

Research on actively responding to population aging under the Rural Revitalization Strategy—Based on the ethnographical investigation of X Town in J City

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Abstract: With the accelerated ageing population in rural areas, the shortage of talent resource is a bottleneck that restricts all-round rural revitalization, while local ethics, social participation of the elderly, integration of medical treatment and elderly, digital construction and pension planning provide the possibility of transforming aging into a driving force for rural revitalization. Based on the ethnographical investigation of X Town in J City, Jiangxi Province, this study finds that the elderly in rural areas are not only the objects of support, but also assume the roles of inter-generational rearing, housekeeping and farming, preserving the culture and maintaining social stability. Ecological advantages of rural areas can be used to attract senior citizens in urban areas to help rural revitalization, thus the bottleneck of it will be broken through with active ageing.

1. Introduction

1.1 Bottlenecks and Unique Advantages of the Rural Revitalization Strategy under the background of Population Aging

The report to the 19th CPC National Congress put forward a rural revitalization strategy. The rural revitalization strategy has five central tasks: industrial revitalization, talent revitalization, cultural revitalization, ecological revitalization and organizational revitalization. Currently, talent revitalization has become a major bottleneck for all-round rural revitalization. Since the reform and opening-up, surplus rural labor has massively transferred from agriculture to non-agriculture industry and become new industrial workers in the process of China's industrialization. The labor force transferring to non-agricultural industries are mostly strong and well-educated adults, while those left behind in rural areas are less-educated old people. Such rural population structure leads to high-quality labor shortage, which directly restricts the orderly advancement of agricultural mechanization, informatization, scientization and modernization. Therefore, talent revitalization is a crucial issue in rural revitalization. While ecological revitalization undoubtedly has unique resource advantages. As a unique carrier of natural scenery and civilization inheritance, the countryside will be very attractive to people, especially those well-educated and wise seniors focusing on physical health and interested in tourism and leisure.

1.2 Challenges and Opportunities of Actively Responding to Population Aging under the Rural Revitalization Strategy

1.2.1 Challenges

According to the results of the seventh national census, the size of the elderly population is vast and the aging process has accelerated significantly. The annual pension shortfall forecast is highly consistent with the degree of aging indicated by the proportion of the elderly population to the total population in various regions in 2020.

Although economic system reform first started in rural areas, the vitality of traditional rural elderly care models remains strong. Consequently, urban communities were the first to face the challenges of aging governance. With the mobilization of urban resources and the gradual improvement of elderly care management systems, the role of families in elderly care has weakened. With the mass urbanization of young and middle-aged agricultural workers, the lagging problem of aging in rural areas is now becoming increasingly prominent. The traditional rural ethics of respecting the elderly have not kept pace with the times, and the land rural elders living by and the household registration system have undergone profound changes. Therefore, it is difficult for rural areas to establish comprehensive elderly care villages relying solely on their own resources, it's necessary for urgent support from governments at all levels. ^[1]

Data indicates that spouses, are the primary caregivers for the elderly, followed by sons and daughters-in-law. With the average age of primary caregivers reaching 58 years, reflecting a trend of "the old relying on the older." In terms of the needs of rural elderly for community aging services, 54.41% choose home medical visits, followed by health education services, psychological counseling/chatting to relieve boredom, and rehabilitation nursing. Regarding the living environment, issues such as poor age-friendly housing, lack of call and alarm facilities, and absence of handrails are prominent. Meanwhile, the community environment is not well-suited for the elderly, with notable issues in security, traffic conditions, and street lighting.

1.2.2 Opportunities

From an economic development perspective, China's per capita GDP has maintained a high growth rate since 1978 (with the exception of two special years 1989 and 1990), but population aging has not had a negative impact on regional economic growth. In other words, China has managed to become "older and richer" simultaneously. ^[2] This provides a fundamental economic model for implementing an active aging strategy in China

Data from the Fourth China Urban and Rural Elderly Living Condition Survey shows that the happiness level of the rural elderly with high social participation was higher than that of the non-participants, ^[3] which lays a psychological foundation for leveraging the social participation of the elderly in the process of rural revitalization. Implementing a national strategy for actively responding to population aging further provides institutional guarantees for the development of elderly care services. Regarding pension fund allocation, the national coordination of pension insurance was implemented in January 2022. The reform of the system took new steps, with the central adjustment ratio of the fund up to 4.5%. ^[4] This provides a valuable opportunity window for China to proactively promote the strategy of population aging and the comprehensive rural revitalization.

2. Research Methods

This study primarily employs ethnographic research methods. According to the classification named by Kottak (2008) ^[5], the methods used in this study include:

Participant Observation: Direct, first-hand observation of the daily behaviors of the elderly and related personnel. One of the research collaborators actively participates in the villagers' real lives.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Initially, to maintain a trustful relationship with the elderly, the researchers engaged in casual conversation and later in the elderly's feelings and ways of living in rural areas.

Key Cultural Informants: The research team maintained continuous contact with several local

cultural informants.

Combining Emic and Etic Perspectives: The emic perspective uses the viewpoints of local people in Jinggangshan's Xincheng town. The etic perspective is from the standpoint of scientists. Combining these two perspectives overcomes the limitations of a single standpoint.

Problem-Oriented Approach: Before entering the field, the researchers primarily focused on one pending question: Can the strategy of rural revitalization and the national strategy of actively responding to population aging be organically integrated?

Long-Term Study: This is a long-term study based on multiple revisits over a span of more than three years.

Team Research: Based on team members' prior contact with and discoveries about the lifestyles of urban elderly people, this study aims to understand how rural Jiangxi is responding to the social life of aging with new members.

Discourse Analysis: Important information such as political stance, identity, meaning-seeking, and relationship-building is identified from the self-narratives of local elderly people.

Grounded Theory: Open coding, thematic structure analysis, and core coding are employed to analyze interview transcripts layer by layer to uncover the deep logic in the everyday language narratives of the elderly.

3. Behavioral Observation and Discourse Analysis: The Micro-logic of Active Aging in Promoting Rural Revitalization

3.1 Elderly Care and the Elderly Providing Care

The primary conversation topics with the local elderly revolve around their children and grandchildren, indicating that their major life experiences are related to their offspring. The specific mode of support varies from family to family, but typically involves financial support and varying degrees of material security provided by their children to maintain a normal life. The research observed that the elderly, whether around eighty or over ninety years old, all live with their children. Despite their frailty and dependence on their children for care, these elderly individuals still engage in activities in their power.

3.2 Dual Support from the Party and Government

This study found that nearly all the elderly had their halls adorned with portraits of leaders of the Communist Party and the state of New China. According to the interview of Grandma Xie, the Party and government are not only a source of spiritual strength for the elderly but also provide tangible material support.

3.3 Taking Care of Grandchildren and Being Cared for by Children

Almost all the elderly mentioned the matter of taking care of their grandchildren. The traditional Chinese cultural concept of maternal kindness and filial piety is seen as a natural duty of reciprocity. Traditional culture has established the goals of "kindness" and "filial piety" for the elderly and their children in local town. This generation of children, as future elderly, will continue to pass down the traditional Chinese culture, thus forming a cultural environment that guides the life goals of the elderly.

3.4 Telephones, Surveillance, and Digitalized Elderly Care

Modern technologies have provided significant advantages for newly rural elderly care. Unlike traditional child-to-parent care, modern elderly care uses technology to overcome spatial limitations, significantly improving efficiency. The telephone provides emotional companionship across distances and surveillance serves a safety function.

4. Analysis of Long-term Mechanisms: Integration of the Two National Strategies of Rural Revitalization and Active Aging

4.1 Practice of Rural Revitalization in the Town from the Perspective of the Five Central Tasks

4.1.1 Industrial Revitalization

According to the 2021 work summary and 2022 work plan of Xincheng Town, 20 projects have been completed that integrate the consolidation and expansion of poverty alleviation achievements with rural revitalization, which makes each administrative village have at least one contiguous industry project of more than 300 acres, and the collective economic income of each village has reached or exceeded 100,000 yuan.

4.1.2 Talent Revitalization

The town has carried out precise investment promotion activities, inviting successful individuals from outside to return and start businesses in their hometown. The town's Party committee secretary and mayor have repeatedly visited developed areas for investment promotion. Entrepreneurs with ties to the town, such as the founder and CEO of Dewu APP, Yang Bing, and the founder of Xiu Hu Intelligent Manufacturing, Zhang Feng, are planning for the town's industrial revitalization and committed to leading their fellow villagers on the path to common prosperity.

4.1.3 Ecological Revitalization

Located in a mountainous and hilly area, the town has a mild climate. Although far from the main scenic area of Jinggangshan, it has completed the construction of 5 beautiful rural points and 100 beautiful courtyards. Efforts have been made to clean up clutter on streets, remove illegal advertisements, improving the environment along the Longxia Road. The town has also vigorously promoted the rural toilet revolution. The ecological revitalization has become the easiest to achieve and the most likely to become the biggest advantage of rural life.

4.1.4 Cultural Revitalization

The town has the advantage of transmitting red (Communist) genes and maintains many excellent traditional cultural values (especially the concept of respecting the elderly). The town actively sought the Long March Culture Park (Jiangxi section) sub-project - Long March Military Supplies Town to be implemented in Xincheng Town. The town government has also established a leadership team to build tangible cultural aspects in village communities. The town plans to create a new rural tourism pattern where red and ancient colors shine together.

4.1.5 Organizational Revitalization

In terms of advancing social governance, the town values the role of labor, youth, and women's organizations as bridges and bonds connecting the masses. The town is divided into 8 grids, with 8 grid leaders, 8 grid members, and 130 peace volunteers assigned. A comprehensive governance center platform at the town and village levels has been established with 3 full-time staff. At the village level, comprehensive governance rooms, conflict mediation rooms, police rooms, and psychological service stations have been set up. Safety production responsibility systems have been implemented, and special rectification actions in fire safety, traffic safety, and food safety have been deepened. Efforts have been made in flood control, typhoon resistance, forest fire prevention, and other areas, effectively ensuring the safety of people's lives and property.

4.2 Utilizing Ecological Advantages to Attract Urban Elderly People to Support Rural Revitalization

With the increasing number of retirees over 60 in cities, leveraging the experience and value of urban elderly groups and encouraging them to return to rural areas for production, living, and social services after retirement is of great significance for rural revitalization. The practices in Longnan City's Lintang Township and Dujiang Town, not far from Jinggangshan, are particularly enlightening. Similar to Xincheng Town with a large number of vacant houses, the city established a "Village Sages

and Residents” qualification review committee. The returning residents have transformed these houses into retirement homes, guesthouses, and creative workshops, effectively utilizing idle resources and revitalizing local villages. In Dujiang Town, more than 20 Village Sages went to Meihua Ferry Tourism and Leisure Area to attract investment, transforming it into a comprehensive modern agricultural industry demonstration base integrating planting, experimentation, picking, leisure sightseeing, and guesthouses [6].

4.3 Breaking Through the Bottlenecks of Rural Revitalization Through Active Aging

To further improve rural elderly care services, the town has continuously promoted the integration of party building with rural elderly mutual aid homes. New “Party Building + Rural Elderly Mutual Aid Homes” have been established in Qushi Village and Jinyuan Village as a livelihood project. This study combines the two strategies of rural revitalization and active aging, shifting the perspective of population aging from being a social burden to a resource and unique advantage. By integrating urban and rural areas, it not only solves urban elderly care issues but also efficiently saves labor for elderly care, releasing more young rural labor, enhancing the social capital of the elderly, and maximizing the use of human resources. The current level of aging in Xincheng Town is not high. Most of the elderly are under eighty years old, belonging to the "third age" – the younger segment of the elderly population. These individuals, around sixty years old but still capable of working, are well-suited for positions that require mental acuity, such as community policing, and childcare. With their wealth of experience and composure in handling emergencies, they possess certain advantages over younger people and can serve as a significant driving force in talent revitalization, propelling the revival of local specialty industries.

5. Conclusions, Discussions, and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

Researchers have found that coalescence with offspring is the primary lifestyle of the elderly in the town, encompassing three main aspects: Firstly, on the one hand, children view the support of their elderly parents as a material obligation but also as an emotional connection. On the other hand, the elderly, regardless of age, insist on doing things themselves, especially in childcare, making significant contributions to families even in old age. Secondly, this lifestyle of integration is supported by the Jinggangshan spirit, embodying red genes of "hard struggle," "unity and mutual aid," and "self-reliance," driven by the deep integration of traditional cultural values of "kindness" and "filial piety." Thirdly, in the digital age, communication spanning time and space greatly facilitates the realization of a good life in aging rural areas.

5.2 Discussions

The importance of parental involvement in the integrated lifestyle of Chinese parents and children has been recognized internationally for a long time (Chao, 1994) [7]. As domestic scholars, the authors of this article are the first to analyze the behavior of the elderly in "managing" children, others, and themselves in detail. (Wang Tangsheng, 2018) [8]. "Management" is related to but distinct from the prevalent control theory internationally. In Western culture, the self is constructed as relatively independent (Markus, Kitayama, 1991) [9], while in Chinese culture, the interdependent self-construction allows parents to greatly influence their children's lives, even changing the neurological activity patterns of Chinese people (Zhu Ying, 2001, 2004) [10][11]. Secondly, elderly self-"management" is closely related to the secondary control abilities developed by Western old people. Secondary control means the elderly adjust their goals, desires, and beliefs to adapt to their living environment when they cannot modify the environment to meet their needs (Schulz & Heckhausen, 1997) [12]. Thirdly, derived from the readily accessible Jinggangshan red culture and traditional Chinese culture, the factors making elderly parents' lives better come not only from the material and emotional "management" by children but also from the cultural beliefs in self-management.

5.3 Recommendations

5.3.1 Ecological Revitalization to Promote the Coordinated Development of Rural Elderly Undertakings and Industries

With the construction of ecologically livable environments, rural areas are becoming increasingly attractive to the elderly. In China, the elderly's focus has shifted from addressing poverty and material scarcity to fulfilling spiritual needs. As advocated by peers in active aging research^[13], constructing a "win-win" mechanism for urban elderly care and rural revitalization, particularly in the context of having achieved poverty alleviation goals, can utilize the environmental advantages of beautiful rural areas and idle housing. It helps solve the talent bottleneck in rural revitalization and fulfills higher-level spiritual needs like self-actualization for the elderly.

5.3.2 Travel-Based Elderly Care to Aid Rural Revitalization

Travel-based elderly care is more about the mobility of knowledgeable, energetic, and financially capable seniors, bringing urban capital and intellectual resources to rural areas. Travel-based elderly care allows seniors to enjoy life in different places in various seasons, bringing capital, talent, technology, and other resources to the countryside, aiding rural revitalization through education, culture, traditional crafts, entertainment, and public services.

5.3.3 Mutual Aid Elderly Care to Promote Rural Talent Revitalization

In the context where most rural youth labor force moves to urban areas, establishing an organized mutual aid elderly care model in rural communities, such as "Village Sages returning to their hometowns," is a viable solution. Including economic, life and emotional, and medical aid, this model is adopted among the elderly with different strengths and between neighbors, volunteers, and the elderly. Attracting Village Sages back to rural areas through mutual aid elderly care helps combine the two national strategies and change the status of hollowed-out villages.

5.3.4 Red Genes and Traditional Virtues to Aid Rural Cultural Revitalization

Cultural construction for rural elderly people not only satisfies the growing cultural needs of rural seniors but also promotes rural economic and social development. It can create a win-win situation for the individuals, family, society and nation, promoting the rural comprehensive revitalization. The glorious revolutionary history and Jinggangshan spirit characterized by "firm belief, hard struggle, seeking truth from facts, daring to blaze new trails, relying on the masses, and courage to win," inspire today's local elderly, greatly enhancing their secondary control abilities.

5.3.5 Smart Elderly Care to Promote Rural Digital Construction

Digital elderly care is one aspect of new rural elderly care, relying on network information technology, including the internet, big data, the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence, etc., to meet the multi-level and personalized elderly care needs and provide convenient and efficient services. Smart health and elderly care application pilot demonstration construction in several batches are identified, providing comprehensive life support for the integration of the two strategies.

5.3.6 Party Building Work to Lead the Integration of Rural Revitalization and Active Aging Strategies

The rural revitalization can meet many elderly care needs, and active aging can compensate for many shortcomings in all-around rural revitalization. This research mainly reflects in intergenerational education, travel-based elderly care, volunteer services, etc. Institutional strengths can be leveraged under the leadership of the CPC Central Committee led by President Xi Jinping. As the most effective measure, party building plays a leading role in integrating Rural Revitalization and Active Aging Strategies. This paper suggests letting urban and rural elderly party member volunteers play their exemplary roles in establishing Rural Revitalization Home for the elderly. After obtaining comprehensive data on volunteer's functions and needs for rural active aging in the pilot, long-term development mechanisms such as encouraging Rural Elites to return to their hometowns should be

established by adopting incentives from the market, government and public welfare.

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