

A Study on the Optimized Development of Cultural Elderly Care in Heilongjiang Province in the Context of Chinese-Style Modernization

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Abstract: *As the aging population in Heilongjiang Province continues to grow, addressing elderly care has become a major challenge in the process of achieving Chinese-style modernization. Cultural elderly care, as an emerging model, aligns with the intrinsic requirements of Chinese-style modernization. This article analyzes the current status of cultural eldercare in Heilongjiang Province in terms of policy support, education for the elderly, community services, and the integration of culture and tourism. It explores pathways for optimization by strengthening policy support, tapping into distinctive local cultures, innovating rural eldercare models, and expanding international exchange and cooperation. These efforts not only promote the development of cultural eldercare in Heilongjiang Province but also address the pressing issues of our time in the process of Chinese-style modernization.*

Keywords: *Heilongjiang Province; culture-based elderly care; Chinese-style modernization*

1. Introduction

Population aging is one of the major social issues facing the world today, and it is also a practical challenge that must be addressed in the process of China's modernization. According to statistics, as of the end of 2022, the elderly population (aged 65 and older) in Heilongjiang Province reached 5.52 million, an increase of 2.622 million compared to 2005—a growth of 90.5 percent. This group accounted for 17.8 percent of the total population, 2.9 percentage points higher than the national average^[1]. As the pace and extent of population aging in Heilongjiang Province continue to intensify, how to achieve high-quality elderly care and establish a system that keeps pace with the requirements of Chinese-style modernization has become a critical issue that demands urgent attention. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist of China explicitly called for “implementing a national strategy to actively address population aging” and incorporated “developing elderly care services and the elderly care industry” into the overall framework of Chinese-style modernization.

Chinese-style modernization emphasizes “modernization on a massive scale,” and the elderly population is a vital component of this. How to achieve comprehensive safeguards that ensure the elderly “are provided for, enjoy their later years, and remain active” not only concerns the quality of life for hundreds of millions of seniors but has also become a key measure of the success of Chinese-style modernization. Chinese-style modernization is a form of modernization that pursues common prosperity for all the people. Its very nature dictates that solutions for elderly care must balance universality with sustainability. Ensuring that all older adults share in the fruits of development is a vital manifestation of Chinese-style modernization in the realm of people's livelihoods, and it also embodies the people-centered development philosophy. Traditional elderly care models struggle to meet the growing spiritual and cultural needs of the elderly. As an emerging model, cultural elderly care transcends the limitations of traditional approaches that focus solely on material security, expanding the focus to include the fulfillment of the elderly's spiritual and cultural needs. This embodies the intrinsic requirement of Chinese-style modernization—the “harmonious integration of material and spiritual civilization”—and effectively enhances the well-being of the elderly. Based on this, exploring optimal pathways for cultural eldercare in Heilongjiang Province is a pressing issue that the province must address in the process of building Chinese-style modernization.

2. The Current State of Cultural Elderly Care in Heilongjiang Province

2.1 The policy support system is gradually being improved

To thoroughly implement the requirements set forth in the State Council's "Opinions on Promoting the Development of Elderly Care Services," in 2020, Heilongjiang Province issued the "Implementation Opinions on Promoting the Development of Elderly Care Services" to support the integration of elderly care services with multiple industries such as culture and tourism, expand new consumption sectors such as travel-based and culture-based elderly care, guide and encourage cultural enterprises to develop cultural products suitable for the elderly, improve the "Heilongjiang Swan Elderly Care Alliance" and the urban cooperation mechanism of the Swan Elderly Care Economic Corridor, and strengthen coordination and cooperation among tourism and wellness resources both within and outside the province. In 2021, the "14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of the Elderly Care Services Industry in Heilongjiang Province" further clarified the commitment to building a "summer retirement destination" and promoting the "Summer Retirement in Longjiang" brand. In 2023, the Heilongjiang Provincial Department of Education and nine other departments jointly issued the "Heilongjiang Provincial Work Plan for Accelerating the Development of Elderly Education (2023–2025)," which outlines development goals and tasks to advance the cause of elderly education; this plan was selected as one of the "Top Ten Major Events in Aging Work" for the province in 2023. This series of policies has enabled Heilongjiang Province to establish a diversified elderly care service system and set a new, exemplary benchmark for elderly care in the province.

2.2 Expansion of the Senior Education Network

In recent years, Heilongjiang Province has actively responded to the national call to develop senior education and build a lifelong learning system. By 2017, Heilongjiang Province had 119 senior universities, with an enrollment of 19,000 students. In 2022, the Heilongjiang Provincial Department of Education and nine other departments jointly issued the "Implementation Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Senior Education," calling for the further improvement of a five-tier senior education system covering the provincial, municipal, county (city, district), township (subdistrict), and village (community) levels. The plan aims to achieve full coverage of senior universities in all counties and cities at or above the county level by 2025, providing policy support and planning guidance for senior education in Heilongjiang. As of 2023, Heilongjiang had established 121 senior universities at the provincial, municipal, and county levels^[2], and the standard of senior education in Heilongjiang has been continuously improving. In May 2023, the Heilongjiang Provincial Association for Science and Technology of the Elderly established the Senior Science and Technology University, marking the effective integration of educational resources and institutional reforms and innovations in senior education, which further powerfully advances the construction of a learning society based on "learning for all" and "lifelong learning" in Heilongjiang. In 2025, Heilongjiang Province will include the implementation of the "Quality Improvement and Expansion Project for Senior Universities" among the 20 key livelihood initiatives to be carried out in the province. The province also plans to refine the "three-in-one" operational system for senior universities—comprising Open Universities (Colleges), Community Universities (Colleges), senior universities, support general universities and vocational schools in establishing senior universities, and guide various enterprises, public institutions, and qualified and capable industry associations (societies) and private training institutions to establish or participate in the operation of senior universities, with the goal of establishing 60 high-quality senior universities^[3]. The province's senior education network continues to improve, with its coverage steadily expanding, providing educational opportunities to more older adults.

2.3 Continued Innovation in Community-Based Cultural Elderly Care Models

Communities serve as key platforms for providing cultural elderly care services, and achieving a deep integration of cultural elderly care with community development is of great significance for promoting the high-quality development of cultural elderly care in Heilongjiang Province. Heilongjiang Province took the lead nationwide in enacting the "Regulations on Home-Based and Community-Based Elderly Care Services," which took effect on July 1, 2024. Through legislation, the province has clearly defined a service framework centered on "home-based care as the foundation, community-based care as the mainstay, institutional care as a supplement, and the integration of medical care and elderly care," and has innovatively proposed a six-pillar service system covering multiple dimensions, including daily living assistance and emotional support. Mingshui County in Suihua City, Heilongjiang Province, has

created a “15-minute elderly care service circle” with distinctive Heilongjiang characteristics by “replicating” Shanghai’s “Happiness No. 9” community-based elderly care model and integrating local innovations. Relying on Happiness No. 9, the Mingyuan Community Committee has carried out “Four-Sides” services centered on the key needs of the elderly to reshape the “culture + elderly care” space, thereby incorporating cultural elderly care into the core community service system. Harbin City has explored the establishment of a “2+2” meal assistance service system for the elderly that combines “community senior dining halls + senior meal distribution points” with “Internet-based meal delivery.” Daqing City, using the Chuangyecheng Subdistrict as a model, has drawn on the spirit of the oil campaign and the legacy of its revolutionary heritage to establish nearly 100 mutual-aid elderly care service teams, senior universities, and other community-based elderly care service brands, thereby promoting the development of a new “1+1+N” elderly care service model. These innovative practices not only effectively meet the diverse and multi-level elderly care needs of the elderly but also provide valuable “Heilongjiang experience” for the development of community-based cultural elderly care services nationwide.

2.4 Integrated Development of Cultural Elderly Care and the Tourism Industry

The integrated development of cultural eldercare and the tourism industry is not only an innovative approach to actively address population aging and improve the quality of life for the elderly, but also a key measure to drive the transformation and upgrading of the tourism industry and foster new sources of economic growth. In 2015, the Heilongjiang Agricultural Reclamation Beidahuang Elderly Care Center established its first branch in Sanya City. In subsequent years, it signed cooperation agreements on off-site leisure and wellness programs with multiple elderly care and tourism organizations outside the province. Its “Tourism+” senior care model was selected as one of 75 exemplary cases in the development of the senior care service industry by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the National Committee on Aging, producing replicable and scalable outcomes that serve as a model for the development of the senior care service industry nationwide. The Heilongjiang Provincial Department of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, together with 16 other departments, jointly issued the “Guiding Opinions of Heilongjiang Province on Promoting the Development of Real Estate with Health, Wellness, and Tourism Resort Characteristics.” The document states that by 2025, the province aims to build the real estate brand “Summer Resort—Heilongjiang Is the First Choice,” establishing itself as a major national destination for summer retreats and wellness, and further promoting the development of “migratory bird-style” travel-based elderly care in the province. In June 2024, the Health and Wellness Study-Travel Program of the Heilongjiang Open University for the Elderly was launched. Leveraging the province’s abundant natural resources and unique ecological advantages, the program has established 12 health and wellness study-travel and research bases within the Yichun Liangshui Nature Reserve. The integration of cultural aging care with the tourism industry has injected new vitality into the tourism sector. By developing age-friendly tourism products and services, the variety and quality of tourism offerings have been enriched, driving the tourism industry toward diversification and high-end development—a move that yields significant economic benefits.

3. Recommendations for Optimizing the Development of Culture-Based Elderly Care in Heilongjiang Province

3.1 Strengthen policy support and improve the cultural elderly care security mechanism

Although Heilongjiang Province has introduced a series of relevant policies, there is still a lack of specific policies and regulations targeting cultural eldercare. The government should conduct in-depth research into the actual needs and developmental challenges of cultural eldercare in Heilongjiang Province and formulate comprehensive and detailed policies and regulations specifically for cultural eldercare. Elderly care institutions, cultural eldercare venues, and cultural eldercare facilities should be included in performance evaluation indicators; standards for organizing cultural eldercare activities should be clarified; and qualification standards for service personnel should be established to ensure that older adults can enjoy high-quality services. At the same time, a special fund for the development of cultural eldercare should be established and included in the provincial fiscal budget, with a dynamic adjustment mechanism put in place to ensure that funding aligns with the development needs of cultural eldercare. Finally, supervision and evaluation of policy implementation must be strengthened. A joint oversight mechanism involving multiple departments—including civil affairs, culture and

tourism, and finance—should be established to inspect and evaluate the implementation of cultural eldercare policies. The evaluation results should be linked to local government performance assessments. Based on the implementation status of local policies, incentives such as financial rewards and preferential policies, or punitive measures such as accountability and rectification requirements, should be applied to ensure effective policy implementation and promote the healthy development of cultural eldercare in Heilongjiang Province.

3.2 Leveraging Regional Characteristics to Expand Opportunities for Cultural Elderly Care

Heilongjiang Province boasts unique and rich regional cultural resources. It is home to 53 ethnic minority groups, including the Manchu, Hezhe, and Ewenki peoples^[4], each with their own distinctive languages, clothing, music and dance, and traditional crafts. As of 2022, Heilongjiang has 42 nationally designated intangible cultural heritage items. Furthermore, the province boasts profound “red” cultural resources, including numerous revolutionary sites and relics—such as the Headquarters of the Second Route Army of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army—as well as revolutionary memorial halls and martyrs’ cemeteries, alongside snow and ice cultural resources that leverage its geographical advantages. By tapping into Heilongjiang’s regional cultural resources, it is possible to design uniquely appealing cultural senior care programs. For example, the province’s climate can be leveraged to create summer retreats for wellness and recuperation; folk culture can be utilized to launch wellness tourism itineraries that include visits to cultural attractions, folk culture experiences, and tastings of local specialties; and revolutionary culture can be used to develop educational study tours. Angangxi District in Qiqihar City has implemented a “Four-Chain Integration” model, incorporating revolutionary education and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage into cultural senior care. This approach not only meets the growing spiritual and cultural needs of retired officials but also leverages the role of the elderly as cultural ambassadors and leaders, providing an excellent model for Heilongjiang Province to expand the development of cultural senior care by capitalizing on its regional characteristics. On the other hand, this approach can promote the integration of distinctive local culture with the elderly care industry. With cultural elderly care at its core, it expands upstream into areas such as cultural resource development and product design, and extends downstream into fields such as cultural elderly care services and marketing, thereby building a complete cultural elderly care industrial chain and creating a virtuous cycle in which culture, elderly care, and the economy mutually reinforce one another.

3.3 Innovate rural elderly care models to achieve inclusive development of culture-based elderly care

Influenced by traditional beliefs, elderly people in rural Heilongjiang tend to age in place. However, as the younger population continues to migrate out of the province, the family’s role in providing care has gradually weakened, failing to meet the elderly’s spiritual and cultural needs. Furthermore, rural areas in Heilongjiang are vast and sparsely populated, and the overall number of facilities for cultural eldercare is relatively insufficient, making it difficult to meet the growing spiritual needs of the province’s aging population. Heilongjiang Province should rely on organizations such as village committees and senior citizens’ associations to improve the quality of in-home care. At the same time, it should actively explore and innovate rural “mutual-aid elderly care” models by establishing neighborhood support centers at the village group level and promoting mutual-aid elderly care services in rural areas that allow seniors to “remain in their hometowns, among their neighbors, speaking their native dialects, and maintaining their sense of community.” The government should increase financial subsidies to support the construction and operation of rural “happiness homes,” senior care complexes, and cultural service stations; improve facilities for cultural activities; encourage rural senior citizens’ associations and social organizations to participate in mutual-aid eldercare services; and organize volunteers to provide cultural and recreational activities as well as emotional support to rural seniors. At the same time, innovative elderly care models such as “time banks” have been established, awarding points to villagers who provide mutual aid services—points that can be redeemed for daily necessities or service hours. Since Shanghai pioneered this model in 1999, many regions have successively adopted this new approach with excellent results. It effectively mobilizes villagers’ enthusiasm for participation, enriches the cultural lives of rural seniors, and addresses the challenges of cultural elderly care in rural areas.

3.4 Expand international exchanges and enhance the internationalization of cultural eldercare

Thanks to its unique geographical advantages, Heilongjiang Province has enormous potential for international exchange and learning in the field of cultural eldercare. The province should strengthen exchanges and cooperation with neighboring countries such as Russia, Japan, and South Korea in this area, drawing on their advanced experiences—such as South Korea’s “tiered management system for senior care centers” and Japan’s development of senior-friendly communities. On the one hand, Heilongjiang Province can establish a cross-border platform for cultural and elderly care exchange, regularly hosting international forums, seminars, and other events to share experiences among countries in areas such as policy formulation, service model innovation, and industry development. On the other hand, it can launch cross-border cultural eldercare service cooperation projects, integrating cultural, medical, and tourism resources from both sides. Building on the experience gained from the “Sunset Tour” conducted by the Russian delegation in Heihe City, China, on February 24–25, 2024, the province should refine and continue to promote the “Two Countries, Three Locations” international eldercare and wellness service model—first pioneered by Heihe City, Heilongjiang Province—to provide diverse eldercare service experiences for seniors from both countries. Finally, we encourage elderly care institutions and cultural enterprises within the province to collaborate with internationally renowned brands, introducing advanced management practices, service philosophies, and technical equipment to elevate the international standards of cultural elderly care services in Heilongjiang Province and propel the cultural elderly care sector to new heights.

4. Conclusion

The issue of an aging population in Heilongjiang Province poses a serious challenge to the process of achieving modernization with Chinese characteristics, and cultural eldercare plays a significant role in improving the quality of life for the elderly and promoting social development. While Heilongjiang Province has already achieved certain results in the field of cultural eldercare, it still needs to further optimize its development path in order to promote the sustained and healthy development of cultural eldercare in the province and strive to achieve the goals of modernization with Chinese characteristics in eldercare.

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