

# Research on the Role of Retired Elderly in Community Governance — A Case Study of No.23 Community in Shihezi City

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**Abstract:** In the context of the increasing diversification of community governance, the active participation of community residents in community governance is a topic of discussion. There has been a growing body of research on resident involvement in governance. However, there is limited research on the role played by retired elderly individuals in this context. The role of retired elderly in community governance should not be overlooked. Based on research conducted in No.23 Community in Shihezi City, this paper analyzes the role played by retired elderly individuals in community governance through interviews and observations.

**Keywords:** Retired elderly, Community governance, Shihezi City

## 1. Research Background and Significance

### 1.1. Research Background

The Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee proposed to "improve the social governance system, strengthen the grassroots governance system, and combine self-governance, rule of law, and moral governance." It emphasizes the significant role of residents in community governance.

The results of the seventh national population census data show that the average age of the Chinese population is 38.8 years, with a population of 260 million aged 60 and above, accounting for 18.70% of the total population. The data indicates that China's population has continued to grow slowly over the past decade, and the degree of population aging has further deepened. The "Twelfth Five-Year Plan for the Development of Aging Services in China" proposed in 2011 called for supporting older people to actively participate in social welfare activities and community services.[1]

With the development of the economy and society, advancements in medical technology, and the good physical health of retired elderly individuals, coupled with the encouragement of resident self-governance policies by the government, an increasing number of retired elderly individuals are participating in community governance. In the field research conducted by the author in No.23 Community, the total population is 10,269, of which the population aged 60 and above accounts for approximately 24% (around 1,700 individuals) of the community's permanent residents. According to the definition of an aging community (where the population aged 60 and above accounts for 10% of the total population), No.23 Community can be classified as an aging community. Through the author's five-day field research, it was discovered that retired elderly individuals in No.23 Community play an important role in community governance and have a significant impact.[2]

### 1.2. Research Significance

The community is an important component of the social organism, and community governance concerns every person living in the community. How to effectively govern the community is a hot topic today. With the exacerbation of population aging in society, every aspect of social governance in China needs to consider how to adapt to this aging trend and how to leverage the role of retired elderly individuals in community governance. Elderly individuals are often regarded as "useless," but in fact, the opposite is true. Exploring and uncovering the role of elderly individuals in social governance is a subject worthy of in-depth exploration.

As an aging community, No.23 Community fully utilize the resources of elderly residents, allowing

retired elderly individuals to play a role in community governance and ensure that "the elderly have something to contribute." The participation of retired elderly individuals in social governance in No.23 Community can provide valuable experience for other communities in China, enabling more people to recognize the active role of retired elderly individuals.[3]

## 2. Research Methods

### 2.1. Qualitative Research

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research involves the researcher as the main research tool, using various methods of data collection in natural settings to explore social phenomena holistically. It employs an inductive approach to analyze data and develop theories, and through interaction with research subjects, it seeks interpretive understanding of their behaviors and meanings.

The choice of qualitative research method in this study is based on the following three reasons: Firstly, qualitative research requires observing the research subjects in natural settings and emphasizes the perspective of the participants. The field research conducted in No.23 Community provides a favorable environment and rich data for qualitative research. Secondly, qualitative research allows for the use of a small number of samples, making it convenient for the researcher to conduct individual interviews with a few individuals and focus on gaining in-depth understanding. Finally, the purpose of qualitative research is to provide explanatory research on the behaviors of the research subjects. In this study, the research phenomenon is explained and understood from the perspective of the interviewees. In terms of the basic process, qualitative research requires methods for data collection and analysis.[4]

### 2.2. Data Collection Methods

The data collection for this study took place from May 17th to May 21st, 2022, during a five-day field research in No.23 Community of Shihezi City. The research employed the methods of direct observation, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. Through the observation method, the community layout, population situation, and residents' daily lives were understood. In addition, data was collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with eight residents, including two community workers, four retired individuals involved in community governance, and two ordinary community residents, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Basic Information of Interviewees.

ID	Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Occupation
A1	Han	Female	75	Retired
A2	Han	Male	75	Retired
A3	Han	Male	68	Retired
A4	Han	Male	65	Retired
B1	Han	Male	N/A	Community Committee Secretary
B2	Han	Female	49	Community Committee Staff
C1	Han	Male	67	Retired
C2	Han	Female	45	Breakfast Shop Owner

Note: A represents retired individuals involved in community governance; B represents community workers; C represents ordinary community residents.

## 3. Analysis of Retired Elderly Participation in Community Governance in No.23 Community

### 3.1. Overview of No.23 Community

No.23 Community is located in Xiangyang Street, Shihezi City, with the Shihezi University to the east, Donghuan Road to the west, Beisan Road to the south, and Beisi Road to the north. The total area of the community is 0.41 square kilometers. It has a total of 312 households and a population of 10,269 people. The community consists of 89 residential buildings and is home to 12 criminal investigation units, as well as several establishments including the Shihezi State Resources Bureau, China Telecom, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, Financial Building, Shihezi Hotel, Experimental Kindergarten, Shihezi Tobacco Company, Traffic Management Detachment of Shihezi Public Security Bureau,

Marriage and Tobacco Registration Office of Shihezi, and Shihezi Funeral Management Office. The community also includes the Elderly Apartment of Shihezi Welfare Center. There are about 213 non-public economic organizations and individual businesses in the community. Among the 56 communities in the city, No.23 Community is relatively well-equipped and fully functional.

Moreover, the population aged 60 and above in No.23 Community accounts for approximately 24% of the permanent residents (over 1,700 people), indicating that it is an aging community. It is characterized by a high concentration of residents engaged in cultural work, and a large number of retired cadres.[5]

### ***3.2. Factors Favoring the Participation of Retired Elderly in Community Governance***

#### ***3.2.1. Strong Support from the Community Neighborhood Committee***

No.23 Community focuses on resident services and the construction of the "Six Homes" (including homes for safety, civility, services, culture, and literacy). This approach encourages and motivates both local units and community residents to participate in community management, thereby promoting harmonious and safe development of the community. Through the establishment of the "Six Homes," close interactions between community leaders and residents are facilitated, providing multiple avenues for community residents to engage in governance and increasing their willingness to participate.

#### ***3.2.2. Abundant Time Resources of Retired Elderly***

In China, the legal retirement age is relatively early, and modern lifestyles often require less time and energy from elderly individuals in their family lives. Therefore, after retirement, elderly individuals have ample time resources at their disposal, with the freedom to engage in community activities during their leisure time, making their retired lives more fulfilling. In No.23 Community of Shihezi, there are many retired elderly residents who can often be seen engaging in various activities. They have sufficient time and energy to pursue their interests. This favorable condition provides a solid foundation for their participation in community governance, allowing them to not only pass the time but also contribute to the community, creating a mutually beneficial process.

#### ***3.2.3. Positive Dedication as a Virtuous Quality***

Among the interviewees in this study, two of them were retired CPC members. Their identities have an important influence on their participation in community governance. Even though they have left their work positions, they still hold the spirit of serving the people. With their leadership, an increasing number of retired elderly people are willing to engage in community governance, playing a leading role within the community.

### ***3.3. Positive Impact of Retired Elderly Participation in Community Governance***

#### ***3.3.1. Enhanced Cohesion within the Community***

Under the implementation of national policies, the development of urban community residents' self-governance will become the mainstay of grassroots autonomy. Retired elderly individuals play the role of "community backbone" in the process of self-governance, organizing certain community activities. Unlike community workers, retired elderly individuals participate in community governance voluntarily.

During the organization and participation in these activities, the elderly individuals get to know each other and make new friends, thereby enriching their social network. Through interaction with one another, they engage with people in the community as individual entities, enhancing their understanding of the concept of "community" and strengthening their sense of identity and belonging. This contributes to the cohesion within the community.[6]

#### ***3.3.2. Enrichment of Daily Life and Spiritual Well-being of Residents***

From the perspective of activity theory, elderly individuals participating in community governance can expand their social circle and stimulate their internal motivation for self-realization, fulfilling their higher-level needs for self-actualization.

In No.23 Community, many retired elderly individuals actively participate in and even lead various recreational activities in their neighborhoods. For example, interviewee A1 leads 14 cultural teams, including waist drum teams, choir teams, dance teams, and poetry recitation teams, with more than 500 elderly participants. Using the power of culture, they enlighten the spiritual world of these residents and

enrich their daily lives.

### **3.3.3. Assisting Community Workers with Heavy Responsibilities**

Apart from handling resident issues, community workers also have various administrative tasks. Retired elderly individuals, who have more free time due to not being employed, voluntarily take on informal leadership roles, which helps alleviate the workload and pressure on community workers. Additionally, retired elderly individuals can act as a "loudspeaker" between the residents and the community workers, conveying the opinions and perspectives of the community residents, helping community workers understand the concerns of the residents.

### **3.3.4. Facilitating Improvements in Community Governance**

Compared to community workers, retired elderly individuals spend more time in the community and have more opportunities for interaction and communication with residents. Sometimes, when residents have concerns about community governance, they might not directly approach the community workers but express their opinions privately. At such times, retired elderly individuals can listen to residents' feedback and help improve community governance by relaying the information to community workers.

Furthermore, in No.23 Community, there is a group of retired elderly volunteers who actively serve the community. Unlike young people who are usually occupied with work, retired elderly individuals have ample time and are more willing to participate in community governance and serve the residents. These elderly individuals contribute to the improvement of community basic services, maintenance of community order, and more.

## **4. Research Conclusion**

Elderly individuals are an important but often overlooked resource, with society frequently perceiving them as "useless." However, they possess unique advantages and roles. Exploring how to fully utilize the resources of the elderly and harness them as a driving force for community governance is an important research topic. Encouraging retired elderly individuals to participate in community governance not only fulfills their need for self-realization and enables them to contribute to society in their later years but also expands their social support network and reduces feelings of loneliness. Moreover, it can relieve the burden on community workers to some extent, promote the development of community governance, and harness the power of resident self-governance.

In No.23 Community, the elderly population is significant, and retired elderly individuals play a substantial role in community governance. However, field interviews revealed that while retired elderly individuals have a significant impact on various volunteer services and recreational activities in the community, this group mainly consists of CPC members and cadres among the elderly population. The cultural activities they organize, such as dance troupes and performances, have not been widely popularized among the general retired elderly population. Therefore, although retired elderly individuals have a significant role in No.23 Community, there are not many who actively participate in community governance.

In conclusion, retired elderly individuals are an important resource for community governance, and efforts should be made to encourage their participation. This can be achieved by providing policy guidance and support, creating a conducive atmosphere for community governance participation, establishing platforms for retired elderly individuals to engage, and organizing more retired elderly service organizations. These measures can enhance awareness among retired elderly individuals regarding community governance participation and broaden their avenues for engagement. As a result, this valuable resource of retired elderly individuals can be fully utilized, improving their sense of efficacy while promoting community development.

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