

Theoretical and Empirical Research on Elderly Care Issues in the Southern Hunan Region under the Three-Child Policy Background

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Abstract: *The elderly are witnesses and participants in the changes of times. According to the seventh national population census by the National Bureau of Statistics, the aging population issue in China is intensifying, with the rural areas, in particular, facing severe challenges. Analyzing the current state of elderly care in rural regions is of significant importance for ensuring the basic rights and interests of the rural elderly, promoting the implementation of the three-child policy, and strengthening the grassroots foundation of national governance.*

Keywords: *Three-Child Policy; Southern Hunan Region; Elderly Care Issues; Theory; Empirical Study*

1. Introduction

The 21st century marks an era of population aging. The international consensus is that a country or region enters an aging society when its population of people aged 60 and above constitutes 7% of the total population. By this criterion, China entered the aging society in 1999 and is one of the developing countries to have done so early. Currently, the percentage of the population aged 65 and above in China is nearing 10%. According to the predictions of the China Human Development Report 2013, by 2030, this age group will account for 18.2% of the total national population. The issue of population aging is crucial for the long-term development of China's economy and society, necessitating a thorough analysis of the current trends and their potential impacts, to timely adjust policies and measures accordingly.

As society rapidly evolves, the traditional role of families in elderly care is diminishing, and the supply from social care institutions is insufficient. Many children move away from their rural homes, returning only a handful of days in the year, providing insufficient care for their elderly parents. Many of the elderly, not wanting to trouble their children, face various inconveniences that lead them to live in isolation, gradually becoming disconnected from society[1]. To better serve these elderly individuals, communities, as a natural extension of the home and life setting, inevitably become a supportive intermediary between society and the family. The concept of "neighborly support and community care" is increasingly becoming a viable new model for elderly care.

With material life continuously improving and the population of older adults increasing, many families, particularly those with only one child, are caught in the situation of caring for both the older and younger generations, diluting the family's ability to provide care. Approximately two-thirds of the elderly have little to no savings, according to statistics. The fast pace of social development also means that middle-aged couples often struggle to care for both their elderly parents and their children simultaneously, leading to a soaring demand for social elderly care services to alleviate the pressure on families.

Population is the foundation of national strength, and the advantage of population size is one of the core strengths of any country, holding a crucial strategic position in the development of human society. Countries worldwide pay great attention to population and fertility issues. As a significant strategic resource for a country, the population must be compatible with socio-economic development; an excessive or insufficient population is not conducive to the healthy development of economy and society. Therefore, China has shifted from a "two-child open" to a "comprehensive three-child" policy, aiming to optimize the population structure and promote orderly development between the population and economic and social progress. However, data shows that the fertility policy has not resulted in the anticipated outcomes[2]. At the same time, marriage rates have gradually decreased while divorce rates have increased annually. The causes are multifaceted and require profound analysis of the fundamental

reasons behind the fertility desires of childbearing-age women to find a breakthrough solution.

2. Fertility Policies and Effects in the Two Countries

At the founding of New China, the first population census was conducted to get a clear count of the country's population base. After the census, the total population was found to be 602.66 million people, which was much more than initially estimated. At that point, the Central Committee of the Communist Party saw the problems brought by the rapid population growth, hence advocated for "birth control" across society. However, there still were peaks in births and rapid population growth. According to data, "between 1962-1970, the birth rate and the natural growth rate maintained a high growth status with an annual average of 36.74‰ and 27.57‰ respectively, and the population size increased from 672 million in 1962 to 829 million in 1970."

As society progressed, the contradiction between population and economic, social, and environmental development became increasingly prominent. Excessive population was not conducive to the development of society and posed serious challenges. Fertility policies were adjusted in a timely manner according to different stages of actual conditions. In 1978, for the first time, family planning was written into the Constitution of the People's Republic of China. After 1980, China implemented strict family planning, advocating "one child per couple." Despite strict family planning, due to the rapid increase in population size earlier on, the total population grew from 975 million in 1979 to 1.111 billion in 1989. With the continuous implementation of family planning, data shows: "After 1990, China's birth rate continued to decline from 21.06‰ in 1990 to 11.90‰ in 2010, and the natural population growth rate decreased from 14.39‰ to 4.79‰." This kept China's population growth within a reasonable range and to a certain extent, promoted social development[3].

With the reform and opening up, China's society has undergone earth-shaking changes, especially with the development of medical and health services, which greatly increased the average lifespan. The elderly population increased substantially, leading China to enter an aging society prematurely, resulting in a "getting old before getting rich" situation. Facing this situation, the Chinese government actively adjusted its population policy, optimized fertility subsidies, implemented the single-child second child policy in 2013, fully relaxed the two-child policy in 2016, and fully relaxed the three-child policy in 2021. After the implementation of the comprehensive two-child policy, there was a certain increase in births, but the level of fertility remained low. The subsequent three-child policy did not achieve the expected effect[4].

3. The Current Situation of Elderly Care in Rural Areas of Southern Hunan

According to the seventh population census, Southern Hunan has a permanent population of 888,400, of which 194,400 are elderly people aged 60 and above, accounting for 21.88% of the total population; 148,900 are elderly people aged 65 and above, accounting for 16.77% of the total population; there are more than 3,000 people aged 90-99, and more than 40 centenarians. In rural areas, people over 60 years old account for more than 80% of the county's elderly population.

The author visited the County Civil Affairs Bureau, County Statistics Bureau, County Culture, Tourism, Sports, and Broadcasting Bureau, County Finance Bureau, and other units, as well as 16 townships and 185 administrative villages, randomly selected 5 administrative villages as sampling samples, distributed 1,000 questionnaires, and received 986 valid questionnaires, with a valid recovery rate of 98.6%, and interviewed 100 rural elderly in detail. The main research methods were visits and exchanges, data analysis, and expert consultations[5].

3.1 Diversified Methods of Elderly Care

The main methods of elderly care for the elderly in rural areas of Southern Hunan include family care, government support, private institutions, and mutual aid. According to the quantitative analysis of the survey data, the main reliance for the elderly in rural areas of Southern Hunan is family care, accounting for 90.14%. Government care is a safety net for those in rural areas who are incapable of working, have no source of livelihood, and have no legal obligation to support. There are not many who meet these conditions, accounting for only 5.19%. Besides family and government care, privately run elderly care institutions in Southern Hunan have gradually developed. At present, there are four such institutions in the county, serving 521 people. Additionally, some villages have made beneficial

attempts in mutual aid for elderly care[6-7]. Wendevillage Committee of Zhajiang Town has gathered the dispersed elderly and provided them with housing, with the elderly helping each other in their daily lives, exploring village-level mutual aid for elderly care.

3.2 Asymmetry in Supply and Demand for Elderly Care

Township elderly homes commonly face the phenomenon of "having beds unused" and idle resources. During the research process, a common problem reported by township civil affairs offices was the asymmetry in the supply and demand for beds. On one hand, there is an abundance of beds, such as Xianshan Elderly Home with 60 beds, but only about 30 are occupied, and Zhajiang Elderly Home with 120 beds, but only about 40 are occupied. According to the person in charge of the elderly care sector of the Civil Affairs Bureau, the occupancy rate of beds in township elderly homes is less than 30%. On the other hand, some elderly people are unable to take care of themselves, and their children are working away and not around, thus they are eager to move into elderly homes. However, elderly homes, which are government-funded, have very strict admission conditions and only accept special hardship cases from rural areas, known as the "five guarantees households." As a result, the needs of those requiring elderly care are not met, while the resources of the elderly homes remain unused[8].

3.3 Insufficient Investment in Elderly Care

The county's financial input into elderly care is not a high proportion of the county's public welfare expenditures. The per capita funds, operational funds, working funds, and nursing fees of township elderly homes are not effectively guaranteed. The salary of management service personnel in township elderly homes ranges from 2,000 to 2,400 yuan, which is barely enough to maintain their basic life. The original site of a certain town's elderly home was identified as dilapidated and demolished, but the new elderly home could only be constructed to the main framework due to lack of funds, and could not meet the conditions for occupancy. Some town elderly homes cannot hire more nursing staff to take care of the elderly who are unable to care for themselves due to insufficient funds. Financial subsidies for bed occupancy and operation for privately run elderly care institutions are not timely and in full, leading to their operational pressures and reduced enthusiasm for investment[9].

4. Analysis of the Causes of Elderly Care Problems in Rural Areas

The issue of elderly care in rural areas is the result of a combination of various factors, which can be summarized as economic, cultural, and institutional reasons.

4.1 The Deconstruction of Family Structure

China is a traditional agricultural society where family income primarily comes from farming and agricultural production. The fate of farmers is tied to their small piece of land, leading to low population mobility. This mode of production and lifestyle fosters a stable family structure — with three or even four generations living under one roof. Such stability in family structure ensures a sufficient supply of caretakers and opportunities for familial interaction, which traditionally guaranteed the care of the elderly. However, with the development of the market economy and the acceleration of urbanization, traditional agricultural production and lifestyle have undergone profound changes. Many rural youths have moved into towns and cities, becoming "urbanites," while many elderly prefer to stay in the countryside due to habits and financial capabilities. The traditional rural family structure, with multiple generations under one roof, has disintegrated, leading to a significant increase in 'empty-nest' and 'left-behind' elderly. The term "386199 brigade" vividly describes the current demographic structure in rural areas. Due to geographical separation, the elderly have to rely on themselves in their later years, leading to inadequate care, lack of familial interaction, and emotional support.

4.2 The Weakness of Collective Economy

With the disintegration of traditional family structures, community-based collective elderly care remains a suitable option for rural elderly care. During my research in townships, I found that most elderly are willing to accept this form of care, as it is close to home, and they are familiar with each other, providing mutual support. A section chief from the county civil affairs bureau informed me

during research that, to adapt to the development of rural elderly care, the bureau established a number of village (community) level mutual aid elderly service stations through projects like the Rural Happiness Institute, offering daytime care services for the local elderly without leaving their village (residential area). However, most of these service stations have become mere showpieces after construction, due to poor ongoing management and maintenance. Further research revealed that after establishment, these service stations were handed over to village collectives for management and upkeep. Therefore, the development level of the village collective economy is a key factor influencing the development of this form of elderly care. Villages with rich collective economies, such as Yuanjiang Village in Guanshi Town, can allocate funds for the operation of service stations. In contrast, villages with weaker collective economies struggle, as they can hardly sustain themselves, let alone spare funds for elderly care expenses. Civil affairs officials told me that due to insufficient funding and poor management, most service stations no longer exist, with only a few remaining with one or two beds, unable to be put into use[10].

4.3 The Impact of External Cultures

In traditional society, Confucian filial piety played an intrinsic role in the continuity of rural family-based elderly care. As early as 2,500 years ago, the "Liji · Liyun" section of the Book of Rites advocated for a comprehensive system of care, stating that society should ensure the elderly are well-cared for, the able-bodied have employment, the young have opportunities to grow, and the widowed, orphaned, and disabled are provided for. The "Classic of Filial Piety" also mentions, "Using the ways of Heaven and sharing the bounties of Earth, being cautious in conduct and frugal in expenditure, to provide for one's parents." The culture of Confucian filial piety exerts a powerful normative force, regulating the actions of children in honoring and supporting their parents, with societal condemnation and legal punishment as consequences for non-compliance. With the development of the market economy, capitalist values have increasingly infiltrated China, especially materialism, consumerism, and individualism, which have challenged the core socialist values and severely impacted traditional family ethics. Young people influenced by these cultures focus only on personal gains and are unwilling to support the elderly, sometimes even perceiving them as burdens and resorting to abuse and abandonment.

5. Countermeasures and Suggestions for the Problem of Old Age Care in Rural Areas

To promote the development of elderly care in rural areas, protect the rights and interests of the elderly, and allow them to enjoy their later years in comfort, it is my view that elderly care in rural areas should coordinate the forces of all aspects and make comprehensive arrangements, with the government, villages (communities), and society each playing their role and forming a joint force.

5.1 Governments should prioritize the elderly and consolidate the foundation of rural old age care

Governments at all levels should strengthen their sense of responsibility and play a leading role in promoting the development of elderly care in rural areas. They should also equip rural elderly care management personnel accordingly. Referring to the "Standards for Staffing of Elderly Care Institutions" issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, it stipulates: "Elderly care institutions should allocate one social worker for every 200 elderly people (counting any number less than 200 as 200)." To accurately understand the elderly care status in villages and communities, it is possible to explore the establishment of a dedicated elderly care worker in each administrative village or to have village committee members double as elderly care workers. These individuals would carry out capacity assessments of the elderly in the village (community) and keep records, retain contact information, and regularly check on the elderly's living conditions. Particular attention should be paid to the basic elderly care service needs of the lonely, disabled, severely disabled, and elderly, as well as special support targets of family planning families and key consolatory objects, to ensure that medium and severe disabilities in the elderly receive effective long-term care. To meet the needs of rural elderly care, we should promote the increase and quality improvement of rural elderly care beds, constructing elderly care facilities at the standard of 35 beds per thousand people. On the basis of effectively performing the responsibility to guarantee basic needs, we should explore establishing a scientifically reasonable operating mechanism. Elderly homes could offer inclusive elderly care services to ordinary rural elderly people, and open up vacant beds at a price lower than private elderly care institutions to meet the needs of the elderly in rural areas. This not only meets the needs of the elderly for care but also

makes effective use of the resources of the homes for the elderly, adding to their operational funds. Strengthen the construction of elderly care service teams. The government should improve the educational training system for elderly care service personnel. By leveraging the educational resources of universities, it can actively carry out a variety of degree and non-degree education. The government should also strengthen pre-job and regular training for the heads and management personnel of elderly care service institutions, and implement policies such as post allowances, training fee subsidies, and professional skill appraisal subsidies for elderly care service personnel. It is encouraged for elderly care institutions to explore reward systems linked to professional skills and service prices, performance wages, and skill and position income systems linked to professional skill levels and years of work, enhancing the career attractiveness of elderly care workers.

5.2 Villages and communities should assist the elderly, exploring rural elderly care models

Elderly care in rural areas should fully utilize the advantages of grassroots organizations in villages (communities), and continuously explore elderly care models suitable for their own characteristics in line with local actual conditions. Mutual-aid elderly care. Village committees and communities can vacate idle office space such as schools and village offices to set up centralized elderly care activity points. The elderly follow the principles of voluntary choice and mutual assistance and kindness, bonding through kinship or friendship, living together among neighbors, helping and supporting each other, achieving self-management and self-service for the elderly. This model, which does not involve leaving home or the village, not only meets the emotional and communication needs of the elderly but also their daily care needs, and is also cost-effective, generally accepted by the elderly. This model is suitable for implementation in villages (communities) with simple rural customs and a lower level of collective economy. Home-based elderly care. The elderly still live in their own homes, and villages (communities) fund the establishment of elderly service teams to provide home services such as day care, meal assistance, cleaning assistance, mobility assistance, bathing assistance, medical assistance, and emergency assistance to elderly families. This elderly care model combines low-compensation services with free services according to the different situations of the elderly. For empty-nest elderly people who are better off, the village (community) organizes elderly care service teams to provide them with time-purchase services. This model requires a developed village collective economy capable of providing economic support. Land-based elderly care. Rural elderly sign a voluntary paid land exit agreement with the village (community), agreeing on the land value, and the village (community) pays in installments. The land is still used by the elderly during their lifetime and is reclaimed by the village (community) after their death. This model is suitable for villages (communities) around county towns where the land has developmental value.

5.3 Society Should Respect the Elderly, Creating an Atmosphere Supportive of Rural Elder Care

Revering and caring for the elderly is a traditional Chinese virtue, and it's crucial to resist the erosion of this value by decadent Western ideologies, promoting the moral principles of respecting the elderly in the entire society to provide a cultural atmosphere conducive to elder care. Each family, as the basic cell of society and a cornerstone for the transmission of values, plays a significant role in promoting the traditional culture of revering the elderly. Parents are children's first teachers, and family education has a profound impact on venerating the traditional culture of caring for the elderly. Offspring should frequently return home, show concern for their parents' health, take care of their parents' daily needs, and understand their psychological well-being. If you can take care of and respect your parents, such behavior will subtly influence your children, who are likely to emulate you in the future and honor you as well. The worldview and values of young people cannot be separated from the proper guidance provided by schools. It's essential to integrate the culture of filial piety into the moral education curriculum of students. More importantly, education about respecting and caring for the elderly should extend from the classroom to extracurricular activities. For instance, township middle schools can organize students to use their spare time to volunteer at eldercare homes by cleaning, performing shows, and other activities, allowing the youth to learn to care for and honor their parents, the elderly, and the elders in their community.

5.4 Enhance Social Education

The entire society must persistently promote the traditional Chinese virtue of respecting and caring for the elderly, creating a social trend of respecting and caring for older individuals. Various traditional festivals should include acts of care and comfort for the elderly in rural areas, letting them feel the

warmth of the larger social family. Government agencies should regularly organize cultural activities, such as bringing cultural performances to rural areas, to enrich the spiritual lives of the elderly there. It is also important to commend advanced deeds in respecting and caring for the elderly, guiding and fostering a new social trend of honor and love for the elderly throughout society.

6. Conclusion

The impact of different total fertility rates under the "comprehensive three-child" policy, the effects of the policy implementation compared to non-implementation, and a comprehensive assessment in combination with measures such as improving the collection rate, introducing financial subsidies, and delaying the retirement age should be further evaluated to provide empirical references for government decision-making.

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