

China's Indigenous Social Rural Pension: Building Ground Work for Future Research

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Abstract

China has the largest elderly population in the world, while its overall population has been unprecedentedly growing for quite some time now. The aging population is particularly concerning in China where the 'family is traditionally responsible for taking care of their elders as there is no established, sustainable social security system' especially in rural areas. Worse still, the one child policy and the rapid urbanisation processes resulting in younger adults leaving rural areas for better jobs and lifestyles since the 1990s have put greater pressures on rural families who have fewer younger people to depend on for taking care of their elderlies. Against this background, there is an urgent need to build ground work for future research which can shed more light on social organisations for the rural elderly in China, giving particular attention to indigenous features in the Chinese context – a contribution this paper offers to make.

Keywords

Rural pension, China, Cooperative, Elderly association

Introduction

China has the largest elderly population in the world, while its overall population has been unprecedentedly growing for quite some time now. For example, the number of elderly people who are aged over 60 years old increased from 10.33% to 13.26% between 2000 and 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011). This demographic of the Chinese population had already counted toward 21% of the elderly population in the world well over a decade ago (United Nations, 2007). The aging population is particularly concerning in China where the 'family is traditionally responsible for taking care of their elders as there is no established, sustainable social security system' especially in rural areas (Zhang et al., 2019, p. 1). Worse still, the one child policy and rapid urbanisation processes resulting in younger adults leaving rural areas for better jobs and lifestyles since the 1990s have put greater pressures on rural

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families who have fewer younger people to depend on for taking care of their elderlies (Ning et al., 2016). Against this background, elderly pensions 'have become an important component of systems aimed at protecting the elderly against poverty' (You and Niño-Zarazúa, 2019, p. 47) in China, which is consistent with the developed world and other developing countries (Kaushal, 2014). Nonetheless, the existing literature especially in English has been predominantly focused on government and public pension schemes (e.g., Shen et al., 2020; Ma, 2020; Wang et al., 2019), where little research has been done on the potential of community/association based informal elderly pension plans in China. In filling this gap, this paper preliminarily discusses the promise of community-based pension plans for elderly people in rural areas in China, focusing on a type of indigenous organisation, which is referred to in Chinese as elderly associations (老年协会).

The biggest difference between the elderly association and other social organisations in providing social services is that the association lacks a rigid binding force regarding the behaviour of members of the association, unlike that of social organisations. Therefore, how to stimulate the enthusiasm of Chinese elderlies to participate and encourage them to stay for a long time has become an urgent problem to be solved. Accordingly, this paper builds a foundation, based on the existing literature in relevant fields, for the authors' future work which will construct a mechanism analysis framework, briefly of 'the elderly's demand level → the elderly social participation → mutual assistance and pension social embeddedness of rural elderly association'. This framework will enrich the research on the mechanism of the effective provision of social services, by building on the literature on traditional social organisations' managing councils and personnel, emphasizing both the supply side and the demand side. As a preliminary discussion underpinning this framework, this paper's contribution is especially grounded in the 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of the Elderly and the Construction of the Pension System (《“十三五”国家老龄事业发展和养老体系建设规划》¹), which puts forward more vigorous development in building the rural mutual assistance services for the aging population and gives more room for the elderly association to play a role. Accordingly, this paper attempts to build foundational work for solving the key problems in the development of rural elderly association mutual aid, in order to improve the service ability of rural elderly associations and accelerate the implementation of rural revitalisation strategies. By more precisely positioning Chinese elderlies' social participation needs more precisely from a cooperative perspective, the study also builds the ground work for future effort in developing a step-by-step implementation scheme for rural elderly association with stronger operability for grass-roots organisations.

A Narrative Review of Relevant Literature

In the past two decades, researchers have been trying to pay more attention to the social governance tool attribute of elderly participation and inclusion in society (e.g., Haugen et al., 2019; De Graaff et al., 2019; Götzelmann and Kreimeier, 2020) including China (e.g., Feng et al., 2020; Tong et al., 2019, Ma et al., 2020). However, there has been a neglect of the identity of the elderly care service providers, paying little attention to the mutual support of the elderly association (Ye et al., 2016). This neglect makes evidence/theory-based frameworks of analysis difficult, especially on the issue of effective social services provided by social organisations.

¹ Please note the references which are in Chinese in the original sources are not included in the reference list but are available from the corresponding author.

The idea of bringing nongovernmental organisations to the fore was initially related to human rights movement in the US (Weissbrodt, 1977). Since then social, or nongovernmental, organisations have been studied under different lights. From early on, Landim (1987) has found that the effect of providing services to local social organisations is better than to international non-governmental organisations. This differential effect has now become a common issue in many societies, with a possible explanation being that the trend of ‘de-volunteerization’ which involves quasi-government, specialization, and bureaucracy has, to a certain extent, split the natural ties between social organisations and service communities, resulting in an indigenous phenomenon that social organisations are ‘floating’ (悬浮) from/away/in communities (meaning, roughly, interorganisational dissociation) (Ye et al., 2009). This ‘floating’ effect requires Chinese social organisations, which are viewed as ‘outsiders’ to the government, to consider carefully how to operate for service communities. In the Chinese context, the ‘floating’ effect is more attributed to the characteristics of ‘official’ and ‘semi-official’ social organisations as described by Wang et al. (1993). Tian (2004) used ‘externalisation’ (外形化) to summarise the serious separation between the operation of social organisations and the overall system, which eventually led to the ‘suffocation’ (内卷化) of social organisation’ services (Li et al., 2012).

So, how to make social organisations effectively provide social services to communities? We argue that it is important to consider the role of institutions in promoting cooperation between social organisations and various community-led organisations in providing services. Currently, the existing research in this light has focused on community systems to analyse community social capital (Yamaguchi et al., 2019; Lieberman, 2019; Zahnow et al., 2019) or social network (Bliuc et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2020; Baker and Sangiamchit, 2019).

We argue that the cooperation between pension social organisations and other community organisations may be closely linked through informal relationships, while different types of cooperation can affect the structure of cooperation network. For example, Zhu et al. (2016) show that there is a significant correlation between directors’ characteristics and social organisations’ service effects, in that the board size and directors’ professional background can affect the service effect of social organisations. Later literature in Chinese language on embeddedness puts the organizational operation mechanisms in a more micro level analysis using ‘state-society frameworks, considering the variables of economic, political and cultural factors, organisational relations, social capital, and other environmental factors relating to the operation logic and development trend of social organisations (Lin and Chen, 2014; Long, 2018). Thus, social embeddedness theory may provide some ground for explanatory and complex analytical frameworks, but the research on individual behavior of social organization members cannot be ignored.

Specific Research Trends Relevant for Discussion

In general, building a cooperative perspective to social organisations for elderly association should consider a wide and comprehensive range of literature. Nonetheless, we suggest that four strands of research are particularly relevant, which are as follows.

Social Participation and Mutual Support for the Elderly

Since the concept of social participation was seen in the field of elderly research by the 1960s, social participation has been promoted for the elderly's rights in China (Wang, 2011). More broadly, scholars focus on the results of social participation of the elderly and the analysis of influencing factors (de Medeiros et al., 2020, Popovic and Masanovic, 2019, Hand and Howrey, 2019), but lack discussion of social participation in the capacity of pension services.

Social Participation and Elderly Association

Although social participation is regarded as one of the important functions of the elderly association in China (Hu and Wei, 2011), the concept is often mentioned in specific association activities (Chen, 2012) with few having studied the issue of elderly association at an organisational level. It is difficult to find a type of organisation that is completely consonant with the Chinese elderly associations anywhere in the world, while an organization of similar functions may be Happy Age (乐龄) clubs in China. Hu and Wang (2016) found that the reasons for the elderly to be willing to continue social participation are mainly driven by external factors, while social participation can produce benefits for individuals, families and communities.

Elderly Association and Mutual Support

Early on, Liu (1993) proposed to develop rural elderly associations to solve many problem of aging in rural areas in China. However, it was not until the 'Twelfth Five-Year Plan' that scholars started paying more attention to the concept of elderly association. For example, Gan et al. (2014) analysed the home-based elderly care service modes of rural elderly associations. Ye et al. (2016) and Chen (2017) have recently suggested that the elderly associations enrich villagers' spare time in life with entertainment activities, which is also an important function of elderly care services. Furthermore, Hu and Wei (2011) and Chen (2012) adopt the perspective from institutional analysis to explore issues of institutional embeddedness of rural elderly associations. Finally, Zhang (2018) found that elderly associations actively explored home-based care through active joint explorations with the community simulating internal capital within communities to participate, which absorbs and integrates community social resources in forming a community of mutual benefit.

Operation Mechanism of Mutual Support

Kropotkin (1902) was the first to study the human history showing that mutual aid between people is embedded in instinctive human nature which is the foundation of higher morality in human society. This was the inspiration for the subsequently studied 'cultural tradition theory' by scholars in China (Jing and Zhao, 2015; Du, 2016) who continue with the research on the idea of 'instinct theory', attributing mutual aid pension behaviors to some congenital facts. Another way to study dynamic mechanisms is to regard mutual aid as social exchange (Blau, 1968, Zhang et al., 2020). Nonetheless, mutual aid theory and analysis usually start from the discussion of reciprocity principle, regarding mutual aid behaviours as one of reciprocal social exchange behaviors (Aju and Beddewela, 2020; Flach, 2020). A few researchers have recently shown interests concerning how to make mutual pension work in practice in the Chinese

context. For example, Yuan (2018) and Chen and Huang (2018) conduct studies from social capital's perspective, suggesting that mutual pensions expand social networks and help to obtain diversified social support.

Implication and Conclusions

To sum up, the research of the proposed agenda in this paper deserves further exploration and discussion. In particular, we suggest the following aspects are of importance. First, the current operation mechanism research is limited to the discussion of organizational variables and the role of organisational management. In the future, it is necessary to further explore the impact of general organisational personnel behaviour on the operating mechanism. Second, case analysis may outline a rich micro operational picture of the elderly association participating in mutual aid activities, while we still lack empirical data regarding pension activities. Third, the differences of regional organisational environments should be considered in the research of rural elderly associations in the future.

For our further work which constructs a more in-depth analytical framework of elderly associations, we propose the following directions suiting the unique sociocultural environments in China. First, we suggest that the Chinese elderly with lower levels of social demands are likely to be more willing to participate in elderly associations, require social supports, and are more motivated to provide mutual support. Second, social participation of such Chinese elderlies can lead to the social participation of higher-level elderly, but the higher level of social demand the Chinese elderly require, the weaker the commitment to participate in early associations. Thirdly, social participation of the elderlies can activate and reconstruct rural social networks. Finally, rural elderly associations should design the corresponding service provision models, organisational and management structure, and social mobilisation schemes according to the needs of Chinese elderlies with different levels of social participation willingness.

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