What We Learn in Later Life? Policy, Practice, and Future in China

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Abstract—**Population aging has been a global phenomenon. In 2050 it is expected that one in six people will be aged 65 years or over in the world. With a large population, China chooses to implement the elderly education policy to respond to the challenge of population aging. In the policy system, China absorbs international ideals, such as lifelong learning, and active aging, into the national policies. However, in the practice, the elder's curriculum exists an unbalanced state. The situation on rural elderly education lags far behind urban elderly education. This paper takes a chronological and historical approach to examine policies and practice in elder education in China. Recommendations are: (1) the national standard of curriculum for elderly education should be promoted. (2) the rural elderly should be paid more attention.**

Index Terms—**the elderly education, education policy, curriculum, the rural elderly**

I. INTRODUCTION

Population aging has been a global phenomenon. In 2050 it is expected that one in six people will be aged 65 years or over in the world [1]. In China, an aging population has exceeded 190 million, accounting for 13.5 percent in 2020. This shift raises a number of questions about how to engage older people in active society? According to the disengagement theory, the most important task for the elderly is to adapt the retirement life and find their own fun in their rest of time. However, more and more scholars realize that the elderly are social resources which can promote development of economy and culture. In addition, labor participation rate and education level may offset the negative impact of population aging [2]. Active aging is the current trend to coping with the aging population.

With the promotion from UN, such as *World Population Ageing 2019, The second world assembly on aging*, China's elderly education policy and related research have been gradually increased. This paper takes a chronological approach and text analysis to examine the curriculum of policies and practices for elderly education. By contextualizing and offering a broader understanding of the policy shifts and responses that happened for the last about 30 years, this paper attempts to offer suggestions related to design curriculums of the third age education and clarify the controversial issues about policy and practices.

II. POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Well-chosen policies are a critical factor to the elderly education. The elderly education policies include special policies, aging career policies, as well as general policies related to elderly education. This paper selects 17 national policies related to elderly education from 1994 to 2020. Considering the content and significance, there selected three representative policies as the time nodes of the development of the elderly education policy:

- *China's aging development program (1994-2000)* issued in 1994.
- *Outline of the "10th Five Year Plan" for the development of Chinese aging work* issued in 2001.
- *The development plan of older adults' education (2016-2020)* issued in 2016.

A. The Embryo in 1994-2000

The practice of China's elderly education precedes the policy. Shandong Red Cross University for the Third Age was established in 1983, which was only 10 years behind the world's first Third Age University (U3A) in France. In the beginning, only retired cadres were eligible to U3A in China, which is hard to meet the needs of the growing elderly population. In 1994, 10 ministries of the central government jointly formulated *China's aging development program (1994-2000)*, which required establishing U3A and various activities for the elderly and highlighted the right of the elderly to education [3]. It set up the older people's courses focusing on health care and disease prevention. At the same time, it specifically proposed agricultural technology education for the elderly in rural areas.

In 1999, China officially entered the ranks of aging countries. To effectively deal with various social problems brought by "getting old before getting rich", in October 1999, the Party Central Committee and the State Council decided to establish a national aging work committee to strengthen the promotion of aging work. Ministry of Culture released *the suggestion strengthening the cultural work of aging* which proposed that through the elderly education, the elderly should achieve the goal of increasing knowledge, enriching life, cultivating sentiment, promoting health, and serving the society in 1999. During the implementation, MOC divided the educational task to the Mass Culture Department of the social books department. It can be seen from the attribute

of the competent department that the orientation of elderly education was mass cultural activities at that time. In 2000, *the decision to strengthen the work of aging* issued by the CPC Central Committee and State Council requires to gradually establish a service system for the elderly, involving the key part of the elderly education. In terms of curriculum, it suggests scientific knowledge education focusing on health education. During this period, China's elderly education changed from retired cadres to all the elderly in society, and the purpose of it has changed from well-being type to education type.

B. The Development in 2001-2015

In 2001, *The information to work on aging* proposed to effectively improve the life and quality of life of the elderly, paying attention to distance and network education formats. Chinese State Council issued an *Outline of the "10th Five Year Plan" for the development of Chinese aging work*, which began to plan the aging work every five years [4]. Elderly education is a key part in the planning of the cause of aging, which plans and designs the purpose, content, mode, and organization of the elderly education.

After the concept of active aging appeared in *the Report of the 2nd World Assembly on Ageing*, subversive changes have taken place in the international community's understanding of the elderly. In 2007, *the outline of the Eleventh Five Year Plan for national education* stressed that elderly education is the most crucial part of lifelong learning. *The outline of the national medium- and long-term education reform and development plan (2010-2020)* paid attention to elderly education in continuing education. It means that elderly education, as an integral part of continuing education and the final stage of lifelong education, has officially become a part of national education. *The suggestion to further strengthen the aging cultural construction* states to improve social adaptability and life health quality and encouraged innovations to teaching approaches and to curriculum to improve seniors' social adaptability and quality of life [5].

During the period, this concept, elderly education is a part of continuing education, and the last stage of lifelong learning has become a consensus. The elderly education policy has expanded from a single health curriculum to civic, skill and leisure education. The goal of the elderly education policy is to enable the elderly to better achieve self-improvement and social integration in the participation of economic, social, cultural, and public affairs.

C. The Improvement in 2016-2021

On the 70th anniversary of UNESCO, *Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good?* was published. It reiterated the humanistic ideal on education and stressed that education and knowledge are regarded as global common interests. *The development plan of older adults' education (2016-2020)* is the first time that elderly education has been issued in the form of a special policy [6]. It required to form a new pattern of

educational development with Chinese characteristics. At the same time, it has joined the education for the elderly in intergenerational communication and life dignity for the first time.

The Opinions on the formulation and implementation of elderly care service projects highlighted to share the fruits of reform and development to the elderly, improved the community learning network for the elderly. And Ministry of Civil Affairs has paid attention to the education of the rural elderly since 2018. It proposed to take various forms of education to guide the rural left-behind elderly to learn new things and enhance their psychological self-reliance and self-care ability. The law Protection of the rights and interests of the elderly (revised in 2018) took the education of the elderly into the lifelong education system. *Opinions on promoting the development of elderly care services* promoted the sharing of educational resources, courses and teachers for the elderly, and explores a new model of the combination of support and education.

To date, China began to focus on the education management department to carry out the top-level design and practical action of elderly education. Elderly education has gradually evolved from the early social welfare service system to the modern lifelong education system. Based on the development of the elderly education policies, China's elderly education policy absorbs international ideals of elderly education, such as active aging, lifelong learning, life dignity education. There are key contents on it:

- The curriculum with Chinese characteristics for the elderly has been established.
- The elderly in rural areas is concerned, and rural elderly education has become a crucial part to establish.

III. PRACTICES

A. The Type of Curriculum

The curriculum is the most important part of the elderly education system and one of the determinants of whether the elderly education policy can achieve the effect. The policy of the elderly curriculum involves health, safety, property, culture, science, and technology el at. The purpose to analyze the policy is to go out of the text and move towards the real practice in elderly education.

This paper uses the curriculum data of 14 local educational institutions for the elderly in 7 provinces in China [7] to classify into five curriculum types based on the demand of theory [8]. McClusky stated only when the curriculum meets the corresponding needs can it fully adapt to social development. He divided the curriculum needs into five types:

- Copy needs are to maintain physical and mental health.
- Expressive needs are an activity carried out in people's interests.
- Contributive needs are an altruistic desire to serve others.

- Influence needs are a desire for political skills and wisdom, which can be improved through surplus energy and resources.
- Transcendent needs are to transcend age-related limitations and learn to balance capacity and load.

From Xu and Li's studies, the number of courses is very large and increasing every year. The 14 institutions offered 715 courses in 2013, 765 in 2014 and 892 in 2015. From the demand theory, the types of courses are very unbalanced. From Fig. 1, the courses were satisfied with expressing needs, accounting for 71.6%. It is followed by the courses related to coping needs, accounting for 21.7%, including health and safety courses. the courses rated contributive and influence needs are lower, separately 0.63% and 0.19%. the transcendent needs have no corresponding course. Furthermore, Pan studied the online courses of the National Open University in Chinese for the elderly [9]. It found that among the more than 300 online courses, the course of coping needs accounted for 21.6%, the course of expressive needs accounted for 78.4%, and other demand types were not involved in the courses (see Fig. 1).
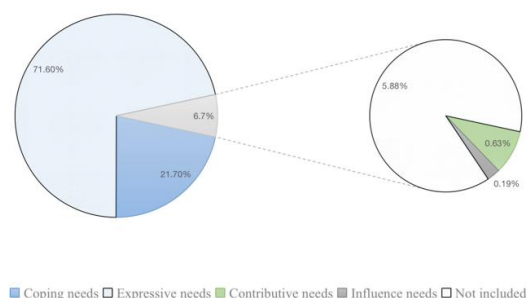

Figure 1.   The types of courses for elderly education.

The interests and hobbies of the elderly are the main standards for formulating a curriculum, which ignores the scientific and systematisms of the curriculum construction. The two research reflect that in the practice of elderly education, the type of curriculum is unbalanced. The leisure courses that meet the expression needs of the elderly are more favored by educational institutions.

On the other hand, there is a lack of unified curriculum names and standards. In the process of investigation and statistics, it is found that the curriculum names of various schools are different. Although it embodies some characteristics of the school for the elderly, it makes the investigators unable to define it completely according to the curriculum naming standard, which brings great difficulty and uncertainty to the scientific investigation and research. It is very disadvantageous to carry out in-depth research on elderly education.

B. The Cohort of Rural Elderly

The information of education development plan (2016-2020) set a 2020 goal, that in principle, cities have at least one university for the elderly, 50% of townships (streets) have schools for the elderly, and 30% of villages (neighborhood committees) have learning centers for the elderly. In practice, compared with the good performance of cities, there is a serious lag in rural elderly education.

For example, in 2017, the elderly educational institution in Fenghua, one of the distinctions of Ningbo, Zhejiang province, established only 21% of the expected. Keqiao in Shaoxing city had built 13 teaching sites, accounting for about 4% of the total number of village residents [10]. These areas belonged to Zhejiang Province, which means their economic situation is generally better than that of other parts of China.

The elderly in rural areas are less limited by their cognitive level, lacking understanding of the status of elderly education, and they are not aware of the benefits of elderly education for their development, social progress, and family happiness. In Yanqing, a rural area of Beijing, Yan found the illiterate elderly accounted for 4.2% of the total population in pilot towns. The elderly with primary school education accounted for 86.7% of the pilot villages and towns. The elderly with junior middle school education accounts for 8.05% [11]. Due to most of the pilot villages being in mountain areas, the cultural level of the elderly population is lower than the average level of pilot villages and towns. Through the questionnaire survey in four pilot villages, the satisfaction of rural elderly groups with education courses is shown (see Fig. 2).
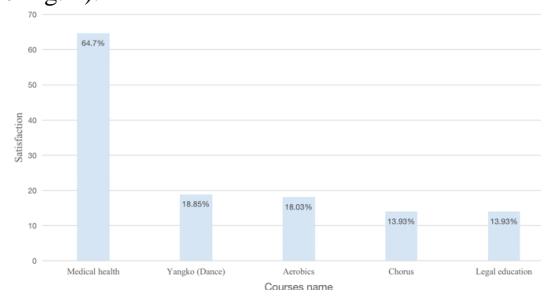

Figure 2.   The educational satisfaction of rural elderly.

The rural elderly cohort has the highest satisfaction with medical health education, accounting for 64.75%, which reflects they have a strong demand for the courses related to coping needs. Other courses, like Yangko (a local dancing), Aerobics and Chorus, which belonged to the courses related to expressive needs, received low comments.

Furthermore, limited by economic conditions, rural areas have few professional teachers who can undertake and are willing to undertake elderly education. There are many volunteers in rural for basic education, but few in elderly education. The government also has no policy in this regard to encourage elderly education talents to devote themselves to the cause of elderly education in rural areas. Most of the existing teachers do not fully recognize the status of rural elderly education, so they do not pay enough attention to it, have serious coping thoughts, and cannot continue to seriously study elderly education and improve their teaching level and ability. In addition, the teaching contents taught do not match the current needs of rural elderly education.

IV.   CONCLUSION AND FUTURE

As a part of the work of social aging and the last stage of lifelong learning, the opportunities and challenges of

elderly education coexist. There is a distance between the elderly education policies and its practice in China. Especially in the two most important aspects: curriculum design and rural elderly.

A. To Establish National Curriculum Standard

To date, there is no unified standard for the curriculum of elderly education in China. The elderly institutions set up courses according to the needs of students and the situation of its resources. *The information of education development plan (2016-2020)* requires to set up diversified curriculums. But diversity is not without standards. Diversified courses more need principled standards. Forming curriculum standards and establishing a set of scientific and flexible curriculum systems are the development direction of elderly education.

B. To Promote Regional Equity in Elderly Education

Paying attention to the vulnerable groups of the elderly is the cognitive basis for the national implementation of "everyone has the right to education" and "the elderly have the right to continue education", and it is also the core theme called for by the previous World Assembly on aging. It should consider the learning needs of the rural elderly. Based on this, arranging appropriate courses is an important part of the elderly education in China.

Over the past 30 years, the elderly education has gradually transformed from the welfare treatment enjoyed by special groups into the equal rights of ordinary elderly people in China. Popularization is related to the accessibility of education for the elderly, and unbalanced development is the main obstacle. It is an important factor to eliminate the gap in elderly education caused by various factors, especially the education problems of the elderly in rural areas, border poor areas and the elderly, disabled, disabled, and widowed special elderly.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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