

A Comparison of Global Aging Trends: Exploring the Path from “Healthy Aging” to “Active Aging” - Case Studies Based on Japan, Northern Europe and China

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Abstract: The global population structure is undergoing a profound aging transformation, driving the concepts of “healthy aging” and “active aging” to gradually evolve from focusing on the maintenance of individual physical health to a comprehensive framework emphasizing social participation, equal opportunities, and the development of the entire life cycle. This article aims to deeply analyze how cultural background, institutional arrangements and social structure shape the differentiated paths for each country to deal with aging by comparing three typical cases: Japan (ultra-aged society and cultural tradition integration), Northern Europe (high welfare system and universalist design), and China (rapid aging and aging before getting rich). The core research finds that the governance model for aging is deeply influenced by cultural values, the maturity of the welfare system, and the intergenerational relationship structure. Among them, the construction of social support networks, the collaboration of multiple subjects, and the integration of life-cycle policies are key variables. The implications for China lie in the fact that it is necessary to base itself on the local filial piety culture and the stage of social and economic development. While strengthening the family-based elderly care function, it is also necessary to accelerate the construction of a multi-level elderly care security system, promote the construction of an age-friendly environment, and actively explore aging response plans that are culturally adaptable, institutional resilient and social innovative.

Keywords: Population Aging; Healthy Aging; Active Aging; Comparative Study; Japan; Northern Europe; China

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1. Main Research Conclusions

With the acceleration of global population aging, national response strategies are undergoing a subtle transformation. The previously health-focused “healthy aging” model is gradually being replaced by “active aging,” which emphasizes encouraging social participation, promoting employment, and enhancing capabilities^{[1][2]}. This study examines Japan, the Nordic region, and China as case studies to conduct an in-depth analysis of their similarities and differences in transition pathways, policy tool applications, and the development of social support systems, leading to relevant conclusions.

1.1 The Unique Path and Determining Factors of the Transition from “Healthy” to “Active” Aging in the Three Kingdoms Period

In addressing aging challenges, Japan has developed an effective model through comprehensive legislation. The country enacted key laws including the Elderly Employment Stabilization Act and the Lifelong Active Society Promotion Act,

mandating corporate retirement age extensions and providing reemployment support^{[3][4][5]}. This established a robust framework characterized by “government-led legislation, corporate compliance, and multi-stakeholder collaboration.” Japan demonstrates strategic foresight in employment guidance by prioritizing senior citizens in experience-intensive sectors like services and consulting, effectively harnessing “the value of accumulated expertise.”^[5] The nation maintains a comprehensive Silver Human Resources Center network offering integrated services such as job placement, vocational training, and career counseling to facilitate reintegration into the workforce. Furthermore, Japan’s deeply rooted work ethic fosters a culture where many seniors view employment as vital to life fulfillment. Retirement without work often triggers feelings of social exclusion and unrealized potential, compelling them to continue working—not merely for financial gain but also to maintain social connections and achieve personal fulfillment^[4].

For Nordic countries, building upon the well-established foundation of a “high taxation-high welfare” system, seniors have been redefined as “lifelong learners” and “active participants.”^{[6][7][8]} The implementation strategy relies on three key pillars: a universal lifelong education system, flexible retirement policies, and community-integrated services, with particular emphasis on the concept of “work-life balance.” At the governmental level, tax incentives encourage businesses to actively employ older adults, while community centers provide skills training, volunteer opportunities, and social support services. This has formed a flexible integration model characterized by “state guarantees as solid support, community engagement as practical foundation, and individual autonomy as intrinsic motivation.”^{[6][8]} Notably, the Nordic model places great importance on elderly mental health and social connections, actively promoting social integration through intergenerational cohabitation programs and community cultural activities—practices deeply rooted in the Nordic philosophy of equality for all citizens^[7].

Currently, China’s population development has entered a completely new phase, characterized by declining birth rates, an aging population, and significant regional disparities in population growth and decline. Within traditional Chinese family values, “caring for the elderly” holds a prominent position, while the concept of “utilizing the elderly” is rarely emphasized. This deeply ingrained mindset results in generally low societal and individual acceptance of elderly reemployment^{[1][9][10]}. For most seniors, although they recognize the need for “care,” they fundamentally wish to retain their personal value. Moreover, societal pressures act like an invisible shackle, preventing them and their children from typically encouraging elderly individuals to seek employment elsewhere. Additionally, the gap between urban and rural areas is pronounced: rural seniors predominantly engage in agricultural labor, while urban seniors face a mismatch between their reemployment aspirations and available opportunities. In the information age, Chinese seniors have increasingly limited access to information, hindering their full integration into this rapidly evolving era. Their adoption of new technologies is relatively slow, and their children are often preoccupied with livelihoods, leaving little time for support. China’s silver economy remains in its early stages of development, confronting dual challenges of “aging before prosperity” and “aging without adequate preparation.”^{[11][12]} The labor market has yet to establish flexible mechanisms to accommodate the elderly, and social security systems—such as pensions and healthcare—are primarily focused on meeting basic needs. Vocational training resources are predominantly allocated to younger generations, leaving seniors with limited access to adequate training opportunities^[13]. Compared with countries like Japan and Northern Europe, China still lacks a well-established system for vocational training for the elderly, with severely inadequate incentives for enterprises to employ older workers and a lack of systematic legal safeguards. There are few easy and engaging employment opportunities suitable for seniors. Even when some older adults break free from social pressures, they are plagued by questions such as “what jobs are available” and “how to secure employment opportunities.” Clearly, the path to re-employment for the elderly is fraught with obstacles. Despite many seniors possessing work capabilities and a desire to re-enter the workforce, they often have to abandon their aspirations. We need to focus on both mindset shifts and institutional measures, integrating the concept of active aging and healthy aging into the entire process of economic and social development^{[1][2]}. However, directly transplanting the Japanese or Nordic models may lead to “institutional rejection,” necessitating dual efforts in policy localization and social mindset guidance^[14].

2. Research Gaps and Future Prospects

2.1 Shortage of Research, Inadequate Research, Lack of Research

This study faces challenges in data depth and microscopic mechanism analysis. Current research predominantly focuses on

macro policies and statistical descriptions, lacking in-depth exploration of micro-level mechanisms such as the formation of elderly re-employment decisions, underlying motivations for enterprises to hire seniors, and the operational dynamics of community support networks. Particularly regarding the psychological transition of older adults from “health-oriented aging” to “active participation,” as well as the specific mechanisms through which family support systems function, more in-depth qualitative research is urgently needed^{[9][13]}.

The study lacks sufficient exploration of internal disparities within Northern Europe. By treating the region as a homogeneous entity, it fails to meticulously differentiate subtle variations in elderly employment policies and community service models among countries like Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. In reality, Nordic nations exhibit distinct differences in pension systems, employment subsidy standards for seniors, and approaches to community service delivery. These variations significantly impact policy effectiveness, warranting in-depth investigation^{[6][8]}.

The study lacks in-depth analysis of regional disparities in China regarding the differentiation trends in aging response strategies among eastern, central, and western regions as well as urban and rural areas. Given China’s vast territory and significant differences in economic development, aging levels, and cultural traditions across regions, conducting more detailed regional comparative studies is essential^{[9][10]}.

The study exhibits limitations at the data level, primarily relying on cross-sectional data or short-term policy evaluations, lacking long-term tracking of the transition process from ‘healthy aging’ to ‘active aging’ among the elderly population. This results in difficulties in accurately assessing the long-term efficacy and sustainability of relevant policies^{[1][2]}.

2.2 Future Research Direction

Further in-depth comparative studies should be conducted between urban and rural areas as well as different regions, focusing on China’s various regions such as the Yangtze River Delta, Pearl River Delta, and rural areas in central and western China, to explore their differentiated approaches in elderly human resource development and community support system construction. Particular attention should be paid to how rural elderly can achieve “productive aging” amidst the wave of agricultural modernization, while also helping younger urban elderly break through the “glass ceiling of re-employment” and realize their own value^{[9][12]}.

It is necessary to conduct cross-border impact assessments of key policies. Specifically, the policy effectiveness of Japan’s “Silver Human Resources Center,” Northern Europe’s “flexible retirement system,” and China’s “long-term care insurance pilot program” in enhancing elderly social participation can be compared. Quasi-experimental designs or case comparison methods can be used to accurately evaluate the cost-effectiveness and social impacts of different policy tools^{[4][5][14]}.

To conduct in-depth research in the fields of cultural psychology and social identity, cross-cultural surveys should be implemented to analyze differences between China and Japan, as well as China and Europe, particularly in aspects such as “perception of elderly values” and “stigma surrounding re-employment.” These findings will provide a solid foundation for policy dissemination and social advocacy. Social psychology theories suggest leveraging narrative transformation and role model promotion to reshape societal perceptions of elderly participation in social activities—a critical priority that demands immediate attention^{[1][14]}.

The research should focus on multi-stakeholder collaborative mechanisms, conducting an in-depth analysis of the roles and synergistic approaches of governments, enterprises, communities, and families in advancing the “active aging” initiative^[15]. Particular attention should be given to exploring how enterprises balance economic benefits with social responsibilities, and how communities integrate various resources to create a supportive environment for the elderly^{[8][11][12]}.

Against the backdrop of an aging society, in-depth research on intergenerational relationships and family support has become imperative. It is essential to examine the evolving trends in intergenerational dynamics and the impact of family support systems on elderly social participation. Particular attention should be paid to studying children’s attitudes toward parental re-employment and their influencing factors, thereby providing solid evidence for family policy formulation^{[1][9]}.

It is imperative to establish an assessment indicator system for “active aging” that aligns with China’s national conditions. This system must encompass multiple dimensions such as health, participation, and protection to provide scientific and precise tools for policy formulation and efficacy evaluation^{[2][12]}.

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Conflict of Interests

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