

# Promoting social engagement of the elderly to cope with aging of the Chinese population

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**SUMMARY** China is in a stage of rapid aging of its population, and its old-age dependency ratio has been increasing for decades. The acceleration of aging of the population and the increasing old-age dependency ratio will significantly increase the pressure on social security and public services, highlight the need for the effective supply of labor, and weaken the demographic dividend, which will continue to affect social vitality, the power to innovate, and potential economic growth rates. Promoting social engagement has been widely recognized as an effective strategy to address these challenges. Such an approach not only promotes the development of social productivity, but it also alleviates the social burden. Actively promoting the social engagement of the elderly is an important task in gerontology in China. Although the development of social engagement of the elderly is on the rise, the infrastructure and institutions to provide social engagement need to be enhanced. Improving social engagement in China is not just the responsibility of older adults themselves but also of the country and society as a whole. In the future, the entire society will fully understand the special role of older adults and increase their value through social engagement to achieve active and healthy aging in China.

**Keywords** social engagement, aging of the population, old-age dependency ratio, China

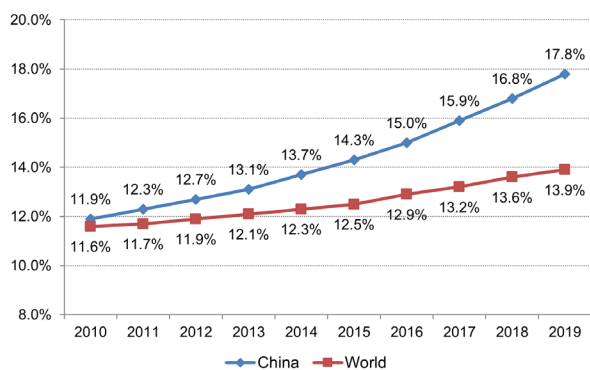
## 1. Introduction

Aging of the population is a worldwide problem. How do policy-makers help people remain independent and active as they age? How can the quality of life among older people be improved as people are living longer? These questions are even more difficult and challenging for China, which is the world's most populous country with the largest aging population (1). China is in a stage of rapid aging of the population. The number of people aged 65 and older in China was 176 million in 2019 (2), accounting for 12.6% of the total population. According to data from the World Bank (3), the older population is estimated to reach 240 million in 2030, accounting for 16.9% of the total population, and 354 million in 2050, accounting for 26.1%. Although aging symbolizes the great success of development, it is also one of China's biggest challenges. The acceleration of aging of the population will significantly increase the pressure on social security and public services, highlight the need for the effective supply of labor, and weaken the demographic dividend, which will continue to affect social vitality, the power to innovate, and potential economic growth rates (4). At present, China faces the

problem of an increasing number of older people as well as a reduction in the labor force and an increase in the dependency ratio. Reaching its "Lewis turning point" (5), China's working-age population is decreasing and its elderly population is increasing, causing the old-age dependency ratio to increase from 11.9% in 2010 to 17.8% in 2019. This exceeds the average ratio worldwide, and the gap is widening (Figure 1). The old-age dependency ratio refers to the proportion of older dependents (people older than 64) to the working-age population (those ages 15-64), reflecting the burden of old-age dependency on society (6). Traditional thinking often regards the older population as a "burden" and views aging as a "problem," thus obscuring the potential of older people. The concept of *Active Aging* was devised to solve the challenges of aging and explore the potential of older people.

## 2. Active Aging and social engagement

In 1996, the World Health Organization (WHO) first proposed the concept of *Active Aging*. Social engagement is the core and essence of the concept of *Active Aging*, highlighting the fact that the elderly have an equal right



**Figure 1. Trends of the old-age dependency ratio in China and the world from 2010 to 2019.** Data source: The World Bank, [https://data.worldbank.org.cn/indicator/SP.POP.DPND.OL?end=2019&name\\_desc=true&start=2010&view=chart](https://data.worldbank.org.cn/indicator/SP.POP.DPND.OL?end=2019&name_desc=true&start=2010&view=chart)

to engage in a social life, which is defined as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, engagement, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age" (7). *Active Aging* recognizes that older people have a right to social engagement and that such a right should be restored if lost. Accordingly, older people will cease to be the source of social problems and instead become the solution to those problems, changing from a consumer of social wealth to a creator of wealth, changing from a drag on social development to a promoter of development, and fundamentally defining an identity like the young and middle-aged. The WHO believes that if governments implement *Active Aging* policies and programs to enhance the health, engagement, and safety of older people, then those countries will be able to deal with aging.

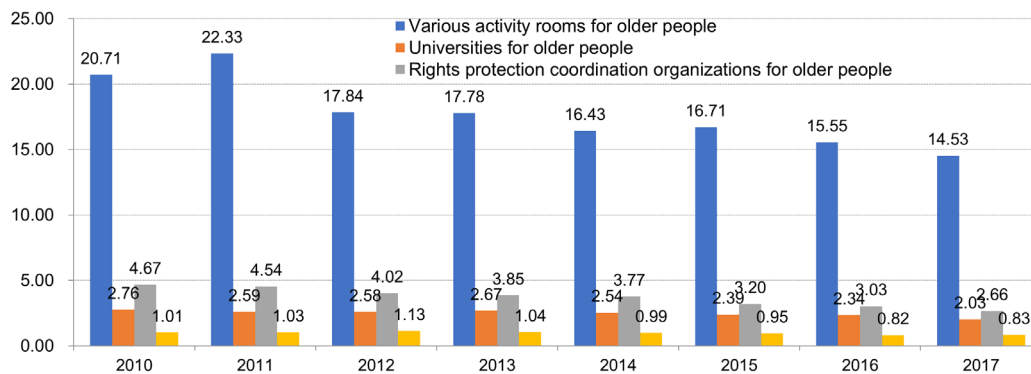
### 3. The role of social engagement in coping with aging in Chinese population

Promoting social engagement has been widely recognized as an effective strategy to cope with aging of the population, and especially in China today. First, reemployment of the older population can promote the development of social productivity to a certain extent. Nowadays in China, one couple needs to take care of two children and four elderly parents in a typical family (8). In order to curb the continuing increase in the old-age dependency ratio, China implemented the two-child policy in 2016 to increase the expected labor force (9). However, the two-child policy only addresses the "denominator." Encouraging the social engagement of the elderly can fundamentally solve the problem of the increasing dependency ratio in terms of the "numerator." According to data from the China Association of Senior Scientists and Technologists, the number of older scientific and technological workers has reached more than 6 million, accounting for 15% of the total number of scientific and technological personnel in China (10). Older scientific and technological workers with senior

professional titles account for a large proportion of the country's senior technical personnel. Older scientific and technological workers have worked hard in various fields such as education, scientific research, culture, health, and industrial and agricultural production for a long time. They have accumulated rich practical experience and made major contributions to the country's scientific and technological progress and economic and social development. If retired senior professionals continue to devote themselves to economic and cultural development, this will further spur the momentum for sustainable economic and social development. Older people in general also have a wealth of political experience, extensive knowledge and experience, technical proficiency, and usually have a strong desire to participate in society. In addition, most of the elderly are in good mental and physical condition and have the ability to engage in production, labor, social management, scientific research, creation of art, helping and teaching the next generation, and other social affairs. Second, social engagement can also alleviate the social burden caused by aging. After retirement, the main arenas for older people are the family and society, and the proportion of elderly people living alone or living separately from their adult children continues to increase as families in China shrink. Most of the elderly want to be independent and may not want to live with their children (11). However, older people can enrich their own lives in their later years and improve their own quality of life through hobby circles and educational groups. Older people in local hobby circles can promote traditional Chinese culture, such as Beijing opera and Yangko dances. More importantly, the elderly will no longer feel lonely in their later years. A growing number of studies have indicated the important role of social engagement in promoting health and reducing the burden of caregiving among older adults (12,13). A study has also suggested that older people who engage in group activities have lower medical costs (14).

### 4. Policy background and the way of social engagement in China

Actively promoting the social engagement of the elderly is an important task in gerontology in China. As early as 1996, Article 4 of the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly" specifically stipulates that the state and society will improve conditions for the elderly "to participate in social development," thus establishing social engagement as a basic right of the elderly (15). The National Population Development Plan (2016-2030) issued by the State Council in 2016 proposed encouraging the elderly to actively engage in family development, mutual assistance for the aged, community governance, and social welfare activities (16). In 2017, the "Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for Healthy Aging"



**Figure 2. Number of institutions providing social engagement services to older adults in China from 2010 to 2017 (per 10,000 older individuals).** Data source: Ministry of Civil Affairs, People's Republic of China, <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/tjgb/> (Note: The latest national data prior to 2017 are available).

issued by the National Health Commission clearly stated the need to provide daily care and support for the elderly living separately from their children, to encourage them to actively participate in society, and to promote the health of the elderly (17).

At present, the best form of social engagement among older people is mainly through various social organizations (18). Social organizations of older people are large organizations involved in self-education, self-management, self-service, community-building, and social development. Social organizations for older people play an increasingly important role as the population rapidly ages. Although social engagement among older people is increasing, it is still relatively limited in China at present. The number of institutions and organizations providing social engagement services to older adults in China tended to decline from 2010 to 2017 (Figure 2). This indicates that the rate at which the elderly are engaging socially lags behind the growth rate of the older population within the content of rapid aging in China.

## 5. Policy recommendations

There are some suggestions and pathways to improve the level of social engagement. First, the reemployment of older adults needs to increase. Human resources or departments to promote employment of the elderly need to create a database to collect information on relevant resources and to establish a forum where the elderly can regularly interact and receive information about employment opportunities. Suitable platforms should be created to capitalize on the advantages of older adults so that older adults and children, adolescents, young people, and even the middle-aged can help each other. The government should further construct public facilities for older people. Many recreational, developmental, and modern activities require corresponding venues or settings, such as places to play chess or cards, venues for community organizations, etc. Last but not least, an awareness of the importance of social engagement

should be cultivated among older adults by expanding informational campaigns and active advocacy so that they actively participate in and integrate into social life. Overall, improving social engagement in China is not just the responsibility of older adults themselves but also of the country and society as a whole. In the future, the entire society will fully understand the special role of older adults and increase their value through social engagement to achieve active and healthy aging in China.

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