

Population ageing and the development of social care service systems for older persons in China

Peng Du¹ and Yongmei Wang²

Abstract. China has the largest ageing population in the world and the absolute number of the older persons accounts for over one-fifth of the world's population. China's population ageing has the characteristics of having an enormous number of older persons with an accelerating ageing pace, a weakened traditional elder familial care capabilities, and vast regional and rural-urban differences. The elder social care service system of 'families serving as the foundation, communities as the base, and institutions as the supplementation' has initially formed in China, but there remains various problems. The Chinese government is now making efforts on the reconstruction and consolidation of elder family care capabilities, to support elder care capacities of the families through social services, the development of long-term care insurance system and relevant service systems, and narrowing the gap amongst various areas of service provision.

Keywords: social care, service systems, older persons, China.

Introduction

China has entered the ageing society since 2000, and the size of its older population is the most populous in the world. The number of people aged 60 and above was 222 million at the end of 2015, accounting for 16.1 per cent of the total population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016). There is no doubt that whether China, with nearly one quarter of the world's ageing population (United Nations, 2015), could actively address the issue of population ageing or not is directly related to the overall quality of life of the world's older population. Therefore, it is necessary to have an understanding of the characteristics of China's population ageing and its policy response.

Over the past 40 years, China experienced such profound social transformations as rapid economic growth, continuous decline of birth rate, shrinking size of families, endless development in urbanization, frequent population flow, improving social security systems

¹ Director, Institute of Gerontology, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China. (dupeng@ruc.edu.cn)

² Ph.D candidate, Institute of Gerontology, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China. (wang_ym@ruc.edu.cn)

and so on. All these have made profound impacts on the pattern of China's care services for older persons, and issues of who is responsible for such care, of where should older persons be cared for, and of how to care them are all to be changed greatly (Du, 2016). Since the new century, the Chinese government has attached great importance to the course of ageing and has defined the development of social care service for older persons as the major livelihood issue that the government cares for, the society concerns and the people urge to solve. Currently, the social care service system for older persons of the family serving as the foundation, the community caring as the base, and institutions as the supplementation is being followed.

As a developing country with its special governance systems, cultural traditions, and intergenerational relations (e.g the realistic basis of 'getting old before being rich'), China has to develop a social care system based on the Chinese realities. In particular against the background of China's New Normal in population and economy (namely low fertility rate and lower economic growth rate) (Li, 2015), measures of actively responding to the population ageing should be continuously improved in practical exploration. In order to improve the understanding of foreign scholars about China's population ageing and its countermeasures, this paper will discuss about the ageing issues and related ways of resolution on the basis of talking about its features and development direction.

The features and the trend of China's population ageing

Similar to the world's population ageing process, China's population ageing also benefits from the decline of birth rates and extension of life expectancy. Meanwhile, the percentage of the older persons is also increasing. Statistics show that the number of older persons aged 80 and above in 2010 has reached 21 million, which accounts for 11.82 per cent of the total ageing population and is 2.59 per cent higher than that in 2000 (Research Center of the State Council, 2015).

The size of China's older population is quite large and it is ageing rapidly

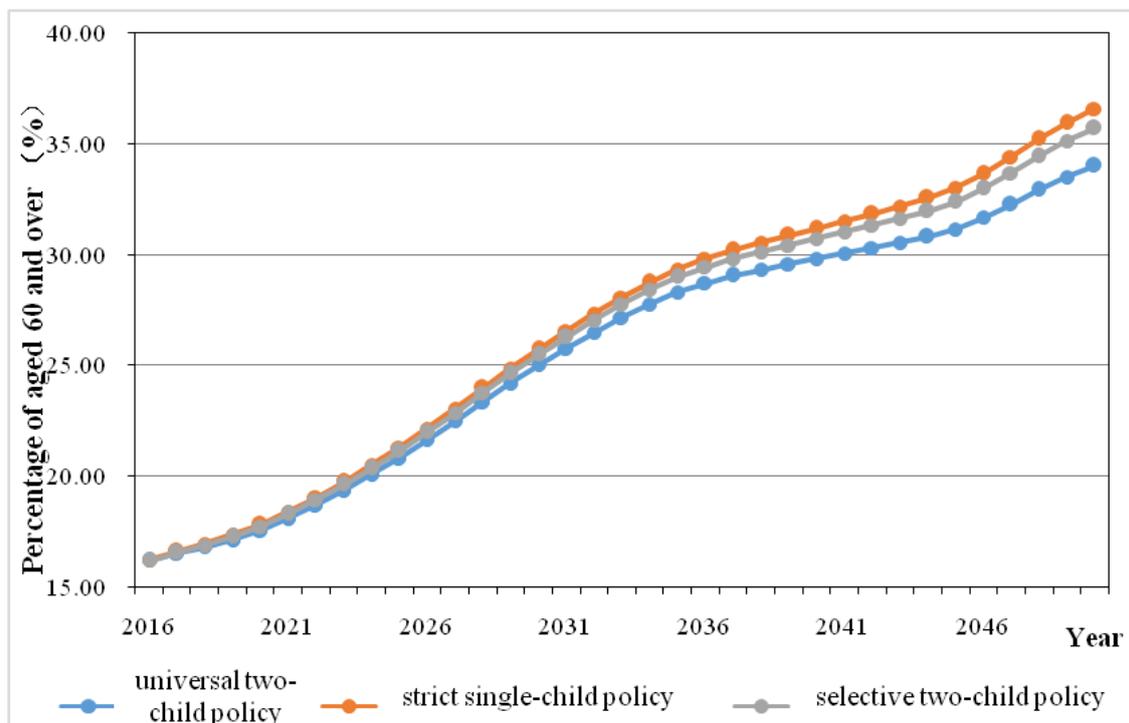
As mentioned earlier, the number of people aged 60 and above was 222 million at the end of 2015 which accounted for 24.64% of those in the whole world³ (United Nations, 2015). In order to promote the balanced development of population and to improve the family planning policy, Chinese government adjusted its population policy in October, 2015. The new policy is that "a couple can have two children (abbreviated as 'the universal two-child policy')", so that action ended the "selective two-child"⁴ policy and "single-child" policy (Community Party China - Central Government, 2015). Undoubtedly, this action will definitely influence China's population ageing. However, statistics show that after implementing the 'the

³ According to statistics given by the United Nations (2015), the total number of old persons in the world was 901 million at the end of 2015. It could be calculated that China's persons aged 60 and above accounts for 24.64 per cent of the total older population in the world.

⁴ The 'selective two-child policy' refers to the possibility that a couple could have two children if either parent is an only child. This policy was raised and implemented in 2013.

universal two-child' policy, the ageing proportion is only 2 per cent lower than that after implementing the 'the selective two-child' policy, although it will be reaching 34 per cent by 2050. There will be more than 470 million older persons in China by 2050 and this number will not be changed by the current new population policy. Figure 1 shows the development trends of China's population ageing under different fertility policies. Figure 2 shows the development trends of the number of China's ageing population in the years from 2016 to 2050 (Institute of Gerontology of Renmin University of China, 2016). The huge ageing population and rapidity of ageing pose great challenges for China in addressing the population ageing.

Figure 1: Development trend of population proportion (%) of persons aged 60 and over under different fertility policies

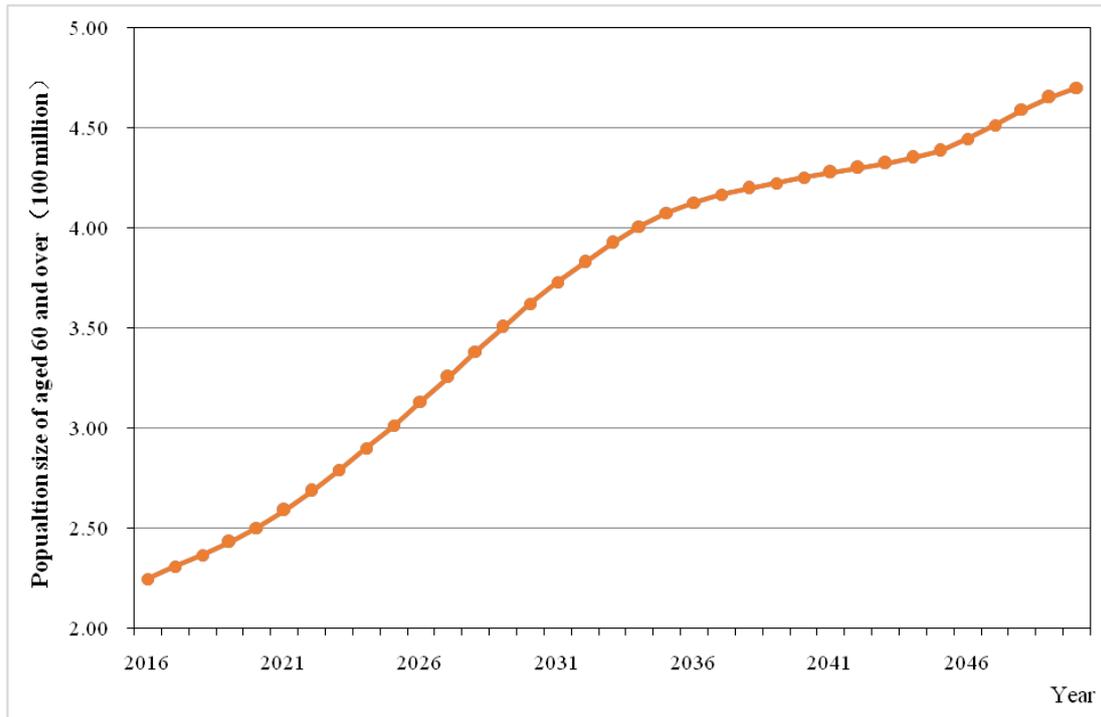


Source: Institute of Gerontology of Renmin University of China, (2016).

The traditional family capabilities in caring for older persons have been weakened significantly

Traditionally, China depended on the family-based care model for older persons for a long period of time. Family members (especially female ones) were deemed as the major caregivers for older persons and the government was only responsible for those vulnerable older persons without family members and the poor. However, with the implementation of the family planning policy, the number of children for the families have been decreasing gradually. Also with the improvement of living conditions, the family size began to shrink since the late 1970s, more and more older persons choose to live separately with their children actively or passively (Li, 2010; Zhang, 2012).

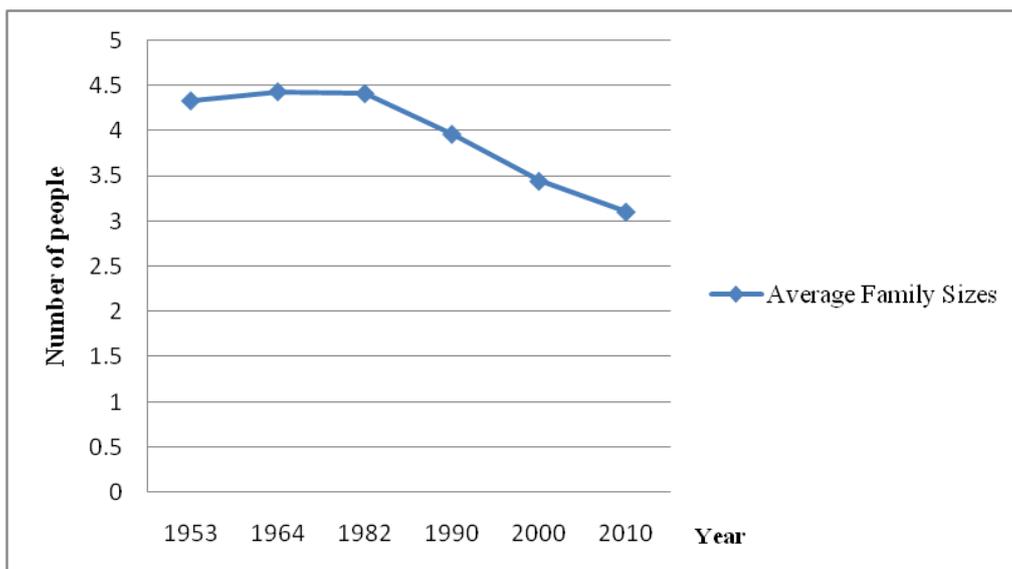
Figure 2: The population size of older persons aged 60 and over in 2016-2050



Source: Institute of Gerontology of Renmin University of China, (2016).

Figure 3 shows the changes of average family sizes from 1953 to 2010. The shrinking family size will unavoidably influence the supply of traditional elder care resources.

Figure 3: Changing trends of Average Family Sizes in 1953~2010



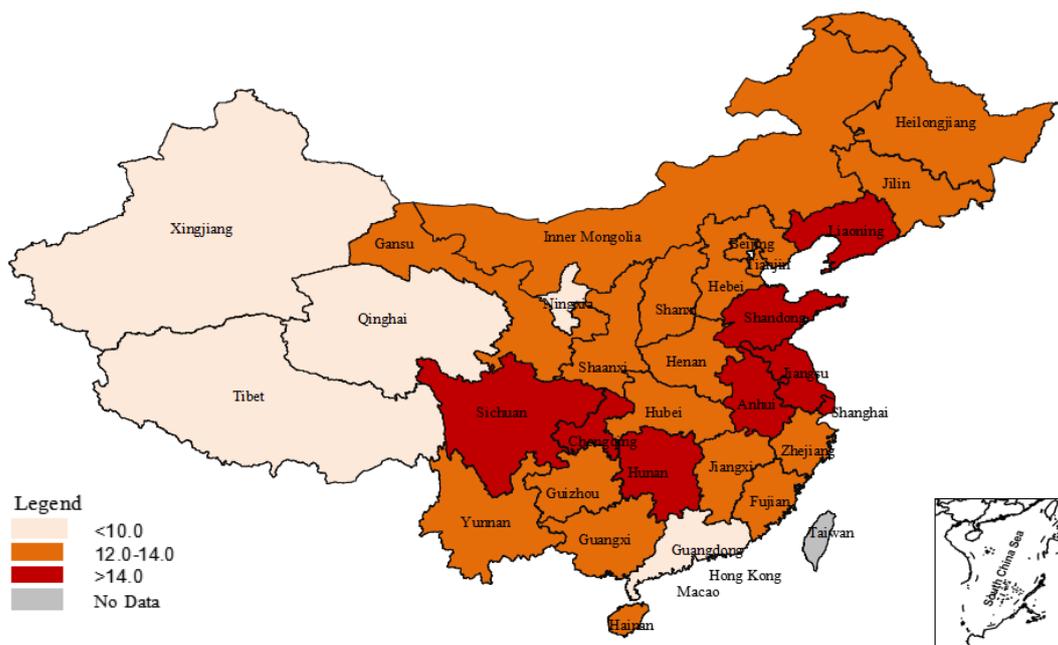
Source: Data calculated based on the 1953, 1964, 1982, 1990, 2000 and 2010 Censuses as cited in Census Office of the State Council, National Bureau of Statistics, (2014).

Meanwhile, because of the concept of gender equality and women empowerment movement, the proportion of women participating in a job is now gradually increasing (Ma, 2013). Both reasons have resulted in the weakening of China's traditional elder care resources. Statistics show that higher numbers of older persons are afraid that no one would look after them when they need care. The Sampling Survey of the Ageing Population in Urban/Rural China (SSAPURC) indicate that 39.88 per cent of older persons are worried about this, among whom 23.64 per cent are 'somewhat worried' and 16.24 per cent are 'very worried' (Wu, Guo & Miao, 2014). This concern serves as the fundamental driving force for the country and the society to improve the elder care service policies.

The regional and rural-urban differences of China's population ageing has been on expansion

The regional differences of China's population ageing are quite large. When western China (e.g. Xinjiang, Qinghai, Tibet) has not entered the ageing society (the proportion of older persons aged 60-plus is lower than 10 per cent), central and eastern China (e.g. Shanghai, Jiangsu, Hunan) has already entered the advanced stage of ageing (proportion over 14 per cent). The differences are shown in Figure 4. Studies show that China's ageing population process gradually rises from the eastern coastal area to the western area (Wang, Sun & Li, 2013). Since the 21st Century, as China entered the rapid urbanization stage, the population flow has become one prominent feature, with the flow 'from rural to urban areas' becoming the major force in the floating population. The Population Census carried out in 2010 indicates that China's floating population has reached 221 million, rising to 253 million at in 2014 (National Health and Family Planning Commission Mobile Population Division, 2015).

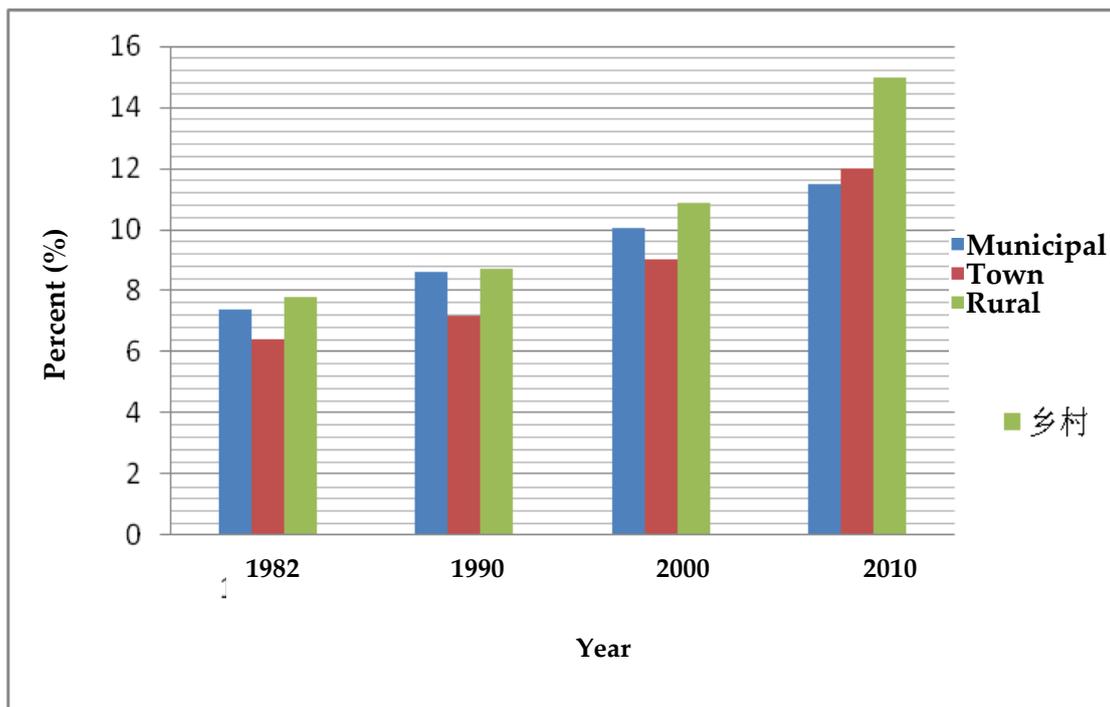
Figure 4: The regional differences of China's population ageing



Source: Drawn in accordance with the Sixth Census on 2010 (Census Office of the State Council, National Bureau of Statistics, 2014)

As higher numbers of younger people move from rural areas to cities, enhancing the ageing degree in rural areas. Statistics show that the number of older persons who are left-behind in rural areas has reached 50 million (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015), which means that nearly one-fourth of China's older persons have been left behind, and that many of them have lost their place in the traditional elder care system. We can get a glimpse of this idea in Figure 5 which shows the trend of ageing degrees in urban and rural areas over the past 30 years. How to make them being looked after properly is really a big challenge. Above all, China's population ageing is the result of the economic and social development. The development of medical services and health technologies has prolonged the average life expectancy, resulting in the ageing 'on-top'; and the implementation of the family planning policy has lowered the birth rate, resulting in the development of the ageing 'at the bottom' (Wu, Wang & Miao, 2003). The shrinking family sizes, the increasingly frequent population flow and the modernization of living patterns cause the weakening of traditional family care capabilities.

Figure 5: Proportions of Chinese municipal, town and rural older persons aged 60 and above during 1982-2010



Source: Data for 1982, 1990 and 2000 as cited in Wu and Du (2006). Data for 2010 as cited in Census Office of the State Council, National Bureau of Statistics (2014).

Considering the realistic condition of 'getting old before being rich' in China, we hold the idea that the change of China's elder care pattern manifests itself as an effort in exploring a dynamic equilibrium in the process of establishing the elder care pattern under the new social supporting system after the weakening of family elder care capabilities (Du, 2016), so it has

become a prominent strategic decision in actively addressing the population ageing to develop and improve the elder social care service.

Challenges and strategies of China's social service system for older persons

History of elder care service policies and the challenges

Since the founding of People's Republic of China (in 1949) to the Reform and Opening-up period in late 1970s, the elder care policy in China stipulated that in urban areas, the working units should be responsible to support its retired workers; in rural areas, families and their children should look after older relatives. The government was only responsible to ensure that the rural 'Five-Guarantee' older persons and urban 'Three Noes' older persons have the basic needs for food, clothing and care⁵. As the reform of economic and social systems was deepening, the social welfare ideology changed accordingly and the State started to explore the reform whereby 'society should be responsible for social welfare'. Therefore, during the years from 1978 to 2000, Chinese government, represented by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, introduced a series of policies, laying the ideological foundation for social forces to take part in ageing care.

Since 2000, the Chinese government began focusing on the best suited design for elder social care service and the Communist Party of China's Central Committee and the State Council issued important documents such as *Decision on Strengthening the Undertaking on Ageing*, *Notification on Opinions About Speeding up the Development of Elderly Care Service*, the 10th and 11th *Five-Year Plans for China's Development of the Ageing Undertaking*, and so on. In this period, the improvement of elder care infrastructures and the avocation of its ideas have laid the important foundation for the development of the service. During the years from 2010 to today, China's social care service system experienced substantial development, and more important documents have been introduced, including the 12th *Five-year Plan for Construction of System of Social Services for the Elderly (2011-2015)* issued in 2011, *Some Suggestions of the State Council on Speeding up the Development of Elderly Care Service* issued in 2013, and *Guidance on Promoting the Combination of Health Care and Elderly Care* issued in 2015. However, although China has achieved a lot in developing elder social care, there still exist many problems, such as the supply-demand imbalance of the elder care service, the difficulties in implementing the top-level policies, the serious fragmentation of elder social care services, the imbalanced supply of the service (such as the serious shortage in rural areas), the ambiguities of responsibilities of all elder care providers (such as families, governments and the society) and so on. How to solve these challenges remains to be a huge challenge for Chinese government.

⁵ Urban "Three Noes" older persons refer to those who don't have labor capacity, source of income and supporters, or their relatives having no supporting capacity. Rural "Five-Guarantee" older persons refer to those whose eating, clothing, housing, medical treatment and funeral services are provided by the Government.

Key points of Chinese government's work in the ageing undertaking

To address the above challenges more effectively, Chinese government, observing the principles of population ageing, has made great efforts, not only to solve the current problems but also to make preparations for the future advanced and even serious ageing society. Currently, the key points of Chinese government's work can be summarized as follows.

...focus on the reconstruction and consolidation of elder family care capabilities.

In China, families are still the important subjects of responsibilities of elder care, which could be seen from the stipulation of 'the fundamental position of family elder care' in the *Elderly Rights Law* in 2012. And policies stipulate that over 90 per cent of older persons should be looked after by their families.

On one hand, the government pays much attention to the birth number of families. It is mentioned in the beginning of the article that Chinese government adjusted the population policies in 2013 and 2015 respectively and implemented 'the universal two-child' policy in 2015 to promote the sustainable development of the population. Though the implementation of the new policy can hardly change the rapid development of ageing, it can obviously delay its process (Zhai, Zhang & Jin, 2014). The birth of more young people will definitely improve family elderly care capabilities in several years.

On the other hand, the government cares about the construction of elder family care capabilities. In recent years, Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and Hangzhou have made useful attempts in respite services, economic subsidies, and social system supports and these efforts have achieved good results. In the newly issued *13th Five-year Plan on National Economic and Social Development*, it is clearly pointed out that 'we should perfect the reward, assistance and special assistance system for family planning families in rural areas and enhance the care and help for families which lose their single child'. And the government started to explore flexible work system, elder care vacation system and other methods to improve family capabilities.

However, the implementation of the new population policy would increase the burden of raising children, which will influence the families' capabilities in caring for older relatives to some extent. How to construct the families' elder care capabilities in the new situation is still the work direction for both the government and the scholars.

...focus on the responsibilities of governments and social subject.

Since the beginning of the 13th Five-year Plan, namely 2016, the Chinese government began to focus more on the quality and efficiency of social elder care service system by

- Adjusting the role of care homes for older persons. During the 12th Five-year Plan, Chinese government proposed to establish the system of families serving as the foundation,

communities as the base, and institutions as the support and raised the pattern of '9073'⁶. After many explorations and practices, the government changed it into the system of families serving as the foundation, communities as the base, and institutions as the supplementation, weakening the role of institutions.

- Defining the government's responsibilities in elder care. The government and scholars begin to realize that if they want to motivate social forces to participate in the elder care, they should first know what the government should do. Due to the ambiguity of the separation of duties, especially that in what the government should do, the efficiency of this system is low. Currently, the scholars have reached a common consensus that the government should ensure that elder care should not only cover the 'Three Noes' and 'Five Guarantees', but also include the 'old-old' and older persons with disability and dementia.
- Enhancing the construction of assessment standards to standardize the development of elder care service. Though the national standards have not been established, Shanghai took the lead to establish the assessment system for their demands and compiled local standards such as *Assessment Requirements on the Grade of Elderly Care*. And Beijing has also finished the preliminary investigation on the comprehensive assessment. In 2013, Ministry of Civil Affairs issued *Licensing Procedures for Establishing Elderly Care Institutions and Management Methods for Elderly Care Institutions* and began to standardize and enhance the regulation for these institutions; in 2016, the Ministry introduced the industrial standard of *Service Guide for Social Work on Older Persons* and began to specify the working standard. Meanwhile, the construction of infrastructures for the service is changing from being driven by investment to demands and actual demands of older persons to attract more attention (Wang, 2016).

...focus on the development of long-term care insurance system and related services.

Chinese government and scholars pay high attention to the establishment of the long-term care insurance system and regard it as the necessary way to respond to the elder care in the advanced society of ageing. Due to the condition of 'getting old before getting rich', whether the economic development level could support the system has always been the focus of academic argument. Currently, scholars think that China does not have the conditions to establish the welfare, inclusive, and mandatory system and China will not establish the national Long Term Care insurance system in the next five years.

However, Beijing, Qingdao and other cities have started to explore pilots of this system, making preparations for establishing the national system. What lies in contrast is the development of the elder care service. Chinese government has always been proposing the pattern of government being the leading force for and multi-entities participating in the service. Researches also show that Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) pattern could help improve the supply efficiency of elder family care service (Gao, 2015). Therefore, the 13th Five-

⁶ '9073' means that 90 per cent of all older persons shall be cared in their home, seven per cent be cared in communities using social service, and three per cent be cared in the institutions.

year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2016-2020) clearly points out that under the conditions of ‘overall planning the construction of public elderly care service market’ and ‘improving the welfare and charity systems adapting to ageing’, and that China should ‘completely open up the elder care service market and support market entities to increase the supply of the service and goods through buying services by government, equity corporations and other methods’.

...focus on the equalization of elder social care services

The development of China’s elder social care service is in disproportion and there are huge regional and rural-urban differences. From the perspective of rural-urban differences, though the ageing degree in rural areas is higher than that in urban areas (the ageing degree in urban areas in 2014 was 13.9 per cent and that in rural areas was 17.6 per cent) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015), its service resources fall far behind those in urban areas in both quantities and qualities (Ding & Wang, 2011). Statistics in 2015 showed that the number of community service centers including the elder care in rural areas, accounting for 34.8 per cent of the total number, was only half of that in urban areas (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2015). In recent years, the government’s work for older persons begins to tilt toward rural areas. For example, Li Ligu, Minister of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, pointed out that the elder social care industry in rural areas will be our key work point and the tilting direction. We should develop the service in rural areas by enhancing the construction of day care infrastructures in communities, giving full play of the role of market resource allocation, and depending on the mode of ‘Internet plus’ (see <http://shfl.mca.gov.cn/article/ldjh/201603/20160300881739.shtml>). From the perspective of regional differences, the elder social care service in eastern China develops fast while the elder care infrastructures and services in central-western China develop slowly. For example, statistics show that the average index of public elder care service in eastern regions such as Shanghai, Beijing and Jiangsu has reached about 2.0, while that in central-western regions such as Shaanxi, Yunnan and Guizhou is only about 0.46 (Chen & Man, 2013). In recent years, governments and scholars begin to realize that elder care resources should be inclined to central-western regions and late-starting advantage should be made use of to develop social elder care service in accordance with local ageing features (Shi & Tang, 2015).

...focus on the integrated development of the elder care service.

Due to lacking of theoretical knowledge of the elder care service, the development of China’s elder care service is in ‘fragmentation’. The most typical situation is the separation of medical care and daily nursing care – that is, one cannot enjoy elder care in places where they can see a doctor and one cannot see a doctor in places where they can enjoy the service. After many years of exploration and practice, the government and scholars begin to think about what on earth is the connotation of ‘elder care’? In recent years, the concept of ‘integrated care’ began to be recognized by China’s scholars (Du, Li & Li, 2014). In 2015, the concept of ‘new healthy ageing’ was raised in *World Report on Ageing and Health*, issued by World Health Organization (2015) - namely, that countries should work hard to help improve the physical and mental capacities of older individuals and enable them to perform their functions in the interaction

with favorable external environment (including such micro environment as families, homes and interpersonal relationships and such macro ones as social ideas and public policies). Both concepts of 'integrated care' and 'new healthy ageing' serve for an integrated development of elder care resources. In 2015, the State Council introduced the *Instructions for Promoting the Combination of Health Care and Elderly Care Service* and clearly put forward the idea that 'we should promote the combination of health care and elder care service' in the newly issued *13th Five-year Plan for National Economic and Social Development*. The integration of service resources is also manifested in interdisciplinary cooperation. For example, the Smart Ageing, trying to apply technological achievement in the service, develops rapidly in recent years. The National Committee on Ageing (CNCA) also set up the 'National Committee of Experts of Smart Ageing' in 2013, guiding the Smart Ageing of China. In 2014, the 'Informational People-Benefit Project for Elderly Care Service' was included in 11 projects started by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. It means that the government will spend great efforts to promote the integrated development of elder care, health care and medical service. The multi-disciplinary, multi-sector, and multi-resource coordination will definitely improve the quality and efficiency of China's elder care service.

...and at last, the government will begin to focus on constructing an age-friendly livable environment (e.g. livable communities)

Just as what is mentioned in the concept of 'new healthy ageing', a favourable external environment could help improve the self-care ability of older persons. It is precisely the recognition of the importance of the environment that the government discussed 'livable environment' in a single chapter in the revised edition of the *Law on Protecting the Rights and Benefits of Older Persons* in 2013. Indeed, China is the first country in the world that includes the livable environment for older persons into its laws. Many places, such as Shanghai, Hangzhou, Qingdao, and Qiqihar, have started to implement the construction of the livable environment. Besides, the national *Instruction on Promoting the Construction of Livable Environment for the Elderly* is going to be issued soon.

Coda

With the largest population in the world, China has entered the rapid ageing stage. Compared with the population structure with more young people before the end of last century, the population ageing has influenced China in many ways and poses as a serious challenge to the elder care capability to this big developing country. The biased word of 'Chinese style elderly care', which makes people feel helpless, has caused heated discussion in Chinese and foreign academic world. And many people believe that according to the current development situation in China, it would be very hard (at least be stretched) to address the issue of elder care for so many older persons. Many problems would be unavoidable to happen, including 'children could not support their parents after they grow old', 'imbalance of resource allocation', 'a lack of service staff', and 'rapid landslide of economy' and so on.

However, due to China's distinct features and advantages in its development stages, cultural traditions, family relations between generations, and governance systems, China must embark on 'an elderly care road with Chinese features' (Du, 2016). First, because of the fundamental realities that China is still a developing economy, China is doomed to integrate the elder care into the economic development, and China's economy is now changing from being led by industry into service. Chinese government grasps the opportunity to propose the suggestion to strive to develop elder care service and to integrate the challenge of addressing population ageing into economic transformation. Second, Chinese people used to emphasize the reciprocal support among family members. This cultural tradition of elder family care provides cultural foundation for the 'elderly care road with Chinese features'. The fundamental status of elder family care is also made clear in laws and the elder social care plays the role of 'helping families achieve elderly care'. In this way, the content and pattern of elder social care service would definitely have Chinese features. And finally, 'promoting the all-round development of people' is the core value of the governance of Chinese government. What's more, to re-understand the social value of older persons, to encourage them to participate in social activities, and to realize their all-round development have also naturally become the connotation of the 'elderly care road with Chinese features'. And greater longevity bonus would be generated as a result.

With the adjustment of population policies, the population ageing in China will develop further whilst the number of elder families with no children will increase. With the urbanization, the population begins to move in a larger scale. These conditions which have weakened the function of elder family care are challenging the wisdom of Chinese government and the society. And much more efforts are needed for the development of China's elder social care in the future.

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