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Research on the Challenges and Countermeasures Facing Traditional Elderly Care Services in the New Era from the Perspective of Intergenerational Change

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Abstract: From the perspective of intergenerational change, after China entered the new era, both intergenerational structure and intergenerational content have undergone significant changes. The generational mindset has shifted backward as a whole, and the physical and mental conditions of young-old adults have become more youthful, while traditional elderly care and nursing are mostly concentrated on those aged over 80. Intergenerational values and skill transmission patterns have changed; traditional family size has shrunk, and residential separation has weakened traditional family intergenerational relationships. Under intergenerational change, population aging brings multiple challenges to traditional elderly care services. Social support for young-old active adults is insufficient, the supply of individualized elderly care services lags, and services related to maintaining social relationships have shortcomings. We should establish a scientific view of elderly care, subdivide elderly care services according to differences in the elderly life cycle, vigorously develop enjoyment-oriented and leisure health and wellness services for young-old adults, build a diversified elderly care service pattern, and realize a later life of health, longevity, and spiritual enrichment for older adults.

Keywords: Intergenerational change; Elderly care; Spiritual comfort

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1. Introduction

The new social development stage marked by the new era presents a blueprint full of vitality and opportunities, whose typical features are the strength of the national economy and the comprehensive building of a moderately prosperous society. From the perspective of intergenerational change, the new era is not only rapid economic and social development but also comprehensive transformation of social civilization

and cultural progress. Both intergenerational structure and intergenerational content have undergone tremendous changes, bringing new challenges and impacts to traditional elderly care services.

2. Major changes in intergenerational change in the new era

The characteristics of intergenerational change in the new era are mainly reflected in two aspects. One is intergenerational structure. The traditional intergenerational structure is based on different historical periods: the post-1950s generation already receiving elderly care, the post-1960s generation about to receive elderly care, and the post-1970s generation preparing for elderly care. Because social change in the new era has undergone tremendous changes, the life stages of different periods in the traditional generational division have already changed. An analysis and comparison of age at first marriage shows that according to statistics from Hubei Province, the age at first marriage in the 1960s was 19.6 years, reaching 24.76 years in 2008. According to the 2020 census data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, the age at first marriage was 28.67 years. Changes in the age at first marriage mean that life stages divided according to traditional age groups can no longer correspond. The traditional notion of "standing firm at thirty" cannot be used to judge today's 30-year-old population. The average graduation age of post-1970s college students was about 22–23 years; after graduation, they faced the abolition of the welfare housing allocation system and the rapid development of market-oriented real estate. Traditional marriage and housing are important influencing factors, and completing marriage and home purchase before age 30 is very difficult. Today's 60-year-old retirees have undergone tremendous changes in both mental activity and physical condition. After retirement, they enter a long and energetic period. Their condition is similar to that of the traditional 50-year-old population. Although they fall within the age range of older adults, their actual mental and physical state is not truly old; this change has shifted the generational mindset backward by about 10 years overall.

The other aspect is intergenerational content. Traditional intergenerational content focused more on the transmission of values, work skills, and life experience. Information released by the Ministry of Education shows that in 2020 the gross enrollment rate at the senior secondary education stage reached over 90%, and values are completely realized through school education. At the same time, with the rapid upgrading of technology and the continuous rise of the economic environment, the work skills and life experience young people need must be generated entirely by themselves; they can no longer obtain them from their parents and may even need to provide reverse feedback. The emergence of intelligent technology is a completely new challenge for everyone. Intergenerational content has also undergone fundamental changes. First, intergenerational content is no longer gradual development but may involve comprehensive replacement or even conflict. Those currently entering the elderly care age are the post-1960s generation, who experienced poverty and technological backwardness in life and expect products that are maintainable and durable. Current product design concepts lean toward short-term and innovative approaches; iterative development is no longer the only path, product lifespans are shorter, and high integration makes maintenance difficult. Such changes will cause the services and products needed by the previous generation to be completely incompatible with the next generation. Second, the new intergenerational content is more complex. Social civilization and economic prosperity have provided multiple choices for work and life, from the traditional enough food and clothing to eating well and dressing well, then to eating healthily and dressing beautifully, and now people have begun to pursue delicious food under healthy conditions and personalized style

dressing. Finally, there are contradictions and conflicts in social relationships within generations. Traditional intergenerational relationships placed more emphasis on maintaining family relationships, with family members actively participating in the daily activities of the second and third generations to sustain them. In such relationships, family members actively participate in clan affairs, and weddings, funerals, childbearing, and elderly care all receive clan support. The breakdown of such relationships began with the implementation of the family planning policy; the reduction in family members shrank the original intergenerational relationships from clans to families. Educational needs and the attraction of urban economic environments have also increased the spatial distance between family members, making it impossible for family members to effectively support the maintenance of family relationships. Today, reunion can only be achieved on major holidays, and daily communication and contact are seriously lacking.

3. Profound impact of intergenerational change on elderly care services

Intergenerational change in the new era, coupled with population aging, has had a profound impact on elderly care services and posed serious challenges to traditional elderly care.

3.1. Accelerated intergenerational change makes traditional elderly care services incompatible

With the reset of intergenerational structure, the new generation of older adults, especially the post-1970s generation who will enter the elderly stage in the future, may not enter the traditional elderly care state until after age 70. They will have a relatively long adjustment period after retirement, for which individuals and society are not prepared or responsive.

3.1.1. Young-old adults are more active, and social support is seriously lacking

Young-old adults generally refer to those between 60 and 70 years old. A research report on older adults in Beijing shows that in the current real elderly care environment, the main force of nursing assistants in elderly care institutions is on average over 40 years old, and in many families the "young-old" take on the work of caring for the "old-old. [1]" These relatively young older adults are physically healthy, and a large proportion have become the main force caring for elderly family members and grandchildren. With the deepening of population aging, more young-old groups need to arrange either continued work or retirement life after retirement. Society currently lacks serious support for the young-old group: either there are no suitable jobs, or they do not know how to engage in leisure life after retirement [2].

3.1.2. Active older adults need more health care, but elderly care cannot meet the demand

Traditional elderly care is based on medical care and nursing, and care methods and means are based on medical technology, neglecting the health care of active older adults [3]. Health care places more emphasis on leisure and wellness; health care lacks not only technical means but also theory, education, and training. Under intergenerational change, the concept of elderly care after age 60 is blurred and unclear. Older adults should first enjoy life, then pursue health, and finally receive elderly care. Elderly care and nursing are rigid needs, but elderly care services should also include health-oriented aging; health-oriented aging aims to improve older adults' health status, has a broader scope of application, and faces a larger market. Current elderly care services do not have specialized health care services and are basically dominated by traditional

elderly care and nursing, requiring more health and wellness products and services [4].

3.1.3. Intergenerational transition is faster, and the traditional market has not shifted correspondingly

The new intergenerational transition is accelerating, and society has not changed synchronously with this rapid change. The new generation of older adults faces mismatches in the market supply of products and services and insufficient effective products. Current elderly product and service markets are all based on descriptions of older adults from traditional generations; the styles and designs of elderly products supplied by the market are outdated, their content is traditional, and even the images of older adults in advertisements only match those aged over 80 in reality. Population aging merely means an increase in the number of people over 60, not that older people's concepts have become old. Intergenerational differences are changing faster, requiring the market to shift backward correspondingly and develop and sell products or services for the new generation of older adults [5].

3.2. Accelerated variation in intergenerational content slows the development of new elderly care services

3.2.1. Intergenerational content faces conflicts and challenges, and individualized elderly care services are difficult to implement

The intergenerational content of the new generation of older adults has undergone tremendous changes. Under the multiple impacts of the new era's economy and technology, the needs of older adults have greater intergenerational differences and higher individualized requirements. Current elderly care services have difficulty implementing individualized services for older adults. The main life needs of the post-1960s and post-1970s groups will be completely different. The post-1960s generation leans more toward traditional life and has a favorable attitude toward square dancing after retirement; highly educated older adults are better at calligraphy and painting. The post-1970s generation has greater interest in various activities such as fishing, billiards, and table tennis. They also retain hobbies such as stamp collecting and photography. At present, there are few elderly care institutions that can simultaneously satisfy the daily individualized lives of older adults at different stages, and older adults can only find them on their own in society [6,7]. With the shrinking market for traditional leisure services, special leisure activities such as bridge and stamp collecting are even less able to meet the individualized service needs of older adults [8].

3.2.2. Intergenerational values have changed, and attitudes toward later life are diversified

Today's older adults show diversified attitudes toward life in the new era; views on marriage, life, and longevity have all changed [9]. According to the Statistical Communiqué on the Development of Civil Affairs in 2025 issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, from 2010 to 2023, the divorce rate among people aged 60 and above rose from 3.2% to 12.6% [10]. Regarding attitudes toward caring for grandchildren, a survey by the China Research Center on Aging shows that 66.47% of older adults have participated in skip-generation caregiving, but more and more older adults would rather give money than care for grandchildren in person [11]. The number of older adults who start individualized lives after retirement is also increasing. According to the 2026 White Paper on Consumption Trends in the RV Market by the China Tourism Automobile and Cruise Association, among 2026 RV sales, the elderly consumer group aged 60 and above accounted for 65.3%, and the "silver-haired" RV group is growing rapidly [12].

3.2.3. Traditional social relationships have changed, making it more difficult to maintain relationships in later life

From letters and online chatting to today's online video socializing, the ways social relationships are communicated and maintained are constantly changing. The content of traditional family relationships has also changed; "often going home to visit" has become "reverse family visits [13]." The new generation of parents is more tolerant and open, but this has brought about children's indifference toward family relationships. In terms of dealing with and maintaining family relationships, it is difficult for older adults to maintain family relationships, and they crave more responses from their children. These should normally be transformed into new social needs supported by social services, but such social services are currently in a blank period. The weakening of family relationships in social relations has enhanced older adults' sense of loneliness. The China Report on Aging Development 2024 pointed out that nearly one-quarter of older adults in China experience loneliness to varying degrees, and more than 26% show depressive symptoms [14].

4. Countermeasures for transforming traditional elderly care services in the new era

From the perspective of intergenerational change, traditional elderly care services can no longer meet the deepening of population aging, especially in health and wellness care, individualized elderly care services, and social relationship services for older adults. Elderly care services are both public services and require support from market-oriented economic services. Actively developing the silver economy can use non-basic elderly care services to effectively support rigid-demand services such as elderly care and nursing, while also effectively solving elderly care problems brought by social change [15].

4.1. Improving understanding of population aging in the new era

Population aging in the new era is the result of the progress of human civilization and socioeconomic development. When viewing elderly care issues, we must not regard elderly care as a social burden or aging as decline. We should correctly and objectively understand the challenges that intergenerational change brings to elderly care services; population aging in the new era brings more opportunities and entirely new market development space.

4.1.1. We should have a scientific view of elderly care; health, longevity, and spiritual enrichment are the correct expectations for elderly care

A scientific view of elderly care means viewing elderly care issues from the perspective of natural dialectics. Older adults should not be simply divided by the age of 60, nor should all older adults' elderly care be focused on caregiving. Elderly care and nursing are necessary means of maintaining health when older adults' physical functions decline and their life cycle is in a declining state. With the advancement of medical and health technology, human lifespan has been greatly extended. In 2025, the National Health Commission announced that by the end of 2025 China's average life expectancy is expected to reach 79.25 years. The larger number of active older adults in the elderly population needs precisely adapted post-retirement lives.

4.1.2. We should attach importance to older adults' spiritual needs; after intergenerational transition, more social support is needed

Under intergenerational transition, older adults in the new era have higher spiritual needs. The post-1960s and post-1970s generations who are about to enter elderly care have experienced more social changes, have a clear understanding of the tremendous changes brought by reform and opening up, and have higher expectations for future social development. This intergenerational transition requires social support, including high-quality employment opportunities for economic self-realization and cultural, sports, and tourism social services such as travel-based health and wellness and leisure enjoyment in life.

4.1.3. We should actively guide economic intergenerational transition and adapt to the market changes brought by the intergenerational transition of elderly care

Intergenerational transition brings changes in market consumption structure, consumption content, and consumption patterns. According to the 57th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development, the number of internet users aged 60 and above has reached 173 million, accounting for 15.4% of all internet users. The consumer side is shifting toward the elderly market [16]. The first generation of internet users is precisely the post-1970s generation now about to enter elderly care. Under intergenerational transition, older adults' satisfaction with the traditional elderly product market continues to decline; older adults are becoming more fashionable and increasingly accepting of new products. Enterprises should face the elderly product market squarely and actively innovate and adapt to the new elderly market.

4.2. Developing elderly care services adapted to the elderly life cycle

Intergenerational transition has brought rich patterns of elderly life; elderly care is developing in a diversified and complex manner, and systematic elderly care centered on the elderly life cycle has begun to influence elderly care services in the new era. Elderly care has a more accurate intergenerational division; intergenerational transition shows that elderly care services should be precisely adapted to the elderly life cycle.

4.2.1. Increase market development of non-basic elderly care services to support the development of basic elderly care services

Under intergenerational transition, older adults have higher requirements for life services, and traditional elderly care services are difficult to support. Elderly care institutions also face operational problems of high caregiving service costs; the two can be combined to support elderly care through the development of the elderly market under intergenerational transition. Taking elderly meal assistance services as an example, older adults with certain economic capacity pay relatively close attention to health products, and the elderly health care market is expanding year by year; traditional Chinese medicine medicinal cuisine supply can be added to elderly meal assistance services. Older adults have relatively high trust in community canteens with high food safety; many older adults hope to conveniently and quickly purchase foods such as rice nearby. These can all be added to elderly meal assistance services to support basic elderly meal assistance economically [17].

4.2.2. Actively develop enjoyment-oriented services for the young-old population and gradually align with the elderly life cycle

Most young-old adults in China have experience caring for children and grandchildren after retirement[18].

This group of older adults, whether physically or mentally, is closer to middle age and should have enjoyed leisure life after retirement; under traditional intergenerational patterns, grandchildren are at the age requiring nurturing. Society has not provided more post-retirement work, and supporting children has become the choice of most older adults. With intergenerational transition, the intergenerational age of the post-1970s generation has increased; when they retire, their children have not yet given birth, and these young-old groups face a state of having nothing to do. Internet surveys show that staying up late binge-watching dramas and playing games has become the norm for young-old adults online. The strong need for self-realization brought by intergenerational transition and insufficient market supply has led older adults to seek all developable activities. Actively developing activities for young-old adults can effectively connect with the deepening of old age.

4.2.3. Increase leisure and wellness services for older adults and improve the elderly health and wellness service system

Health and wellness services, as the foundation of caregiving services and an important component of the integration of medical care and elderly care, are currently still mainly medical care in the support of elderly care institutions [19]. In elderly care services for active older adults, the service model still mainly refers to the medical care and caregiving model. Under intergenerational change, older adults pay more attention to wellness, and traditional elderly care institutions are unable to provide support. This deficiency is due to the lack of a systematic knowledge system for leisure elderly care and insufficient talent training, resulting in an insufficient supply of leisure and wellness services. With intergenerational change, young-old groups hope to obtain more health and wellness services. Elderly care organizations and enterprises should pay attention to older adults' demand for leisure elderly care, actively develop suitable leisure elderly care services designed for older adults, improve the health and wellness service system, and effectively connect medical care, elderly care, and caregiving services to support one another [20].

4.2.4. Pay attention to the individual needs of lonely older adults and build a diversified elderly care service system

Traditional social development theory holds that elderly care organizations should provide more social activities and actively guide older adults to participate to avoid loneliness. Under intergenerational transition, attention should be paid to the new phenomenon of solitary life in social development. The implementation of the family planning policy in 1978, the acceleration of urban life rhythms, and the networking of social interaction have led modern people to adapt to solitary life. In terms of elderly care, most older adults age in place at home, and they also adapt to solitary life. Elderly care organizations should pay attention to the individualized elderly care needs of lonely older adults, design and develop elderly care services suitable for solitary life, and, together with group elderly care services, form a rich and diversified elderly care service system.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, from the perspective of intergenerational change, the elderly care service needs of older adults in the new era have undergone tremendous changes, bringing new market opportunities and development space. Elderly care services are not just elderly caregiving; national policies guide basic elderly care services,

and the larger silver economy market requires precise segmentation and positioning of elderly care services. Only by changing thinking, actively participating in the elderly care economy, and building a diversified elderly care service system can we truly achieve a healthy, long-lived, and spiritually enriched later life for older adults.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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