

A Research on the Problems of Cultural Care for Rural Empty-Nest Elderly from the Perspective of Social Work

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Abstract: With the accelerated aging of Chinese society, the problems faced by empty-nesters in rural areas in terms of cultural aging have become increasingly serious. From the perspective of social work, this study examines in detail the cultural old-age situation of rural empty-nesters in Shandong Province. the study points out that the rural empty nesters encounter economic challenges, as well as obvious deficiencies in daily life care, emotional companionship, and spiritual comfort. These difficulties not only pose a serious impact on their quality of life, but also reduce their activity and participation in society. In order to solve these problems, this paper puts forward six countermeasure suggestions: strengthening policy advocacy and promoting the construction of a cultural elderly service system; promoting community integration and cultural construction to enhance the quality of life of the elderly; enhancing family participation and building an emotional support network; enhancing individual and institutional linkages to enrich the cultural life of rural empty-nested elderly; enhancing the capacity and quality of social workers and strengthening the cultivation of professional talents; and exploring the model of mutual support for the elderly and building a social support network. the implementation of these strategies can improve the living standards of rural empty-nested elderly people and satisfy their spiritual and cultural needs, so that they can be properly cared for and enjoy life in their old age.

Keywords: Rural Empty Nesters; Cultural Aging; Geriatric Social Work

1. Background and Significance of the Study

1.1 Background of the Study

With the rapid economic and social development of China, the problem of population ageing is becoming increasingly prominent. According to the results of the seventh national population census, the number of older persons aged 60 and over in China is expected to increase to 300 million by 2025, and to reach approximately 487 million by 2050. Although rising socio-economic levels have ensured the material life of older persons, their spiritual and cultural needs have not yet been fully met, and empty-nesting older persons in rural areas, in particular, face multiple challenges in such areas as physical health, mental health and social activities.

2024 The Opinions on Developing the Silver-Haired Economy and Enhancing the Well-being of the Elderly, issued by the General Office of the State Council at the beginning of the year, put forward 26 specific measures, including guiding the elderly to assist with meal services and encouraging door-to-door services for the elderly in their homes; and the Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Rural Elderly Care Services, jointly issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and other ministries, emphasized the requirements of strengthening the safety supervision of services and promoting the combination of medical care and rehabilitation, which have provided important support to These policies provide important support for improving the quality of life of the elderly in rural areas.

This study aims to explore the cultural pension service model for empty nesters in rural areas of Shandong Province, analyze the specific situation of this group and the main problems they face through in-depth research, and put forward service countermeasures in line with the local reality by combining with the latest policy guidance.

1.2 Research Significance

1.2.1 theoretical significance

Based on the spiritual and cultural needs of the elderly, this study explores how cultural elderly care services can satisfy their high-level needs and enrich the study of elderly care for rural empty nesters. Adopting Maslow's hierarchy of needs, social support and empowerment theories, it analyzes the elderly's pursuit of belonging, respect, and self-actualization, and emphasizes the establishment of a support network, the stimulation of potential, and the promotion of community participation. This study not only provides a solid theoretical foundation for the cultural elderly service model, but also expands the scope of application of related theories, which helps to form a more comprehensive and effective rural elderly service system, and provides an important reference for the development of aging at home and abroad. In summary, this study fills the existing research gaps and makes an important contribution to the combination of theory and practice.

1.2.2 practical significance

This study is dedicated to addressing the spiritual and cultural needs of rural empty-nesters, alleviating their loneliness and psychological pressure, and enhancing their quality of life and social participation through the provision of diversified cultural elderly care services, such as cultural activities and community participation programs. the study innovates the rural elderly service model, promotes the diversification and specialization of service provision, provides reference templates for other regions, and promotes the improvement of the rural elderly service system. Meanwhile, it emphasizes the establishment of a multi-level social support network to enhance the sense of social integration of the elderly. In addition, the study enhances the recognition of social work for the elderly and promotes the overall development of the aging cause.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Current Status of Foreign Research

2.1.1 Study on the problem of rural empty-nesters in old age

Abroad, rural empty nesters (or "elderly living alone, " "left-behind, " or "isolated elderly") may develop empty nest syndrome, which

manifests itself in physical and psychological symptoms, and is influenced by sociodemographic factors such as social support, gender, marital status, income, and other factors. Symptoms are influenced by socio-demographic factors such as social support, gender, marital status, income, etc. ([1]). Research has focused on several key areas, firstly, social support and mental health research has explored how older people can intervene in older people's depression through family, friends and community networks [2] . Second, community service and engagement research emphasizes the role of social activities and volunteering in reducing loneliness and improving quality of life. Policy and practice analyses assess the effectiveness of government and social services in supporting rural older adults, such as social assistance, health care, and long-term care. Cross-cultural comparisons reveal the approaches to aging and their effectiveness in different countries, highlighting the influence of cultural context. In addition, the studies examine the life satisfaction and service experiences of older people and advocate the development of self-supporting care models and multilevel care systems to meet diverse needs. These studies provide a scientific basis for addressing the challenges faced by older persons living alone in rural areas.

2.1.2 Study on cultural pensions

A. Concept of Cultural Pension

Marhánková (2011), in the concept of 'active ageing', emphasizes that older people positively influence the conditions of their ageing through self-responsibility and self-care, and advocates the maintenance of social identity and quality of life through participation in social activities and lifelong learning. Arts & Gelissen (2002) argue that cultural ageing in Western countries is also reflected in social security and welfare policies for older people, which focus not only on economic security but also on the social and cultural needs of older people, reflecting cultural differences in how different countries deal with ageing issues.

B. Cultural Pension Function

The function of culture in old age in Western countries is manifested in a number of ways: the welfare system balances the demand for social care with the distribution of public funds through innovative strategies, while promoting

the processes of marketization and socialization. In the field of old age, the role of culture is emphasized as meeting the deep spiritual and cultural needs of older people, which has become particularly crucial in the context of rapid socio-cultural development; social policies and service-oriented welfare systems (e. g., in the Nordic countries) are associated with higher subjective well-being and social trust among older people, emphasizing the importance of formal support and gender equality; however, rapid demographic aging leads to resource constraints and challenges such as age discrimination, and there is a need to find ways to balance the needs of older people with the allocation of resources to reduce intergenerational tensions. Together, these dimensions demonstrate the multidimensional efforts of Western countries on cultural ageing and the challenges they face.

C. Cultural Pension Dilemma

Western countries face multifaceted challenges in responding to the dilemma of cultural ageing, including economic pressures, changes in cultural values, shifting gender roles, challenges of cultural diversity and reforms to pension systems. These challenges require policymakers, social service providers and older persons themselves to take comprehensive measures to ensure that older persons have access to appropriate social support and respect.

2.2 Status of Domestic Research

2.2.1 Study on the problem of rural empty-nesters in old age

According to the information of Knowledge.com, 1063 articles were searched through the keywords of "rural empty-nesters" and "cultural pension", of which 82 were in the core journals of Beihang University. the number of related studies increased steadily from 2003 to 2008, increased rapidly from 2009 to 2018, and showed a fluctuating growth trend from 2019 to 2024, indicating that this field continues to receive attention from scholars.

The research mainly focuses on the aspects of old-age security, old-age service and old-age dilemma. Empty-nested elderly face economic difficulties, lack of life care, insufficient emotional support and lack of spiritual comfort, depression and other problems [3], and the

social security system is not perfect. Elderly care methods cover family elderly care, community elderly care, elderly care institutions and the emerging smart elderly care model. For the empty-nested elderly in cities, their old-age problems have been paid attention to and researched earlier, and the empty-nested elderly in rural areas are slightly lacking in the quality of life, resource distribution, and social security [4], therefore, the "empty-nested elderly in rural areas", "the elderly living alone" and "left-behind elderly" have become the focus of research.

2.2.2 Study on cultural pensions

Cultural aging is a comprehensive aging concept that focuses on the spiritual and cultural needs of the elderly, emphasizing spiritual care, emotional comfort and moral support, combining traditional culture and contemporary humanistic care [5]. However, the construction of China's cultural elderly service system faces challenges such as single content, lack of professionals, and insufficient cultural products for the elderly. In order to promote the development of the cultural elderly service system, it is necessary to start from multiple levels such as government, community, enterprises, individuals and families, establish relevant policies and systems, strengthen the conceptual publicity, improve the education system, and develop the elderly culture industry [6]. Community cultural aging and community sports and cultural aging enable the elderly to regain knowledge and skills and enjoy the emotional nourishment of interpersonal interaction [7]. Traditional Chinese clan culture has a double-sided influence on cultural pension, which needs to be dialectically analyzed and absorbed to build a cultural pension system adapted to modern society [8]. In addition, public cultural services play an important role in cultural pension, and improve the level of pension services by improving the service system. the status of cultural pension services directly affects the subjective well-being of the elderly, and it is necessary to improve access to services and provide effective service content to enhance the sense of well-being.

2.3 Research Reviews

In dealing with the problem of the elderly living alone in rural areas, foreign countries have emphasized the influence of cultural

factors on the choice of residence, including cultural adaptation, access to resources, social support and the family model of old age. the research not only focuses on material needs, but also on psychological and emotional health, and enhances the quality of life through community services and mental health care. In contrast, China's attention to the problem of rural empty nesters started later, but is developing rapidly. Research has focused on the social support systems of these seniors and the economic, health, and psychological challenges they face. the traditional Chinese concept of family eldercare is particularly important in this context, as Western countries have more mature systems of eldercare than China.

With the aging of China's rural areas and significant urban-rural differences, it has become especially critical to strengthen research on rural empty-nesters, with the aim of improving their quality of life and promoting social participation. the construction and improvement of a cultural pension service system for rural empty nesters can provide more diversified and culturally appropriate services. At the same time, the combination of international experience and China's actual situation will help to form a more comprehensive pension service system and improve the quality of life and happiness of the elderly. the government has also proposed a series of measures, such as setting up more village-level elderly service points, promoting the integration of medical care and recreation, and upgrading the level of elderly services in relocation sites for poverty alleviation, in order to improve the mechanism of rural elderly services and ensure that the basic service needs of the elderly are met. These initiatives will further promote the development of rural elderly care services.

3. Definition Of Relevant Concepts

3.1 Rural Empty Nesters

The so-called rural empty-nested elderly refer to those middle-aged and elderly parents who remain in the countryside after their children have left their hometowns for reasons such as work, study or marriage. With the aging of the population, the number of this group is increasing, and it is gradually evolving into a social problem. When their children leave

home, these middle-aged and elderly couples left alone often feel depressed, frustrated and lonely, a phenomenon known as the "empty nest" syndrome.

3.2 Cultural Pension

"Cultural ageing" focuses on the spiritual needs of the elderly, emphasizing emotional communication, exchange of ideas, physical and mental health, and the pursuit of individuality, independence and happiness. Compared with the traditional approach to old-age care, which focuses only on material supplies, "cultural old-age care" has higher requirements in terms of the level of protection and intrinsic needs. From the perspective of public services, "cultural old-age care" is the focus of the construction of the old-age service system; from the perspective of personal needs, it attaches importance to the satisfaction of spiritual culture and the realization of humanistic care.

3.3 Social Work with The Elderly

Gerontological social work utilizes professional theories, methods and skills to assist older persons in coping with difficult life situations and meeting their physical, psychological and social needs, thereby enhancing their quality of life. This work includes a variety of modalities such as case management, group activities and community services to cater for the specific needs of different older persons. the service not only focuses on material needs, but also emphasizes spiritual needs and social participation to enhance the overall development and well-being of older persons.

4. Countermeasures Suggestions on Social Workers' Intervention in Cultural Retirement of Rural Empty Nest Elderly People

4.1 Strengthening Policy Advocacy to Create a Cultural Pension System

Social workers are actively involved in policy initiatives to promote the improvement of the relevant systems. the government should clarify the responsibilities of various departments, increase financial support, improve the quality of service facilities, and expand the variety of cultural activities; at the same time, it is called upon to make use of the

professional capacity of social organizations to provide personalized assistance through the purchase of services, and to enhance their service capacity through authorization and cultivation, so as to make them an important partner in collaborative governance. All sectors of society are encouraged to speak out together, offer constructive opinions to the relevant departments, push for the introduction of more policies and measures conducive to the provision of rural cultural services for the elderly, and strive for broader financial and resource support. Social work organizations are committed to building an inclusive and supportive social environment, and through close cooperation with the Government and all sectors of society, they can more effectively meet the spiritual and cultural needs of the elderly, improve their quality of life, and help rural empty-nesters enjoy a peaceful old age.

4.2 Deepening Community Integration and Creating a Cultural Elderly Atmosphere

Social work builds a diversified service network by integrating the resources of the Government, enterprises and social organizations. As resource linkers, social workers work with non-profit organizations to provide material assistance and emotional support to enhance the social support network for the elderly. At the same time, they focus on resource integration and conceptual updating at the indirect service level; for direct services, they strengthen case management, group activities and community work to improve the level of elderly services.

(c) Encouraging the participation of left-behind women and children in professional care teams, organizing regular care activities and promoting the culture of filial piety. Specific strategies include reaching out to the community to establish close ties, decentralizing and empowering residents, and supporting the development of self-organizations and their role in giving back. In addition, promoting the spirit of mutual assistance in the neighbourhood, forming volunteer teams to help solve daily problems, and motivating older persons to participate in community management and volunteer activities, such as serving as consultants or participating in environmental protection projects, will help to enhance their sense of participation and belonging in the community.

4.3 Strengthening Family Ties and Weaving Emotional Care Networks

Social workers play the role of facilitators, helping the elderly to adapt to the new age model of old age and changing their views on old age. Children who work outside the home are encouraged to visit their parents more frequently, so as to provide the elderly with the necessary spiritual and psychological comfort. In order to strengthen emotional ties among family members, social workers can assist the elderly and their children in establishing a regular communication mechanism, such as utilizing video calls or letters to maintain close communication. In addition, through the implementation of specialized family education programmes, the younger generation can be trained to care for and support their elders at home more effectively, thereby enhancing mutual support within the family and jointly creating a loving and caring living environment. This approach will not only reduce the loneliness of empty nesters, but also promote more harmonious and closer relationships among family members.

4.4 Promoting Family-Community Collaboration to Enrich Rural Cultural Life

Social work interventions have been effective in helping the elderly left behind in rural areas to improve their self-organizing ability, thereby enriching their cultural life. Social workers should actively advocate the elderly to pay attention to their own cultural life problems and encourage them to take the initiative to seek solutions. In this process, the "elite elderly" in the village should be explored and cultivated, and their influence and appeal in the community should be utilized to integrate resources and lead other elderly to actively participate. In addition, relying on government support, the establishment of comprehensive community elderly service activity centers that integrate learning, recreation, life care and medical care can fully meet the diversified needs of the elderly in their old age. They not only provide the elderly with diverse venues for cultural activities, but also ensure that they receive appropriate care in terms of health maintenance and daily life care, thus significantly improving their quality of life.

4.5 Enhancing the Quality of Social

Workers and Nurturing Professionals

Through systematic education and training programmes, a team of social workers with highly professional skills and service awareness can be trained to raise the overall standard of elderly services. Such training should not only cover basic service skills and knowledge, but should also emphasize the flexibility of working methods, so that social workers can flexibly adjust their service strategies according to the specific conditions of the elderly. In addition, it is also crucial to enhance the professional attractiveness of the profession, which can be achieved by providing good career development paths, reasonable remuneration packages and continuous career growth opportunities to attract more outstanding talents to join the field of elderly services. Ultimately, by strengthening the capacity and quality of social workers, a more cozy and harmonious living environment will be created for the empty-nested elderly in rural areas.

4.6 Exploring Models of Mutual Assistance and Building Social Support Networks

In order to cater to the needs of rural empty-nesters in terms of cultural old-age care, it is necessary to actively seek new ways of helping each other in old-age care, utilizing social resources and team cohesion, and breaking down established concepts of traditional old-age care services, so as to enhance the social participation of the elderly and improve their quality of life. Social workers can use their professional skills to get involved and strengthen the social support network for rural older people. Specific actions may include organizing community outreach activities to create a positive service environment, combining volunteer resources, and collaborating with various associations, clans and other groups to carry out diversified community activities and provide detailed services for the elderly. These measures will not only directly improve the living environment of older persons, but will also build a more comprehensive and sustainable social support system in the long term, ensuring that rural empty-nesting older persons can enjoy a full and happy old age.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the cultural aging of rural

empty nesters in Shandong Province from the perspective of social work, revealing the significance of cultural aging in enhancing the quality of life of the elderly and meeting their spiritual needs. Through a variety of service modes, social workers are able to effectively alleviate the psychological disorders, emotional loneliness, and lack of social participation faced by rural empty nesters. The specialized assistance, emotional support and spiritual comfort provided by social workers play an important role in enhancing the life satisfaction of rural empty-nesters, and also contribute to social harmony and stability. Therefore, strengthening the construction of a cultural old-age service system for rural empty-nesters is an important step towards realizing the goal that the elderly should be properly cared for and enjoy life.

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