

The Practical Logic and Empirical Characteristics of Japan's Intergenerational Co-care model Against the Background of Low Birth Rates and Population Aging

Yunjing Gao

College of Educational Science, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu, China

Abstract: Against the global backdrop of intertwined low birth rates and population aging, how to holistically address the dual needs of elderly care and early childhood education and care has become an important issue in social governance. As one of the earliest countries to enter the stage of low birth rate and population aging, Japan has gradually formed a relatively mature intergenerational co-care model through long-term exploration, providing a referential sample for alleviating care burdens, promoting intergenerational integration, and optimizing community services. From the analytical perspective of intergenerational integration, this paper systematically analyzes the demographic characteristics of low birth rate and population aging in Japan and the resulting social governance dilemmas, clarifies the practical logic of Japan's intergenerational co-care model in terms of institutional guarantees, spatial facilities, service provision, and professional support, and summarizes its empirical characteristics on this basis. The study finds that Japan's intergenerational co-care is not a simple combination of elderly care and childcare resources, but a comprehensive governance practice that realizes intergenerational mutual assistance and social integration through institutional synergy, spatial composite, service integration, and professional support against the background of low birth rate and population aging. Its experience demonstrates that the effective operation of the intergenerational co-care model depends on well-established institutional frameworks, spatial design that balances the differences and interactions between the elderly and young children, service arrangements that attach equal importance to daily routines and cultural elements, and the support of a team of interdisciplinary professionals.

Keywords: Japan; Intergenerational Co-Care Model; Low Birth Rate and Population Aging; Intergenerational Integration; Intergenerational Bonding

1. Introduction

Demographic transition has become an important issue in global social development in the 21st century. The parallel development of low birth rate and population aging has not only changed national demographic structures and family forms, but also put forward new requirements for social security, public services and grassroots governance. With the continuous decline in birth rate and the rising proportion of the elderly population, the traditional family-centered support system for elderly and early childhood care has gradually weakened, the care burden of young and middle-aged groups has been increasing. This has given rise to increasingly salient issues, such as the scattered allocation of resources for elderly and child care and the weakening of intergenerational bonds. How to reconstruct intergenerational relationships and optimize the allocation of care resources against the background of low birth rate and population aging has become an important issue that needs in-depth discussion [2].

Japan is one of the first countries in the world to enter a society with low birth rate and population aging, and its trends of population shrinkage, family miniaturization and intensifying care burden are relatively typical. Facing the social challenges arising from the concurrent trends of low birth rates and population aging, Japan has gradually explored the intergenerational co-care model through long-term practice. This model breaks through the traditional service idea of separating elderly care and childcare from each other. Through institutional synergy, spatial composite, service integration and intergenerational interaction, it transforms the

governance approach that regards the elderly and children as separate care recipients. Intergenerational co-care emphasizes the functional complementarity and emotional connection between the two groups, reflecting a distinct orientation towards intergenerational integration.

Current research on Japan's intergenerational co-care has covered multiple aspects such as spatial design, facility types, service models and institutional backgrounds. However, on the whole, it has mainly focused on descriptive accounts and single-dimensional analyses, and there is still a lack of a relatively systematic review of why it emerged, how it operates, and what empirical characteristics it presents against the background of low birth rate and population aging. In fact, intergenerational co-care is not merely the allocation of elderly care and childcare resources in the same location, but also a process of promoting the reconstruction of intergenerational relationships through institutional synergy, spatial restructuring and service integration. Against this backdrop, this paper adopts the analytical perspective of intergenerational integration to analyze the emergence foundation, practical logic and empirical characteristics of Japan's intergenerational co-care model under the background of low birth rate and population aging, aiming to reveal its operational mechanisms and main characteristics as a comprehensive care practice.

2. Social Characteristics of Japan and the Emergence of Intergenerational Co-Care

2.1 Core Characteristics of Low Birth Rate and Population Aging in Japan

Japan is one of the earliest countries in the world to enter a society with low birth rate and population aging, and its demographic changes are characterized by continuity, cumulative and shrinkage. As of 2021, the elderly population aged 65 and above in Japan reached 36.21 million, accounting for 28.9% of the total population, and is expected to peak at 39.20 million by 2040. Meanwhile, Japan's total fertility rate has been below the replacement level of population since 1972, dropping to a historical low of 1.26 in 2005. Although it has rebounded slightly since then, it has remained stable below 1.4 for a long time. This parallel trend of population aging and low birth rate has

led to a continuous decline in Japan's total population since 2008, which fell to 125.5 million in 2021 and is expected to further drop to 88.08 million by 2065, presenting typical characteristics of a shrinking population structure (Wang & Meng, 2024) [6].

Along with demographic changes, Japan's family structure has also undergone a profound transformation. Traditional multi-generational households have gradually decreased, while the number of nuclear families and single-person households has been increasing continuously. In 2015, the number of single-person households in Japan reached 18.41 million, accounting for 34.5% of all households, and the proportion of elderly single-person households is expected to rise further by 2040. The miniaturization of family size and the dispersion of living arrangements have gradually weakened the traditional support mechanism for elderly care and early childhood care that relied on intra-family resources, placing greater pressure on young and middle-aged family members who are juggling employment, childcare and elderly care responsibilities. Meanwhile, phenomena such as the increasing number of elderly people living alone and the reduced interaction between children and their grandparents have become increasingly prominent.

2.2 Social Governance Dilemmas Caused by Low Birth Rate and Population Aging

1) Structural Imbalance in the Allocation of Elderly Care and Childcare Resources

Against the background of low birth rate and population aging, the demand for both elderly care and childcare services in Japanese society has continued to grow, yet the allocation of relevant resources has not achieved sufficient integration. A survey by the Cabinet Office of Japan shows that 93.1% of people aged 60 and above prefer home-based elderly care, but the supply of traditional home-based elderly care services is still insufficient in terms of professionalism and diversity. Meanwhile, although some kindergartens have unfilled capacity, the problem of "wait-listed children" has not disappeared, and there is still a mismatch between the spatial distribution, service provision and actual accessibility of childcare resources (Wang & Meng, 2024) [6]. The coexistence of strained elderly care services and imbalanced childcare resources reflects that the traditional fragmented service system can no

longer adapt to the compound demands brought about by demographic changes.

2) Parallel Growth of Social Security Expenditure and Contraction of Labor Supply

The accelerated development of population aging has directly driven up social security expenditures such as pensions, medical care and long-term care. In 2020, Japan's long-term care insurance expenditure accounted for 1.8% of its GDP. Meanwhile, the proportion of the working-age population dropped from 69.7% in 1990 to 59.3% in 2021(Wang & Meng, 2024) [6]. The compounding of the sustained contraction of labor supply and the continuous expansion of security expenditures has increased the national fiscal burden and also exerted pressure on the sustainable operation of the social care system. Against this backdrop, exploring more integrated, efficient and synergistic service models has become an important direction for Japan to respond to demographic changes.

3) Alienation of Intergenerational Relationships and Weakening of Emotional Support Functions

Changes in family structure have altered caregiving practices and reshaped the form of intergenerational relationships. With the popularization of nuclear families and intergenerational separate living becoming the norm, daily contact between children and their grandparents has decreased significantly, and the elderly are more prone to feelings of loneliness and loss due to the lack of stable intergenerational interactions. The weakening of intergenerational bonds not only diminishes emotional support within families, but also undermines social and cultural inheritance and community identity. Relevant studies point out that the elderly and young children inherently possess a natural foundation for emotional connection and complementary needs, yet the institutional differentiation and lifestyle changes in modern society have made their ties increasingly distant(Quan, Liu, & Zhang, 2025) [1]. Therefore, how to reconstruct the intergenerational interaction mechanism has become an unavoidable important issue in the governance of societies with low birth rate and population aging.

2.3 Intergenerational Co-Care as an Important Path to Address Low Birth Rate and Population Aging

Intergenerational co-care is precisely a comprehensive care practice that has gradually

emerged against the above-mentioned background. Its core concept is to break the traditional spatial, institutional and cognitive separation between elderly care and childcare services, and take intergenerational integration as the orientation to reconstruct the life connections, emotional interactions and functional complementary relationships between the elderly and children in the same setting. Compared with the governance approach that places the elderly and children in separate welfare systems respectively, intergenerational co-care places greater emphasis on reciprocal symbiosis and resource sharing among cross-generational groups.

From the perspective of operational mechanism, intergenerational co-care is not simply placing the two groups of service recipients in the same space, but reorganizing care resources and social relations against the background of low birth rate and population aging. The elderly can help children grow with their rich life experience, relatively stable time and ability to provide emotional companionship; in turn, children endow the elderly with comfort, companionship and a sense of engagement through their vitality and emotional responsiveness. In this process of bidirectional interaction, the originally separate needs of elderly care and early childhood care are reintegrated, thereby forming a governance practice that is simultaneously service-oriented, relational and community-based. Therefore, intergenerational co-care has gradually become an important path for Japan to solve the problems of low birth rate and population aging, rebuild intergenerational bonds and improve community care(Wang & Meng, 2024) [6].

3. Practical Logic of Japan's Intergenerational Co-Care Model

Japan's intergenerational co-care model is not the result driven by a single measure, but a comprehensive achievement that has been gradually developed and improved in terms of institutional synergy, spatial composite, service integration and professional support. From a practical perspective, its operational logic is mainly reflected in the following aspects.

3.1 Institutional Safeguards: Coordinated Advancement of Legal Policies and Financial Support

The sustainable development of Japan's intergenerational co-care model first benefits

from a relatively systematic institutional safeguards. Japan has gradually established a policy and legal framework centered on the Child Welfare Act, the Long-Term Care Insurance Act and the Social Welfare Act. The Child Welfare Act clarifies the basic norms of childcare services and the government's responsibilities; the Long-Term Care Insurance Act provides a stable source of funding for elderly care services through the long-term care insurance system; while laws such as the Act on Basic Measures for a Society with Declining Birthrate and the Act on the Promotion of Measures to Support Raising the Next Generation provide broader policy support for intergenerational co-care in terms of responding to the low birth rate, family support and resource integration(Sun, Li, & Han, 2025) [7].

In the process of institutional evolution, Japan has gradually incorporated intergenerational co-care into the framework of community-based integrated care and symbiotic society development. The "Community-based Integrated Care System" was proposed in 2013 to promote the shift of elderly care from fragmented services to comprehensive support; the "Community Symbiotic Society" was put forward in 2017, emphasizing the importance of joint participation of different age groups; and the concept of "Symbiotic Services" was further clarified in 2018, enabling integrated services for the elderly and children to gradually gain institutional recognition(Wang & Meng, 2024) [6]. This indicates that the development of intergenerational co-care in Japan is not a sporadic innovation by grassroots institutions, but a result of gradual institutionalization under the continuous promotion of national policies.

In terms of financial support, Japan has developed an operational mechanism where government subsidies and insurance support coexist. The government allocates special funds to subsidize the construction of care facilities, the renovation of community welfare spaces and the construction of integrated facilities, while implements differentiated financial support for different types of institutions to reduce their construction and operation costs(Wang & Meng, 2024) [6]. The interplay between institutional design and financial support has provided a practical foundation for intergenerational co-care from conceptual advocacy into stable and sustained operation.

3.2 Spatial Integration: Shared Interaction Based on Differentiated Support

The key to the design of Japan's intergenerational co-care facilities is not simply the physical juxtaposition of elderly care and childcare facilities, but the rational spatial layout based on respect for the distinct physical and psychological characteristics and daily rhythms of the elderly and children, creating opportunities for natural interactions between the two groups and fostering communication between them. Its spatial organization embodies the philosophy of equal emphasis on both "differentiated support" and "shared interaction". From the perspective of spatial form, Japan's intergenerational co-care has mainly developed two major types of composite designs. One is composite integration within the same building, including the side-by-side type, stacked type, mixed type and integrated type. The side-by-side type emphasizes the sharing of independent functional spaces and public areas; the stacked type conserves land through vertical layout; the mixed type balances zoning and connectivity; and the integrated type is more suitable for small-scale facilities, enhancing interaction density through family-like spaces(Sima, 2015) [4]. The other type is adjacent composite on the same plot, where elderly care facilities and childcare facilities are laid out next to each other, enabling the sharing of outdoor spaces and regular mutual visits.

A typical example is "*Kotoen*" in Edogawa Ward, Tokyo, which integrates multiple functions including elderly care, day care, short-term stay services and a community kindergarten. Through the layout of public spaces and the design of circulation routes, it creates conditions for eye contact, verbal interaction and joint activities between the elderly and children, while retaining their relatively independent living spaces(Xu & Jiang, 2024)[5]. In addition, Japan employs detailed designs such as glass doors, grilles, open corridors and shared dining halls to enhance the visibility and proximity of spaces, thus enabling intergenerational interactions to be more integrated into daily life rather than being merely confined to certain specially arranged activities(Sima, 2015)[4]. Therefore, the spatial integration in Japan's intergenerational co-care is actually a spatial reorganization of the field that emphasizes both boundaries and connections.

3.3 Service Integration: Parallel Development

of Basic Care and Intergenerational Interaction

The effective operation of the intergenerational co-care model depends not only on the rational arrangement of systems and physical sites, but also on the organizational form of service content. Japan adopts the approach of "basic care + intergenerational interaction" in service provision. For the elderly, it mainly provides services such as day care, rehabilitation training, meal provision, bathing and entertainment, and residential care to meet their needs for health maintenance, daily care and social participation. For children, it mainly provides temporary childcare, nursery services, nutritious meals, health check-ups and safe physical activities to ensure the basic growth needs of young children(Xu & Jiang, 2024)[5].

On this basis, Japan embeds intergenerational interaction into the service process, forming a service model that combines daily interactions and themed activities. Daily interactions include greetings, shared meals, and participation in simple activities, which integrate intergenerational ties into daily rhythms; themed activities, through forms such as festivals, gardening, handicrafts, performances and birthday parties, enhance the depth and emotionality of communication. In these activities, the elderly impart traditional skills and share life experiences with children, while children respond to the elderly with companionship, blessings and participation, and both sides establish emotional bonds and value recognition through reciprocal interaction. It can be seen that Japan's intergenerational co-care is not content with merely having service recipients "share the same space", but promotes the regeneration of intergenerational relationships in daily life through targeted service design.

3.4 Professional Support: Joint Support from Interdisciplinary Training and Collaborative Cooperation

The stable operation of intergenerational co-care is also underpinned by a well-defined professional talent system. Japan has established relatively standardized professional qualification systems in both the elderly care and early childhood care sectors. Certified Care Workers must obtain qualification through systematic academic training or practical experience accumulation and passing the relevant national

examinations; while Childcare Workers are trained in specialized institutions, completing courses in social care, social welfare and child development to establishing a solid professional foundation(Xu & Jiang, 2024)[5].

With the development of the intergenerational co-care model, Japan has begun to emphasize cross-disciplinary talent cultivation. Some universities and institutions have launched interdisciplinary training programs, guiding students to conduct field training in intergenerational co-care institutions, where they learn about the physical and psychological characteristics of the elderly, the organization of intergenerational interactions, and service delivery in integrated care settings(Xu & Jiang, 2024)[5]. Meanwhile, a collaborative mechanism has been progressively established between nursing staff in elderly care institutions and kindergarten teachers: the former have advantages in elderly care and life experience support, while the latter are more professional in child development and educational activity design, and the two sides achieve role complementarity through cooperation. Thus, Japan's intergenerational co-care is not a mere extension of traditional elderly care or childcare practices, but imposes new integrated requirements on the structure of professional competencies.

4. Empirical Characteristics of Japan's Intergenerational Co-Care Model

In the long-term development process, Japan's intergenerational co-care model has gradually formed distinct Empirical characteristics. These characteristics not only reflect its response to the practical problems of low birth rate and population aging, but also demonstrate its maturity in terms of institutional design and social practice.

4.1 Systematic Nature of Institutional Supply

The development of intergenerational co-care in Japan does not rely on single-point pilot projects or short-term policy promotion, but is gradually advanced through the interplay of legal frameworks, policy planning and financial support. Its first empirical characteristic lies in the systematic nature of institutional supply, that is, forming stable external supporting conditions through institutional confirmation, policy advancement and capital investment. This systematic guarantee enables intergenerational

co-care to move from conceptual advocacy to standardized operation, avoiding arbitrariness and fragmentation at the practical level.

4.2 Composite Nature of Spatial Organization

Japan does not interpret spatial integration in intergenerational co-care as mere site juxtaposition, but employs various types of composite spatial forms to realize the layout logic of "separated but not isolated, integrated but with boundaries". Whether it is vertical integration within the same building or adjacent layout on the same plot of land, their common point is to emphasize the design of shared spaces while dividing areas by functions. This composite nature of spatial organization allows the elderly and children to maintain their own rhythms and safe boundaries in daily life, while having more opportunities for natural and frequent interactions.

4.3 Interactive Nature of Service Content

Traditional care services tend to focus solely on the differences in living security for different groups, while Japan's intergenerational co-care integrates intergenerational interaction as an important component of its services. It not only meets the basic care needs of the elderly and children, but also emphasizes fostering emotional bonds and strengthen intergenerational ties through shared daily life, recreational activities and communicative experiences. Therefore, interactivity has become an important characteristic of Japan's intergenerational co-care service model, which also enables intergenerational co-care to go beyond resource integration in the general sense and instead play a role in rebuilding interpersonal relationships and providing emotional support.

4.4 Daily Nature of Cultural Transmission

Intergenerational interactions in Japan's intergenerational co-care do not rely on abstract preaching, but are realized through concrete methods such as festival activities, life stories, traditional skills and daily companionship. Cultural inheritance is not an isolated single element, but is integrated into the daily life shared by the elderly and children. This daily cultural transmission makes intergenerational communication and interactions more natural, and also enhances the social and cultural value of the intergenerational co-care model.

4.5 Integrative Nature of Professional Support

Japan's intergenerational co-care does not require talents from a single field, but a professional team that can understand the needs of different service recipients and has the ability to work in integrated facilities and areas. Through interdisciplinary training, joint internships and post collaboration, Japan has gradually promoted the integration of the two types of professional resources in elderly care and early childhood care(Zou, 2025) [3]. This also means that the stable operation of the intergenerational co-care model not only relies on institutional and spatial support, but also heavily depends on the matching and continuous renewal of the professional competency structure.

4.6 Collaborative Nature of Operating Entities

Japan's intergenerational co-care model is not driven by a single institution or department, but is shaped by the joint efforts of multiple stakeholders including the government, communities, service institutions and relevant professionals. At the institutional level, there are corresponding policy support; at the organizational level, it has specific operational practices; at the professional level, there is a backbone of professional service personnel; and at the community level, it has a well-established relational network. These elements collectively constitute the operational foundation of intergenerational co-care. This collaborative nature endows intergenerational co-care prominent characteristics of integrated governance, and also enables it to establish a relatively stable support system at the community level.

5. Conclusion

Japan's intergenerational co-care model is a comprehensive care practice developed in response to the increasingly severe challenges of low birth rate and population aging. Its core lies in promoting the transition from separation to interaction and from one-way care to intergenerational mutual aid between the elderly and children through governmental institutional synergy, spatial and facility composite, care service integration and professional talent support. Compared with the traditional practice

of placing elderly care and childcare in separate systems, intergenerational co-care places greater emphasis on functional complementarity, emotional bonding and social symbiosis among cross-generational groups, reflecting a distinct orientation toward intergenerational integration. Overall, the operation of Japan's intergenerational co-care model is built on the combined effects of institutional safeguards, spatial composite, service integration and professional support. Its empirical characteristics are prominently reflected in the systematic nature of institutional supply, the composite nature of spatial organization, the interactive nature of service content, the daily nature of cultural transmission, the integrative nature of professional support, and the collaborative nature of operating entities. It can be seen that Japan's intergenerational co-care is not a simple combination of elderly care and childcare resources, but a comprehensive governance practice that responds to demographic structural changes, reconstructs intergenerational relationships and optimizes community care. It also provides an important sample for understanding cross-generational support mechanisms and community symbiosis practices in modern society.

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