Building Ageless Urban Communities

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Abstract

The world is facing the problem of rapid population aging. This issue is especially challenging for China as it is still on its way to become a developed country. Economic development brought about by the reform and opening up has drastically changed some social and institutional structures that helped the Chinese to care for their elders in previous generations. This contributed to large scale migration and expansion of cities. However, at present, little thought has been given to making Chinese cities more accommodating to the elderly population by urban planners. In this paper, we analyze the economic, social and cultural roots of certain challenges facing modern Chinese elderly urban dwellers. Based on this analysis, we propose a list of best practice considerations for urban planners to help make future Chinese cities ageless.

Keyword: ageless, urban planning, China.

I. Introduction

According to the report on urban planning system in China produced by the Ministry of Construction, P.R. China [5], the development of the Chinese urban planning system has gone through three distinct stages. Immediately after gaining independence, a great emphasis has been placed on urban planning to revive the war ravaged cities. However, during the 1958~1978 period,

political movements have seized the attention of the entire nation and urban planning has been suspended. Since the economic reform starting from 1978, with rapid urbanization, the importance of urban planning is once again recognized and widely accepted. Currently, the Chinese urban planners are mostly focused on the following issues with regard to economic and social development when planning for urban redevelopment. These issues include: *security in the communities*, *protection of historical sites*, *protective utilization of resources*, *spatial control*, *administrative reforms* and *involvement of citizens in the urban planning process*.

China is undergoing a significant demographic transition together with the developed world – population aging. Of the 1.3 billion Chinese, over 160 million are aged 60 and above [4]. This group of the population is expected to grow at a rate of 5.96 million per year until 2020 and 6.2 million from then on until 2050. By the year 2050, the elderly population is expected to reach 400 million and make up almost 30% of the Chinese population [1]. However, at present, concerns for serving the elderly urban dwellers have not yet been taken into account by the Chinese urban planners.

In this paper, we review the economic, demographic, and socio-cultural issues related to caring for the elderly population in China. Through such an analysis, we propose a set of best practice considerations for urban planning decision-making concerning the elderly population in China. These considerations may serve to guide future urban planning decisions and contribute towards making Chinese cities truly ageless.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section II, we analyze the impact of rapid modernization in China on the rural and urban institutions which may affect the elderly population. Section III then illustrates how the elderly in China are taken care of under such rapid societal changes. Section IV offers a discussion of the social and cultural traditions that affect the lifestyle choices made by Chinese elders. The suggested best practice considerations for urban planners to make future Chinese cities ageless are presented in Section V. Section VI summarizes the paper and discusses potential future research directions.

II. The Impact of Rapid Economic Development

Over the past thirty years, China has enjoyed one of the fastest economic growth rates in the world. In 1978, when the country shifted its attention from the Mao era focus on "social equity" to the post-Mao era emphasis on economic efficiency, the central planning based economic management has been gradually transitioned into what has been termed the "socialist market economy". Apart from bringing about rapid economic development, such a transition also dramatically altered the social and institutional structures in both rural and urban China.

Government institutions translate the intentions of the government, whether they are explicit or implicit, into actions. Being a one-party state, China is generally able to co-opt various interest groups within the Chinese society. For nearly three decades after independence, China followed a Soviet style rural organization of collective farms and national ownership of agricultural lands. The restrictions on the exchange of agricultural lands together with the household registration system (*hukou*) have successfully tied peasants down to their ancestral lands and prevented labor migration into cities. With extended family members living in close proximity in rural China, taking care of the elderly following the Chinese tradition of filial piety was not a serious issue before the economic reforms in 1978.

Without the huge influx of rural migrant workers into cities, urban life was closely organized around people's work units (*danwei*). State enterprises had been carrying out part of the duties, which would have been regarded to be belonging to the government in Western democracies, during the Mao era and the 1980s. Such duties typically include enforcing the one-child policy, distributing pensions to the retirees, providing housing to the employees, and running the workers' unions. Unlike the workers' unions in the West which typically wield significant political power and aim to negotiate for more benefits for the workers, Chinese workers' unions around the period of the economic reform was primarily aimed to organize various activities for the workers to enrich their lives. Such activities (e.g., day trips, celebratory parties during festivals, etc.) often involve the retirees. Under

such a social and economic structure, with the one-child policy generation still in their early childhood, the challenges of aging populations in China were insignificant.

Through the re-organization of agricultural economy in rural China, many old institutions are removed since 1978. Agricultural activities are no longer carried out in collective farms, but in smaller family based units where the farmers can freely trade the surplus of their produces in rural or urban marketplaces. Nevertheless, the ownership of land is still with the government. However, together with mechanization, the concentration of large areas of agricultural lands into the hands of a smaller number of farmers results in a surplus of labor in many towns and villages in China. Local governments, incentivized by promotions based on the economic performance of their constituencies, absorbed some of this surplus labor into what has been termed "town and village enterprises" (TVEs) [3]. As many of these TVEs are in the manufacturing sector or focused on the extraction of local resources, they tend to sprawl over large areas of land. This requires the conversion of more agricultural lands into industrial lands and, in the process, displacing more rural labors.

Meanwhile, in the cities, the centrally planned state enterprises have undergone complete transformations into private or semi-private enterprises. During this process, the work unit institutions have been torn down and many benefits for the workers as well as the retirees have been
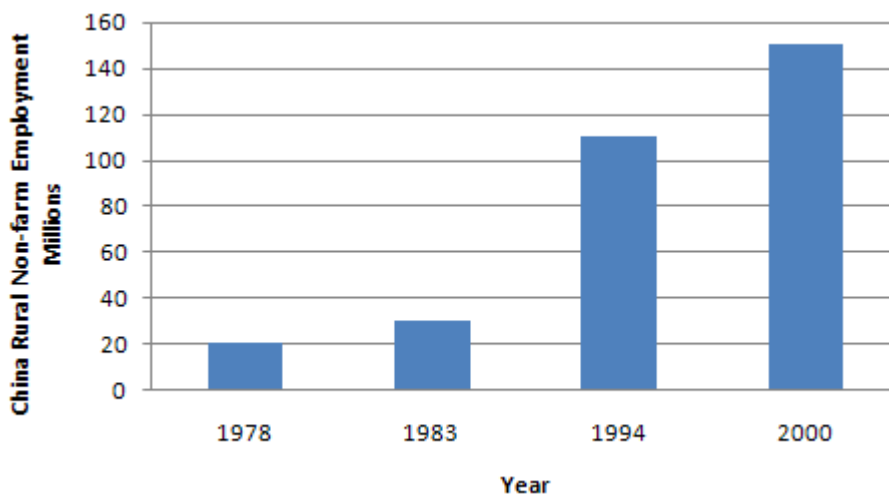

Figure 1. China Rural non-farm Employment [2].

forfeited. Being accustomed to the "iron rice bowls" of socialist centralized economic structures, many of these workers and retirees found it difficult to readjust to a market economy in its early stages where little legislation has been instituted to protect them.

The newly invigorated free market economy requires a huge number of cheap labors to feed its rapid growth. Migrant workers from rural China started to enter the cities in search of higher paid jobs and dreams for a better future for themselves and their children. The huge influx of migrant workers into cities also drives the need for urban expansion. The construction of more infrastructures to accommodate these new migrants, in turn, requires more labors. This feedback loop has been in place from the 1990s and early 2000s as shown in Figure 1 which illustrates the non-farm job growth in China. Such a migration of labor does not only occur between rural and urban areas, but also between less developed cities and more developed cities.

III. Who will Care for the Elderly?

The rural-urban migration as well as the migration from less developed to more developed cities, caused by industrialization, modernization and urbanization, mainly occur among the young and the able-bodied. The elderly family members are often left behind in their home towns either living on their own or having to take care of their grand children who are also left behind by their migrant worker parents. In addition, some young people may marry to other parts of the country or even
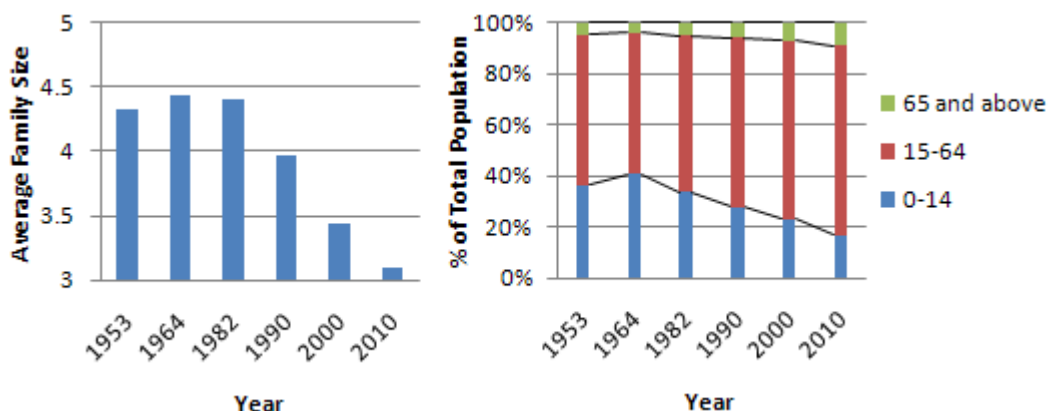

Figure 2. Changes in Chinese Family Size and Population Composition
[Source: Data of Population Census in China (1953~2010)].

study/work overseas.

Over 30 years, China has meticulously pursued the one-child policy to reign in the rapid population growth after independence. As illustrated in Figure 2, this policy has resulted significant reduction in the average family size in China from the peak value of almost 4.5 in the 1960s to around 3 in 2010. Essentially, it means currently the majority of the Chinese families have only one child. At the same time, the proportion of elderly people (65 years old and above) in the Chinese population has been rising consistently over the past 50 years while that of those 14 years old or younger has been dropping consistently. Such a trend has become entrenched in the Chinese demographic transition and is expected to persist in the foreseeable future.

The combined effect of the shift in Chinese demography, the population migration pattern as well as the demolition of certain urban institutions is the emergence of a new family structure in China called the "empty nest families" (*kongchao*) where the elderly family members live with their spouses or alone away from their children. The mainstream Chinese media commonly portray these *kongchao* elderly people as a lonely, disgruntled and homogeneous group. However, being *kongchao* in rural areas can be a very different experience from being *kongchao* in cities. Studies conducted in 2006 by [6] as illustrated in Figure 3 has shown that the prevailing support mechanisms for the elderly people living in urban and rural areas are significantly different. In rural areas where few people can draw a pension from the state, support from their children in the form of remittance and help with daily chores are the primary forms of elderly support; while in urban areas, the primary
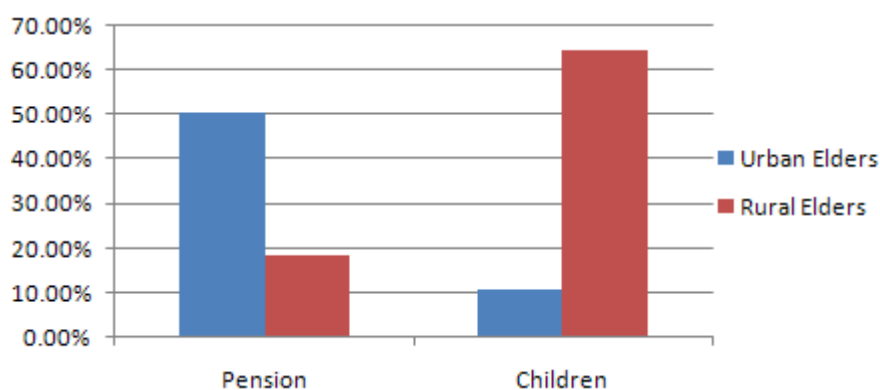

Figure 3. Top Choice for Support among Elderly People in China [6].

form of elderly support is pension. There are many elderly people in the cities who are well educated, command significant financial resources, and relatively healthy. This group of elders has high expectations for their retirement life and may voluntarily choose not to live together with their children. Studies have shown that many elders now realize that it would be impossible (both financially and in terms of effort level) for their children to take care of two parents and possibly four grandparents while raising families of their own. For both rural and urban *kongchao* elders, it is necessary for their communities to take care of them.

IV. Influences of the Chinese Socio-culture Traditions

Although newly retired elders may sometime prefer to live independently for some years. As they get older, they are faced with an increasing number of physiological and emotional challenges such as need for medical care, dealing with relationships with their children and children in-laws, possibly facing the emotional burden of a spouse passing away, and difficulty accessing community services, etc. These challenges are sometimes regarded as humanitarian problems internationally and one proposed way of addressing these problems is through social care. Such a philosophy has brought about the concept of building special elderly care communities in urban areas.

Institutional elderly care centres are commonly organized in the following forms: residential buildings for the aged with related services built into the surroundings of these buildings, and nursing homes. However, currently, these institutions are struggling to meet the need for care from the elderly population in China. The main problem is the lack of government funding. As China is still in its drive towards industrialization when the aging population problem strikes, resources for elderly care centres are still limited. This results in the inability to achieve economy of scale, lack of professional caregivers, and generally poor living conditions among many existing elderly care centres.

Apart from the lack of facilities in the elderly care centres, another cultural factor is also hindering Chinese elders from making a decision to move into such institutions. Unlike most Western civilizations, the Chinese civilization was based on agricultural practices for thousands of years. In an agricultural society, the family unit plays a central role in one's life. One often bases one's fundamental world view and standards of value on one's family. One's relationship with his/her family members also affects his/her reputation in the community. Influenced by such a philosophy, many Chinese elders find it morally difficult to move into an elderly care centre because such an act is often perceived to be symbolizing his/her cessation from his/her family and bring about a loss of face. Therefore, in Chinese societies, aging in place is a more practical and culturally acceptable way of taking care of the elderly.

V. Building Ageless Communities through Ageless Urban Planning

From the above analysis, we can see that although Chinese elders with the necessary educational background and financial resources would prefer to live relatively independent lives as long as their physical conditions permit, they also need regular social interactions with others. Human beings are social animals. Social activities are important to all age groups, especially the elderly. The process of aging is also a social process. By aging together with friends and other family members, an elderly person can better cope with the physical as well as emotional burdens. Retiring from one's work life, coinciding possibly with their children's leaving their homes or their spouses passing away can be an emotionally destabilizing experience for an elderly person. Active involvement in social activities may offer them a more healthy way to regain their footing in the society and adjust to their new roles. Therefore, a truly ageless city should not be one that segregates the elderly population from other age groups. On the contrary, it should be one that makes the elderly forget about their age and actively participate in various aspects of the society.

By taking various factors affecting a Chinese elder's quality of life into account, we come up with the following recommended best practice considerations for urban planning:

1. Considerations for individual elderly people

   a. *Physical factors*:

      i. The elderly tend to be physically weaker than younger age groups. Thus, the location of residential buildings for the elderly should be near areas with better air and water quality, and the building should be well heated for cities in the temperate regions.

      ii. The elderly tend to be less mobile. Therefore, in order to make the entire community accessible to the elderly, providers of daily necessities such as food, clothing, medicine, and entertainment should be located within walking distance to the elderly residential estates. In the room, the floor should be designed to be non-slippery, and the floor levels in the bathroom, balcony and kitchen should be made the same to reduce the possibility of falling.

      iii. The elderly tend to have poorer memory. Therefore, the residential buildings for them should be arranged regularly to facilitate easy identification. In addition, obvious signage should be placed in the community to help the elderly residents find directions, and buildings with different functionalities should be designed to be easily distinguishable. The rooms for each elderly person to live in should be built smaller so as to facilitate cleaning and make it easy for the elderly to locate personal items.

   b. *Psychological factors*:

      i. The elderly tend to want more serenity in their living environment. Therefore, a community design to host elders should be located far away from sources of noise such as schools, night clubs, or places with heavy traffic, etc.

      ii. The elderly tend have more time and need for interaction with others. Thus, elderly communities should provide facilities where the elderly could congregate into various

sized groups with ample seating and small private areas to provide an acceptable level of comfort and privacy.

    iii. The elderly tend to be nostalgic. They often keep a lot of things from the past. In addition, they tend to want to display the photos of their loved ones in obvious places in their rooms. Thus, apartments designed for the elderly should include more storage and display areas.

2. <u>Community Level Considerations</u>

    a. Inclusion of green planted areas in the community: the choice of green plants in elderly communities has unique requirements. Firstly, safety must be adequately addressed. Plants with thorns or large fruits which can be potential hazards when they fall should be avoided. In addition, evergreen plants in the region where the community is located should be used to avoid the psychologically negative impact of plants shedding leaves during autumn and winter.

    b. Small areas for the elderly to plant their own fruits or vegetables should be provided to engage them in light-duty farming activities which are beneficial to their health. Through this process, they can also share their experience with others and grow organic produces for their own consumption.

    c. Exercising areas should accommodate both the elderly and young children to use. As some elders may be taking care of their grandchildren while their children work during day time, such facilities can be convenient for them.

    d. Intelligent assistance in the environment. Infrastructural support should be provided for the management of such communities to have situational awareness of the entire estate. This will enable them to quickly respond to potential hazards such as fire, gas leak, facility malfunctions, and medical emergencies, etc.

3. <u>Societal Level Considerations</u>

a. Ageless designs should be included into the public transport system of a city. The elderly often use public transport systems such as buses, city metros and taxis for commuting. Accessibility designs should be incorporated into all facilities related to these three categories of public transport. Buses should be routed near to elderly communities, the bus and metro stations should have large sized and clear signage with minimal changes in floor levels where possible, buses and trains should include devices that make them wheel chair accessible, easy to use phone or online booking systems for taxis should also be implemented.

VI. Discussions

An ageless community is one that achieves a well balanced development between the economy, social activities, culture and the environment. It should satisfy the special physical and emotional needs of the elderly, thereby sustaining them to live as independent as possible over the long term. Urban planning for ageless cities should be based upon an in-depth and up to date understanding of the mobility pattern of the elderly urban dwellers. By providing features in support of an independent, healthy, secure and convenient lifestyle for the elderly, the principles of ageless urban planning will be the first step towards building truly ageless societies in China in the foreseeable future.

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