

Development Dilemma and Improvement Path of Elderly Education Governance under the Perspective of Multi-Source Stream Theory

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Abstract: *With the aging of the population, the importance of elderly education in improving the quality of life of the elderly has become increasingly prominent. This paper aims to explore the development dilemma of elderly education governance and its optimization path, in order to provide a reference for policy making. The study adopts a multi-source theoretical framework to analyze the challenges faced by elderly education governance. The results show that elderly education has problems such as uneven resource allocation, disconnection between educational content and demand, and lack of professional talents; unclear responsibilities of various departments and insufficient attention from local governments; policy implementation deviations, complex management systems and mechanisms, and insufficient financial investment. In response to these problems, this paper proposes optimization paths from the three perspectives, so as to promote the improvement of elderly education governance, promote the healthy development of elderly education, and help build an elderly-friendly society.*

Keywords: Governance of elderly education, Multi-stream theory, Policy window, Development dilemma.

1. Introduction

The modernization of the governance system and governance capacity in the field of education is one of the ten strategic tasks that the CPC Central Committee and the State Council have focused on in the modernization of education. It is also a key way to better transform the advantages of the national system into governance effectiveness. In this context, with the increasing proportion of the elderly population in my country's total population, as well as the economic and social development and the improvement of living standards, more and more elderly people want to continue to receive education and enrich their spiritual and cultural life. Elderly education, as an increasingly important part of the education system, carries the important mission of enriching the spiritual and cultural life of the elderly and improving their quality of life. The construction of the elderly education governance system has become a key issue in the development of modern education.

The CPC Central Committee and the State Council attach great importance to the development of senior education and include it as one of the important contents of the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity. General Secretary Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed the need to "actively respond to population aging" and proposed to "build an elderly-friendly society", which has pointed out the direction for the development of senior education. The government has also continuously issued relevant documents at the policy level. In 2020, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee proposed to implement a national strategy to actively respond to population aging. In November 2021, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the "Opinions on Strengthening Aging Work in the New Era", proposing to "expand the supply of senior education resources". In February 2022, the State Council issued the "14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of National Aging Affairs and Elderly Care Service System", further clarifying

that "support various schools with conditions to hold senior universities (schools) and participate in senior education". However, in the actual promotion process, the governance of senior education still faces many difficulties, such as inadequate policy implementation, uneven distribution of educational resources, and low participation of the elderly. This article attempts to analyze the development dilemma of elderly education governance from the perspective of the multi-source theory in public policy analysis, combined with my country's current situation, and explore its optimization path, in order to provide reference and reference for China's elderly education governance in the new era.

2. Interpretation of the Multi-source Theory of Elderly Education Governance

The Commission on Global Governance systematically expounded the concept of governance in its 1995 research report *Our Global Neighborhood*: "Governance is the combination of various methods by which individuals and institutions, public and private sectors, manage their common affairs. It is an ongoing process." [1] Guiding the transformation of elderly education management to governance, so as to play a role in promoting the connotation-oriented development of elderly education, is a strategic and adaptive structural adjustment made by the Chinese government in recent years in response to the current changes in economic and social development.

As all sectors of society pay close attention to the field of elderly education governance, many scholars have also conducted multi-faceted research on this issue. From a macro perspective, the construction of the elderly education governance system is explored, and its important position and role in social governance are analyzed. For example, Wang Wenchuan (2023) conducted an in-depth study on the background, connotation and optimization strategy of the modernization of the elderly education governance system and governance capacity, and pointed out its important

significance for coping with population aging [2]. From a micro perspective, the focus is on the specific implementation of elderly education, such as the study of curriculum setting, teaching methods, etc., such as Tan Lihua et al. (2022)'s multi-dimensional review of the governance of elderly education courses in the new era, which provides ideas for improving the quality of elderly education [3].

The multi-stream theory proposed by American political scientist John W. Kingdon has constructed a unique policy analysis framework. The theory focuses on the field of public policy, which is full of uncertainty. The core of the theory is to explain how to attract the attention of the government and how to establish a policy agenda [4]. According to the theory, there are three streams in the policy system, namely, the problem stream, the policy stream and the political stream. Each stream has its own characteristics and its own dynamics and rules. The problem stream originates from the convergence of key events, indicators and policy feedback that have attracted public attention in reality. Its function is to identify social problems and analyze the internal reasons why government officials pay attention to specific problems and include them in the policy agenda. The policy stream is related to the technical feasibility of solving problems and the acceptability of values. In essence, it is an integration of a series of solutions to solve problems. In this process, officials, scholars and other participants jointly form a "policy community" to work together around specific problems and promote the continuous refinement of solutions. Political sources mainly involve various factors that have a significant impact on or hinder the solution of problems. For example, changes in national sentiment and the competition among interest groups are important factors affecting political sources [5]. The three sources flow independently, but can also be coupled at a certain key node under the drive of specific forces. In the multi-source flow theory, this node is defined as the "policy window", and its opening is a sign that the problem has entered the final policy agenda [6].

The multi-stream theory is an analytical framework constructed by John W. Kingdon based on the situation in Western countries. Although it has shown a certain degree of applicability in the field of education, there are significant differences between it and China's fundamental social system and governance paradigm. Therefore, if this theory is to be used appropriately, it must be closely combined with China's actual national conditions to be adjusted and revised. As a socialist country ruled by one party, China's government plays a more core and leading role in the process of policy formulation and promotion. In the process of policy formulation and promotion, the government occupies a more critical and dominant position. Therefore, in the political stream, factors such as the government's decision-making intention and the direction of policy guidance are particularly important. Moreover, the various streams are not in a completely equal and independent state. The political stream has a stronger leading and integrating effect on the problem stream and policy stream. In the issue of elderly education governance, the multi-stream theory is also significantly appropriate. From the perspective of the source of problems, many practical problems have emerged in the development of China's elderly education, such as the large gap in urban and rural resources and the poor matching between educational

content and the needs of the elderly. The focus and presentation of these problems are important manifestations of the source of problems and can provide a basis for subsequent policy attention. In terms of policy sources, education departments, experts and scholars, and educational institutions actively participate in the discussion and design of elderly education policies, forming a rich policy reserve, which is consistent with the role of the policy community in theory. In the political source, with the development of an aging society, the political influence of the elderly group has gradually increased, and the needs of the elderly group as educated people have received more and more attention and attention from the society. At the same time, as front-line workers in the field of elderly education, the demand and quality of elderly education teachers also need to be urgently addressed. These constitute an important political driving force for the development of elderly education policies. By combing through the relevant research on the elderly education governance system and governance capacity, it can be seen that at this stage, the governance of elderly education is relatively weak in the integration and coordination of various sources, which makes it difficult to open the policy window and effectively transform existing problems into operational policy measures. In view of this, this study focuses on exploring how to promote the efficient coupling of problem sources, policy sources and political sources in the governance of elderly education under the background of my country's specific national conditions, break through the current difficulties, and find practical ways to open the policy window, so as to achieve the perfection of the elderly education governance system and the advancement of governance capabilities, lay a solid foundation for the stable and long-term development of elderly education and provide strong support (based on this, the analysis model shown in Figure 1 is constructed).

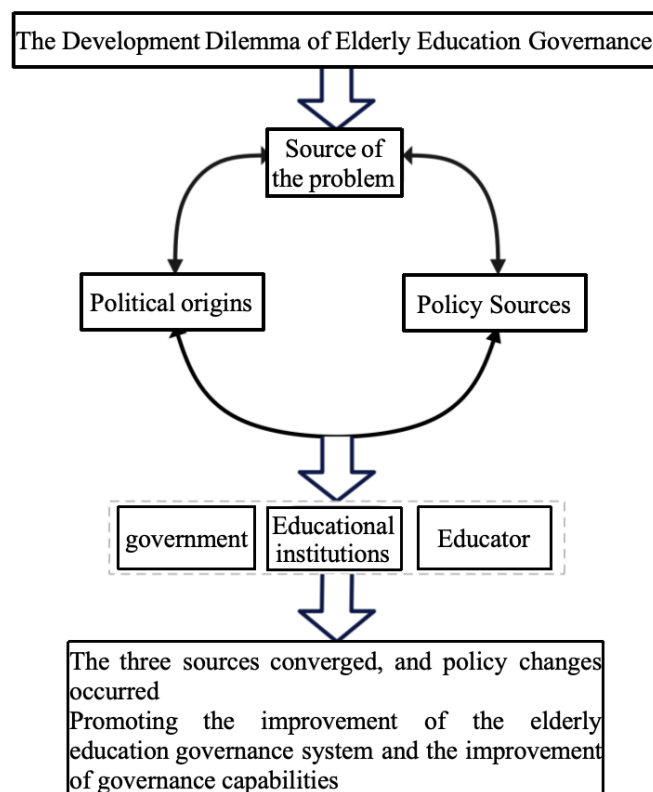


Figure 1: Analysis model of elderly education governance

3. Interpretation of the Dilemma of Elderly Education Governance and Development from Multiple Streams

From the perspective of multi-source theory, the development dilemma of elderly education governance can be deeply interpreted from three dimensions: problem source, political source and policy source. The following is a detailed analysis of these three dimensions, combined with specific data and literature, to reveal the specific challenges faced by elderly education governance.

3.1 Source of the Problem: The Conditions for the Focus Event are Initially in Place

As the core driving force of the multi-source flow theory, the problem source flow attracts the attention of all parties with the help of influential indicators, driven by factors such as focal events, crisis events, symbols, and the role of feedback channels. Moreover, this attention will be further strengthened by the outbreak of landmark events or continuous feedback [8]. In-depth analysis of the content of the issues that policymakers are concerned about in a certain period of time and the process of how these issues enter the policymakers' field of vision can provide a reasonable basis for the formal launch of the policy agenda [9].

In the policy system of China's elderly education governance, in terms of the source of the problem, the outstanding problem facing elderly education is the imbalance in resource allocation. There is a significant gap in elderly education resources between urban and rural areas, both in terms of educational facilities and teaching staff. This has greatly hindered the balanced development of elderly education and has become a key problem that needs to be overcome urgently [7]. According to statistics from the China Association of Senior Citizens' Universities, in the past five years, the average annual growth rate of the number of senior citizens' universities in China has reached 4.7%, and the average number of senior citizens' universities for every 10,000 elderly people aged 65 and above is about 4.3. By 2023, the total number of senior citizens' universities (schools) at all levels and types across the country has climbed to 76,296, an increase of 14,135 from the 62,161 counted in 2017. The number of students participating in learning has also increased significantly from the initial 900 to more than 20 million today, of which more than 10 million are registered distance education students. However, behind this seemingly booming development, the differences between urban and rural areas cannot be ignored. In urban areas, senior citizen universities often have modern teaching buildings, fully equipped multimedia classrooms, professional teaching equipment such as electronic pianos and drawing tools, etc., and a relatively stable teaching staff. Most teachers have professional education backgrounds and rich teaching experience, and teachers with bachelor's degrees or above account for more than 70%. In rural areas, senior citizen education venues are mostly temporarily borrowed village houses or abandoned schools. The teaching equipment is simple, with only basic tables, chairs and blackboards, and even lack of necessary teaching materials. There is a serious shortage of teachers, and less than 10% of teachers have professional qualifications. This huge resource gap has seriously restricted the balanced

development of senior citizen education and has become a key issue that needs to be solved urgently.

In recent years, although the curriculum arrangement of senior universities has shown a trend of diversification, the situation that is contrary to the actual needs of the elderly still exists. Many senior universities did not carry out targeted investigations and planning when planning courses. The course content mostly focuses on the teaching of traditional cultural and artistic skills, such as calligraphy, painting, poetry, etc., while the dissemination of health and wellness knowledge that the elderly are concerned about (such as chronic disease control, rehabilitation care, etc.), training in modern technology application skills (such as smartphone operation, electronic payment, etc.) and psychological adjustment guidance are relatively scarce. A questionnaire survey of 1,000 elderly people showed that only 30% of the elderly felt that the current elderly education courses could meet their actual needs, and more than 60% of the elderly hoped to add practical courses that are closely related to daily life. Just like the design of some courses does not take into account the physical conditions and interest preferences of the elderly, resulting in low enthusiasm for participation by the elderly. In addition, traditional courses such as literacy classes and skin care and beauty are certainly popular, but the demand for fashion courses such as live broadcasting and short video editing has not been fully responded to.

Furthermore, the lack of professional elderly educators is also an important aspect of the problem. Qualified elderly education practitioners must not only have relevant educational knowledge reserves, but also be familiar with the physical and mental characteristics of the elderly, and then provide teaching content and methods that suit the elderly. At present, since elderly education has not yet established a complete discipline framework and professional training system, most teachers engaged in elderly education are transferred from other educational fields and lack teaching methods and skills training specifically for elderly education. Therefore, there is a serious shortage of professional talents in the field of elderly education in China, which greatly limits the improvement of the quality of elderly education. According to incomplete statistics, among the elderly education faculty, the proportion of teachers who have received systematic elderly education teaching training is less than 20%. In all types of elderly universities at all levels, the faculty structure dominated by part-time teachers is still a common phenomenon, which to a certain extent affects the teaching quality and effect of elderly education. The sources of recruitment of teachers in elderly universities are diversified. Inviting professional talents from industries/enterprises has become the first choice, and attracting fresh college students to teach is a new trend.

3.2 Political Origin: Power Contradictions among Governing Subjects

From the perspective of political origin, with the deepening development of an aging society, the elderly group's demands for educational rights have become increasingly strong, and social attention has continued to rise, creating a positive political atmosphere for the governance of elderly education. However, in the existing governance system, the division of

responsibilities between departments is still unclear, and buck-passing is prone to occur during policy implementation, which hinders the efficient advancement of elderly education governance. Although the education department, civil affairs department, and cultural department all assume certain responsibilities in the governance of elderly education, in actual operation, there is a lack of clear functional definition and coordination mechanism. At present, in the process of implementing China's elderly education policies, there is a phenomenon of multiple dragons governing the water and each doing its own thing. There is a lack of special laws and regulations on elderly education, which makes it difficult for the allocation of elderly education resources to obtain continuous human, financial, and material support [10]. The interest game between the central government and local governments affects the implementation effect of the policy. As the main body of policy implementation, local governments must be consistent with the central government, but there are also cognitive deviations, resulting in poor policy implementation and poor results [11].

At the same time, there are large differences in the degree of attention paid by local governments to elderly education, and the results of policy implementation are also uneven. Especially in some provinces in the west, given their relatively backward economic development and limited financial investment, the construction of infrastructure for elderly education has progressed very slowly. Taking Yunnan and Guangxi as examples, the proportion of fiscal funds invested in elderly education each year in total education investment is only about 2%, far lower than the national average of 5%. This situation directly leads to a shortage of local elderly education institutions, a shortage of teaching resources, extremely simple educational facilities, and a serious shortage of teaching equipment and teaching materials, which cannot meet the learning needs of the elderly at all, greatly hindering the effective implementation of elderly education policies in the local area.

3.3 Policy Sources: The Role of Policy Community is Limited

In terms of policy sources, although the academic community and education departments have actively explored and proposed many solutions such as integrating community resources and developing online elderly education courses, these solutions are difficult to implement effectively in the actual implementation process due to the lack of systematic planning and coordination. In various regions of China, the imbalanced distribution of elderly education resources between urban and rural areas and between regions is extremely common. Many specific data and case studies have strongly proved the seriousness of this problem. For example, in Shanghai, even though its elderly education resources are at a high level in terms of spatial balance, there are still spatial distribution differences that gradually decrease from the central urban area to the suburbs, and the density of educational institutions in the suburbs is far less than that in the central urban area. In terms of specific examples, Nanhai District, Foshan City, Guangdong Province, has effectively promoted the development of elderly education by forming a community propaganda team, successfully resolved the problem of integrating town and street elderly schools with

the community, and promoted the construction of a community cultural elderly care pattern. However, given the different resource conditions and conditions in different regions, this successful model may be difficult to replicate in other regions.

After summarizing the relevant data and case materials, we examine the policy sources from the perspective of the policy community and find that they have the following significant characteristics. First, policy implementation deviation. Although national policies can be transmitted and issued well, the lack of operational supporting details has caused the community elderly education policy to deviate from expectations during implementation. Second, the management system and mechanism are complex. The current management system of elderly education in China is complex, which makes it difficult to achieve ideal policy implementation. Third, insufficient financial investment. Although some regions such as Shanghai have included elderly education funds in the overall planning of the city's education funds, the financial investment mechanism for elderly education in the country as a whole is still unclear, and most regions lack stable financial support. Fourth, insufficient participation of social forces. National policies encourage social forces to actively participate in elderly education, but the current policies lack corresponding preferential policies such as fiscal and taxation, land use, and use of venues and facilities, making it difficult for the government, the market, and society to build an efficient and complete cooperation network. Fifth, insufficient legislative protection. At present, there are many policy documents on elderly education in China, but there is a lack of special laws and regulations to protect them, resulting in some policies relying on "rule by man" rather than "rule by law" [15]. For example, only a few provinces and cities have issued laws and regulations such as the "Regulations on Promoting Lifelong Education" or the "Regulations on the Development of Elderly Education" [16].

In recent years, from the perspective of the effects of the implementation of elderly education policies, many scholars have summarized a series of problems, such as uneven distribution of educational resources, weak teaching staff, single curriculum setting, and insufficient funding. These problems have led to prominent contradictions between supply and demand. To solve these problems, scholars have also proposed a variety of strategies. For example, integrating school resources, accelerating the integration of community resources, and fully integrating social resources; moderately opening up school resources, such as libraries and laboratories, to provide learning opportunities for the elderly, achieve resource sharing, and improve the efficiency of teaching resource utilization. In addition, high-level elderly activity centers should be established to meet the learning needs of elderly people with different economic conditions [12].

In summary, the coupling effect of the three sources in China's current elderly education governance policy system is not good, and the "policy window" for promoting the comprehensive development of elderly education has not been successfully opened. Therefore, in-depth analysis of the dilemma of each source and exploration of coupling paths are of great significance to promoting the development of elderly education governance. Through the analysis of the source of

problems, political sources and policy sources, we can better understand the current situation and problems of elderly education governance and development, and provide a basis for formulating more effective policies.

4. Promoting the Governance of Elderly Education and Opening the Policy Window for Improvement

4.1 The Government Focuses on the Source of Problems and Optimizes the Allocation of Elderly Education Resources

The government plays a key role in the governance of elderly education. Its attention to and response to the source of problems is an important prerequisite for opening the policy window. First, the government needs to strengthen the overall planning of the allocation of elderly education resources and narrow the urban-rural gap. By formulating and implementing specific policy measures, it will increase investment in elderly education in rural areas and improve the infrastructure conditions of rural elderly education, such as building more elderly education venues and equipping them with necessary teaching equipment. At the same time, the government also needs to actively guide the reasonable flow of high-quality educational resources to rural areas, encourage urban elderly education institutions to build cooperative relationships with rural areas, realize the sharing of educational resources and teaching staff, and then promote the development of urban and rural elderly education in a balanced direction.

Secondly, the government should focus on the fit between the content of elderly education and the actual needs of the elderly. To this end, the government should build a long-term system for surveying the needs of elderly education, periodically go deep into communities, villages and other areas where elderly people are concentrated, and comprehensively collect the learning demands and feedback of the elderly. Based on the results of the survey, guide elderly education institutions to improve course planning, increase the proportion of practical courses such as self-management of chronic diseases in the elderly, the use of smart home devices, and maintenance of the elderly's psychological state, ensure that the course content is closely linked to the actual life needs and interest preferences of the elderly, and enhance the enthusiasm and satisfaction of the elderly in participating in elderly education. At the same time, the government should also help elderly education institutions develop and introduce diversified teaching materials, such as digital teaching materials, distance learning courses, etc., in order to meet the diverse learning needs of the elderly.

4.2 Integrate Political Sources from Multiple Parties to Enhance the Governance of Elderly Education

In terms of political origins, in order to clarify the responsibilities of various departments in the governance of elderly education, the government should introduce special laws and regulations on elderly education, and clarify in legal form the specific functions and responsibilities of education, civil affairs, culture and other departments in the allocation of elderly education resources, teaching management, and organization of cultural activities. It should establish a

cross-departmental coordination and cooperation mechanism, such as the establishment of a joint leading group for elderly education work, hold joint meetings regularly, and jointly discuss and resolve major issues in the governance of elderly education, avoid buck-passing, and ensure the efficiency and consistency of policy implementation.

At the same time, good governance of senior education cannot be separated from the joint cooperation of multiple parties to form a strong governance synergy. It is necessary for the government to strengthen exchanges and cooperation with social organizations, enterprises, communities and other aspects, clearly define the responsibilities and tasks of various departments and institutions in the process of senior education governance, and build a practical and effective coordination system. For example, the government can work with social organizations to carry out work such as senior education demand surveys, curriculum development, and teacher training, and fully tap the unique advantages of social organizations in resource integration and service supply. At the same time, the government can also rely on policy guidance and incentives to stimulate the enthusiasm of enterprises to engage in senior education, such as giving tax exemptions, policy support and other preferential conditions to participating enterprises, and promote cooperation between enterprises and senior education institutions to jointly promote the development of senior education.

In addition, local governments should also play a greater role in the governance of elderly education. Local governments should formulate elderly education policies and measures that meet local needs based on local conditions, strengthen financial investment and resource allocation for elderly education, and ensure the effective implementation of policies. At the same time, local governments should also strengthen supervision and management of elderly education, ensure the quality and effectiveness of elderly education, and promptly discover and solve problems in the development of elderly education.

4.3 Educators Participate in Policy Development and Promote High-quality Development of Elderly Education

Educators play an important role in the governance of elderly education, and their participation in policy sources is the key to promoting the high-quality development of elderly education. First of all, educators should actively participate in the formulation and implementation of elderly education policies, give full play to their professional advantages and practical experience, and provide scientific and reasonable suggestions and opinions for the formulation of policies. For example, teachers in elderly education institutions can make suggestions to policy makers on curriculum setting, teaching methods, etc. based on their own teaching experience and understanding of the learning needs of the elderly, so as to help policies better meet the actual needs of the elderly. At the same time, educators should also actively participate in the discussion and program design of elderly education policies, and provide professional and operational suggestions for policy formulation with their rich teaching practice experience. For example, in the field of innovation of teaching methods for elderly education, it is advocated to adopt interactive and practical teaching methods that suit the

learning characteristics of the elderly, and actively encourage elderly students to actively participate in classroom discussions, practical operations and other teaching activities to improve learning outcomes; in the construction of the curriculum system, it is necessary to focus on building a layered and classified curriculum framework, comprehensively consider factors such as the elderly's cultural level, interest preferences, physical conditions, etc., establish different levels such as basic, advanced, and advanced, as well as cultural arts, health and wellness, information technology and other types of courses, to meet the rich and diverse learning needs of different elderly groups.

For example, in terms of innovation in teaching methods for elderly education, we advocate the implementation of interactive and experiential teaching methods that are suitable for the learning characteristics of the elderly, and encourage elderly students to actively participate in classroom discussions, practical operations and other activities to improve learning outcomes; in terms of curriculum system construction, we suggest building a layered and classified curriculum system, and setting up basic, advanced, and advanced levels, as well as different types of courses such as culture and art, health and wellness, and information technology according to factors such as the elderly's educational level, interests and hobbies, and physical condition, to meet the diverse learning needs of different elderly groups.

Secondly, educators should also strengthen their own professional ability to meet the development needs of elderly education. Education departments should strengthen cooperation with colleges and universities and scientific research institutions to jointly carry out the construction of elderly education disciplines and professional talent training. Establish majors related to elderly education in colleges and universities, optimize the curriculum, focus on the combination of theory and practice, and cultivate professionals who have a solid foundation in educational theory and are familiar with the practice of elderly education; at the same time, provide continuing education opportunities for in-service elderly education teachers. The government and educational institutions should increase the training of elderly education teachers, organize diversified training activities, and update teachers' educational concepts and teaching methods through online and offline training courses, academic seminars and other forms, improve teachers' professional quality and comprehensive ability, so that they can better carry out elderly education work, and provide solid talent support for the high-quality development of elderly education. In addition, educators should also pay attention to communication and exchanges with the elderly, understand the learning needs and psychological characteristics of the elderly, innovate teaching methods and means, improve teaching quality and effect, and provide strong support for the high-quality development of elderly education.

Through the collaborative efforts of the government, multiple parties and educators at various sources, we will promote the effective coupling of problem sources, policy sources and political sources in the governance of elderly education, open the "policy window" for the development of elderly education, promote the continuous improvement of the elderly education

governance system and the continuous improvement of governance capabilities, enable elderly education to better meet the growing spiritual and cultural needs of the elderly, promote the prosperity and development of the elderly education cause, and help build an elderly-friendly society.

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