

How Can China Deal with the Aging Problem Based on Japan's Experience?

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Abstract: The ageing problem has become a global trend due to the low birth rate caused by the pressure and cost of raising a baby and the increasing life expectancy resulting from technological improvements. Many countries have taken measures such as promoting the birth rate and delaying the retirement age to deal with this situation. However, the rather disappointing result demonstrates that more sustainable and effective methods are needed. This research compares the solutions to the ageing problem between China and Japan, aimed at providing new ideas and possible directions to the struggle with the ageing problem.

Keywords: ageing, China and Japan, comprehensive methods

1. Introduction

Having faced the problem since the 1970s, Japan now has the highest proportion of elderly citizens of any country in the world. As for China, it became an ageing nation at the end of the 20th century. It now has the most rapid ageing speed in the world. Because Japan has faced this problem decades earlier than China, China can deal with the ageing population based on Japan's experience. This research will argue that China can learn to be more comprehensive in dealing with the ageing problem. Being more comprehensive means taking measures on different aspects but also refers to improving existing measures, realizing new changes, trying methods besides conventional ones, and identifying the drawback. These two countries were chosen because they face different variations of the same problem. Japan can be the model of developed countries with small populations, and China can represent developing countries with large areas and huge populations. Thus, the research on these two countries can provide suggestions to countries worldwide to better deal with the ageing problem. As a result, better dealing with the ageing problem can make people's lives better and become more satisfied with the government.

2. Literature Review

The ageing problem in China is becoming serious rapidly, which means that China is now facing many challenges, such as labor shortages and industry upgrades. Focusing on Japan's experience, it can be seen that the slow economic growth and recession that Japan has suffered from since the early 1990s resulted from structural problems caused by the ageing problem instead of a temporary downturn [1]. This warns China to pay more attention to the ageing problem and look for effective

solutions. However, China also has many obstacles when dealing with the ageing problem. Many of the elderly population have bad health conditions and low income, causing high suicide rates [2]. This situation demands China improve its insufficient social security system and provide long-term care to the elderly, which is certainly a financial burden for China [3]. However, this is not enough to solve the ageing problem fundamentally. China has taken measures to deal with the effects of the Family Planning Policy, such as the second-child and third-child policies to promote the birth rate. These measures are estimated to positively affect China's ageing problem [4]. But Japan's experience demonstrates that fertility policies were proved to be highly time-dependent and cannot compensate for the aged demography in the long term [5]. So far, no successful or effective result can be seen in any country.

As a result, the solutions have to be more comprehensive and change the ageing process fundamentally. Besides improving existing methods such as the social security system, it is crucial to understand that the aged demography has led to fundamental changes in people's needs in various aspects, and the government has to be creative and focus more on the methods without much progress. For instance, the population structure changes, and the disease structure changes lead to changes in medical care demand, which means that conventional medical care has to be more suitable for the ageing society, such as focusing on nursing care [6]. Moreover, governments should also discover new areas related to ageing that needs more effort, such as taking advantage of technological improvement. The comprehensive improvements should include completely relaxing the family planning policy, upgrading the level of human capital, improving the pension system and the retirement policy, and trying to implement long-term care services [7]. In addition, China can also make attempts to improve its disadvantages, such as promoting cooperation between different departments of the government and non-governmental actors based on Japan's experience. This research will then compare China and Japan through case studies on some of these aspects in detail, which can combine these two countries to have more reflections on the ageing problem, try to provide a comprehensive solution for countries, and thus fill a gap in the existing literature.

3. Methodology

A case study was used in the paper.

Improving the social security system, especially the pension system, is one of the most direct and effective ways to deal with the ageing problem. The elderly population in China is getting old before getting rich, compared with the opposite trend in developed countries. As a result, China is supposed to provide a better social security system and increase the income of old people. However, there are many problems to be solved. The major problem is inequality between rural areas and cities. Ageing problems in rural areas are much worse than in urban areas in China but rural areas usually have an indigent pension system [8]. After a short period of development, the rural old-age insurance program stagnated since the end of the 1990s. Until 2004, approximately 10 % of the counties were completely without old-age insurance programs [8]. This situation resulted from the pressure on companies and local governments, and the central government does not play an active role. The financial burden becomes an incentive for the collusion between employers and employees to avoid pension contributions, and local governments do not have deterrent punishment [9]. This causes serious inequalities and labor mobility problems. As for Japan, the social security system includes universal pension and medical care these two major parts, which were established in 1961, and other small programs such as Long-term Care Insurance. The pension system especially grew remarkably since then because it mainly targets the elderly. One special feature is that there are six public pension schemes for different kinds of labor [10]. This enables the pension system to cover more than 90% of the workforce in Japan. China can put forward different plans for the pension system to improve its coverage, and thus provide more security to the elderly population, which can reduce the pressure on

their offspring and promote the birth rate.

Another necessity for old people is medical care, and the need of the elderly has changed fundamentally. The need of the aged society has changed, and the most obvious one is medical care. As a result, governments should change the focus of medical care to adapt to social changes. Based on Japan's experience, the increasing number of old people means changes in disease structure, which refers to the increasing trend of functional deterioration of organs, geriatric syndrome, and daily activity dysfunction [6]. Therefore, medical care should focus more on quality of life and death and end-of-life care instead of life-saving and prolongation, such as establishing gerontology departments at medical schools, nurturing gerontological physicians, facilitating a shift to community-oriented medical care, and promoting public awareness of these changes [6]. Knowing this trend, Japan has made some progress in this transformation. For example, the Ministry of Health and Welfare published a notice named 'Implementation of postgraduate medical training with primary care' in 1978 and added a 'general practice course' in 1985 [11]. However, Japan still needs to endeavor on medical care for the elderly even though it already made these initial steps. Only about 30% of medical schools in Japan had a department that specialized in medical care for old people in 2015 [6]. Based on Japan's precedent, China can improve its medical care before the ageing process becomes more severe. Statistics show that more than 80% of the elderly in China have chronic diseases in 2015 [12]. But geriatrics develop very slowly in China. China's first geriatrics department was established in 2007 [13]. In addition, China seriously lacks geriatrics institutions, people specializing in this subject, and management standards. However, it now realized this issue and started adjusting [13]. But the Chinese government has to do more and establish a mature network of medical care for the elderly.

In addition to improvements in the conventional measures dealing with the ageing problem, the Chinese government should also pay attention to new methods. The first example is technological innovation. Because of the increasing need for the elderly care industry and low income and poor treatment of nursing workers, Japan has made great progress in inventing equipment for the elderly, and one of the most remarkable results is the nursing robot in the elderly care industry. Caregivers may deal with very challenging tasks, such as turning over old people who cannot take care of themselves. As a result, the Japanese government has increased the work welfare of nursing workers and then actively promoted research and invention of nursing robots which have been put into the market and application [14]. From 2013 to 2017, Japan funded approximately 12.5 billion yen in the development and promotion of the introduction of robot care services [15]. The efforts led to the creation of various robots which can provide transfer support, mobility support, toileting support, and dementia monitoring [16]. This can reduce care workers' physical and mental burdens and improve the quality of life of the elderly. The Japanese government also pays attention to innovations in electronic technology, such as the digitalization of medical and care fields. For instance, Japan launched the Headquarters for the Promotion of Data Health Reform in January 2017 and encouraged information communication technology in different fields including health, medical care, and nursing care [16]. There are also other measures, such as emergency medical information sharing and data health analysis. The Chinese government can learn from Japan and promote its technological development. However, as a powerful country, China has made progress in some areas of technology, especially the prognosis and prevention of organ degeneration. In China, ageing biobanks have been established focusing on centenarian collections and brain samples from AD patients, and research based on these has made great progress on organ degeneration, such as epigenetic regulation of organ ageing [17]. But China can broaden its research ranges based on Japan's experiences. However, there are still many problems that need to be solved. For instance, robots may harm old people if operated inappropriately or program errors happen.

Another example of measures without much progress is paying attention to the individual

condition of the elderly. With the increase in the elderly population, governments should improve the quality of life of old people in order to ensure their income and mental health. Japan has paid attention to national health and promoted the national health campaign since 1978 and is now planning the fourth campaign [18]. Therefore, health awareness and healthy exercise habits of elderly citizens in Japan have gradually taken root. Furthermore, the quality of life is improving, and life expectancy is increasing. In addition, Japan also promoted elderly employment which can ease its fiscal pressure, invigorate the vitality of the elderly population, and increase the income of the elderly. The Japanese government has implemented the “Elderly Employment Stabilization Law” since April 1, 2021, delaying the retirement age from 65 to 70 [18]. As for China, the government also plans to extend the retirement age. This is crucial because Chinese old people are getting old before getting rich compared with those in Europe who are getting old and rich. Thus, China is going to delay the retirement age to 65 for all people, and the policy will be performed soon. This method is the most effective among all methods in delaying retirement age, which is estimated to cause an increase in the total workforce by more than 55% in 2050 compared with 2010 [19]. However, the Chinese government should pay more attention to individual conditions and care, such as health awareness which Japan has made great efforts.

One of the problems that the Chinese government needs to solve in dealing with ageing is its government structure and cooperation. China already has made some progress in dealing with the ageing problem with an integrated governance system. As a governance entity, the Chinese government has its advantages: its political authority and resources. However, it can also cause obstacles because of its rigid hierarchy, rules, monopoly, and lack of incentives [20]. Based on Japan’s experience, a highly hierarchical system can cause great challenges for policy reform [11]. For instance, the *ikyoku* system, aimed at the formation of specialized physicians, has a feature that is rigid top-down governance structure [11]. This makes it difficult to adjust policies according to the changing needs of society. Japan has made improvements, such as having a community-oriented model and decentralization policies [11]. China should also make similar improvements, such as promoting cooperation between different departments and paying attention to the effects of non-governmental actors. China has made several attempts on both aspects. For example, the National Committee of Aging (NCA) was relocated to the National Health Commission in 2018. NCA was a policy network embedded in the administration and this decision demonstrated the coordination within the government in dealing with ageing [20]. As for non-governmental actors, the participation of non-governmental organizations in ageing policies in China has a short history, which started in the 1990s when non-profit organizations were established to offer services for the elderly such as long-term care and rehabilitation services. But a series of policies and regulations from 1999 to 2014, such as the Interim Measures for the Management of Social Welfare Institutions, has created a more effective collaborative framework compared with the traditional government-provided structure [20]. However, some government agencies are on the edge of the ageing policy-making process and have little contact with others [21]. As a result, strengthening collaboration within different departments in the government is still needed.

4. Discussion

This study has provided some suggestions on the ageing problem, using China as an example based on Japan’s experience. However, there are some disadvantages and flaws in this research. Firstly, the suggestions on the solutions to the ageing problem are just subjective ideas without practice or evidence. Therefore, there is a possibility that they may not be effective. In addition, every country has different backgrounds and conditions. As a result, the improvements which were brought up based on China and Japan may not be suitable for other countries, even though the comparison has made an attempt to consider the representation of the two countries. Moreover, this research lacks the support

of data and statistics. As a comparison aimed at putting forward advice, this research mainly focused on comparison, examples, and statements of the ideas. Because these are all assumptions needed to be tested, it is difficult to use data to prove their effectiveness. Furthermore, some of the examples that were cited from other sources may be outdated because of the limitation of the topic and the database can be used. Besides, there is an update on the situation in China and Japan. For instance, China just held two sessions in 2023, and there are some adjustments and improvements in its solutions to the ageing problem. However, it may be difficult to find relative information because the update is too close to the time that this research was done.

There are still problems that need to be solved on the global ageing problem. This study just put forward the idea that being more comprehensive is possible to ease the ageing problem. However, if we want to solve the ageing problem fundamentally, it is crucial to think about how to establish and keep a sustainable demographic structure. If governments blindly promote the birth rate, the ageing problem will emerge decades later. When it comes to that time, people have to deal with the ageing problem again, which means promoting the birth rate again. This will become a vicious circle. Moreover, different countries have different population problems. In order to help all countries to have a healthy population, is it possible to figure out a demographic model or paradigm to instruct governments in different countries to control their population? Furthermore, we can also find out solutions to different population problems, thus governments can deal with ageing problems with facilities. However, all of these assumptions need more consideration, long-time practice, and experimentation. These can leave to other research in the future.

5. Conclusion

This research has compared the solutions to the ageing problem between China and Japan. China can learn from Japan's experiences because Japan faced this challenge 30 years earlier. China has to be comprehensive instead of just focusing on promoting birth rates. Being more comprehensive means targeting various aspects, including improving existing measures, recognizing new changes, being more creative on methods without much progress, and identifying the drawbacks. It also provides three case studies to explain these four aspects respectively. This research can provide suggestions for other countries that are struggling with ageing problems. With these lessons and experiences, they can be effective with fewer attempts. However, more research should be done to make the solutions to the ageing problem more sustainable. The rising birth rates usually mean the ageing problem again decades later. Therefore, the balance of the birth rate and the ageing population has to be clearer with a specific standard, which can be left to further research. This needs the cooperation and efforts of the whole world because ageing is a global trend and a responsibility of all governments.

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