

From Recreation to Empowerment the Transformation of Elderly Education in Chinese Universities

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Abstract

With the accelerating trend of global population aging, elderly education is undergoing a profound transformation from recreation-oriented models to empowerment-oriented approaches. Recreational elderly education primarily aims to meet spiritual and cultural needs, focusing on leisure and aesthetic experiences. In contrast, empowerment-oriented elderly education emphasizes enhancing social participation capabilities, digital literacy, and health management skills, highlighting the practical and societal value of learning. This study takes elderly education in Chinese universities as the focal point and draws on the digital education and multi-stakeholder collaboration experiences of the United Kingdom, Germany, and South Korea. Using comparative analysis and case studies, it systematically examines the differences, driving forces, and challenges between recreational and empowerment-oriented education. The findings reveal that while significant progress has been made in curriculum innovation, digital infrastructure, and teacher development, challenges remain, including regional disparities, insufficient professional faculty, and low digital inclusion. Policy recommendations include curriculum empowerment, intelligent teaching models, diversified resource supply, and the establishment of an integrated education+elderly care ecosystem.

Keywords: Elderly Education, Recreation-Oriented, Empowerment-Oriented, Digital Transformation, Curriculum Innovation, China

Introduction

Elderly education constitutes an indispensable component of the lifelong learning system, playing a vital role in improving older adults' quality of life, promoting healthy aging, and fostering social integration (Aparecida & Christofeletti, 2024). Amid the rapid acceleration of global demographic aging, the philosophical underpinnings and operational models of elderly education are undergoing fundamental changes. According to the United Nations World Population Prospects (2022), by 2050, individuals aged 60 and above will comprise 22% of the global population, with those aged 65 and above accounting for 16%.



China's aging landscape presents particularly compelling challenges and opportunities. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics (Wang, 2025) indicate that by the end of 2024, China's population aged 60 and above reached 310.31 million, representing 22.0% of the national total, while those aged 65 and above numbered 220.23 million, accounting for 15.6%. Historically, Chinese elderly universities primarily offered recreational courses such as dance, calligraphy, and vocal music, which constituted over 80% of the curriculum (China Research Center on Aging, 2025). However, propelled by the National Strategy for Actively Responding to Population Aging, a growing number of institutions have introduced information technology, health management, and social service courses, significantly augmenting the proportion of empowerment-oriented education (Zhang, 2025).

This paradigm shift from pure recreation toward empowerment reflects broader societal transformations and an urgent response to the multifaceted challenges of an aging population. Empowerment-oriented educational models enhance older adults' capacity for social participation and adaptation to change, thereby improving their quality of life and sense of self-worth (Mausbach, 2022; Ying & Lin, n.d.). This study seeks to critically examine this transition through a multifaceted lens. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions

1. What are the fundamental differences in objectives, content, and pedagogical approaches between recreation-oriented and empowerment-oriented elderly education
2. What are the principal driving forces and challenges underpinning the transformation of elderly education within Chinese universities
3. What insights can be derived from international experiences to inform and refine China's ongoing elderly education transformation

The analytical approach employed in this paper combines a systematic review of literature with a comparative analysis of international models (from the UK, Germany, South Korea, and Japan) and a case study illustration of curriculum transformation within a Chinese university context.

In the transformation of elderly education in Chinese universities from entertainment to empowerment, it is essential to construct a clear conceptual framework. The framework (see Figure 1) begins with "recreation," which represents the traditional focus of elderly education on leisure, social interaction, and cultural activities. On this basis, the content gradually transitions to "skills development," including areas such as health management, digital literacy, and social participation. The ultimate goal is "empowerment," which emphasizes enhancing autonomy, social engagement, and self-realization among older adults. This logical progression not only responds to China's policy orientation toward active aging but also resonates with Freire's (1970) notion of education as liberation in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Moreover, it provides both theoretical justification and practical direction for curriculum reform, teacher training, and the construction of digital learning platforms.

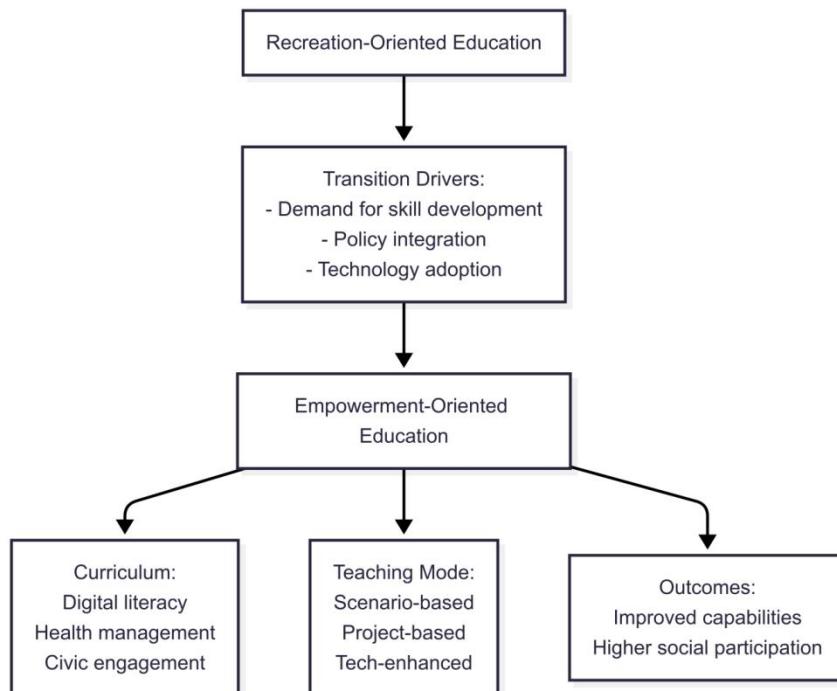


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework–From Recreation to Empowerment

Note. This framework illustrates the transformation pathway from recreation-oriented to empowerment-oriented elderly education in Chinese universities, highlighting the transition drivers (demand upgrades, policy integration, and technology adoption) and the outcomes (improved capabilities and social participation).

Literature and Theoretical Background

1. Conceptual Evolution from Recreation to Empowerment

The conceptualization of elderly education has evolved significantly, mirroring broader shifts in societal attitudes toward aging. Recreation-oriented models, which dominated the early phases of development, are primarily geared toward fulfilling cultural and leisure needs. These programs emphasize artistic appreciation, hobby cultivation, and passive engagement, often characterized by teacher-centered instruction focused on imitation and the evaluation of participatory involvement and finished products (Zhang, 2025).

In contrast, the empowerment-oriented paradigm is grounded in theories of human development and social participation. Drawing on Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, which emphasizes education as a practice of freedom and a means for marginalized groups to achieve critical consciousness and agency, empowerment-oriented elderly education seeks to equip older adults with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to actively engage with and shape their social realities. This approach aligns closely with the World Health Organization's (2002) active ageing framework, which prioritizes health, participation, and security to enhance quality of life as people age. Empowerment in this context involves fostering control, adaptability and social skills in life, and jointly promoting the harmonious development of the

elderly, families, communities and society, rather than just providing entertainment (Wang & Tan, 2011).

2. The Chinese Context Development and Policy Drivers

The trajectory of elderly education in China is deeply intertwined with its socio-economic and policy evolution. Initially, offerings were heavily skewed toward recreational activities, a legacy of viewing elderly care primarily as a form of welfare and leisure provision (Wu, 2022). However, the dramatic pace of population aging, coupled with the state's strategic response, has catalyzed a reorientation. The National Strategy for Actively Responding to Population Aging has been instrumental in this shift, reframing older adults not as passive recipients of care but as active contributors to society (State Council, 2021).

This policy impetus has driven universities and other institutions to expand their curricula beyond traditional arts. Courses in information technology, smart device usage, health management, chronic disease prevention, financial literacy, and even volunteer training have gained prominence, aiming to enhance practical capabilities and social integration (Shen, 2022; Yang & Shen, 2022). This transition signifies an attempt to align elderly education with the demands of a digitalized society and the goals of productive aging.

3. International Experiences and Models

Comparative analysis reveals diverse yet instructive international approaches to elderly education, offering valuable benchmarks for China's ongoing transformation.

The United Kingdom emphasizes a multi-stakeholder model often described as government guidance + enterprise participation + community support. Initiatives like the Silver Surfer program exemplify this, providing older adults with computer training through simplified interfaces and community-based ICT labs to improve digital literacy and combat social exclusion (Chen, 2024). This model leverages public-private partnerships to ensure accessibility and relevance.

Germany has long been a proponent of the active aging concept, formally integrating elderly education into its lifelong learning system and viewing older adults as holders of educational rights. The state-led approach, with strong municipal support, has fostered robust infrastructure. Platforms like SONIA integrate health management tools with personalized learning resources, achieving high user satisfaction rates (89%) by addressing holistic well-being (Chen, 2024). Germany also emphasizes the professionalization of trainers through certification programs for aged learning facilitators.

South Korea stands out for its innovative use of technology to promote digital inclusion. Facing rapid aging, South Korea has invested heavily in technological solutions. The LiKu teaching robot, for instance, allows for customized learning content delivery via an app and uses feedback mechanisms to optimize teaching strategies. This has significantly improved older adults' performance in ICT proficiency tests and includes practical modules on topics like digital fraud

prevention (Hori et al., 2018). This government-led model, involving close collaboration with technology enterprises, demonstrates a high-tech pathway to empowerment.

Japan, with the world's most aged population, has thoroughly integrated elderly education into its community fabric and national lifelong learning system. Universities like Waseda and Rikkyo collaborate to establish Second Life Colleges, which provide learning opportunities that enable older adults to re-engage socially and explore new vocations post-retirement (Jun & Kim, 2024). Research underscores the positive outcomes of this approach, indicating that higher education levels among older Japanese adults are inversely correlated with functional disability risks, mediated significantly through increased community participation (Nurrika et al., 2019).

4. Theoretical Foundations

The transformation from recreation to empowerment is underpinned by several key theoretical frameworks

1. Empowerment Theory This theory posits that empowerment is a process of enhancing individuals' capacity to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes (Zimmerman, 2000). In the context of elderly education, this translates to curricula designed to build critical skills (digital, health, financial), foster self-efficacy, and enable meaningful social participation, moving beyond passive reception of knowledge or entertainment.

2. Active Ageing Framework (WHO, 2002) This policy framework provides a holistic view, identifying health, participation, and security as key determinants of well-being in old age. Empowerment-oriented education directly serves the participation pillar by equipping older adults with the tools to remain actively involved in social, economic, cultural, and civic affairs.

3. Freire's Critical Pedagogy Paulo Freire's (1970) work, though originally focused on literacy and liberation in the Global South, offers a powerful lens for elderly education. It critiques the banking model of education (where knowledge is deposited into passive learners) and advocates for a problem-posing education that encourages critical thinking, dialogue, and praxis (reflection and action upon the world to transform it). Applying this to elderly education means designing learning that is dialogic, relevant to learners' lives (e.g., managing health, using digital services), and empowers them to act as agents of change in their own communities.

Main Discussion

1. The Logic of Transformation Integrating Concepts and Practices

The shift from recreation to empowerment is not merely a change in curriculum but a fundamental rethinking of the role of education in later life. This transformation can be conceptualized as a multi-stage process (see Figure 1), moving from initial engagement through recreational activities, to the acquisition of practical skills that build confidence and capability,

and ultimately toward full empowerment characterized by active social participation, continued learning, and self-realization.

Recreation remains a valuable entry point, fostering initial interest and providing social benefits. However, the empowering model builds upon this foundation by introducing purposeful learning that addresses the real-world challenges and opportunities faced by older adults in the 21st century, such as digital exclusion, health management, and economic vulnerability.

2. Curriculum Innovation and Teacher Development

The heart of the transformation lies in curriculum redesign. While traditional courses like painting remain popular, their teaching methodology is being reconceived. A painting class, for instance, can evolve from purely technical replication to a project-based learning experience where students organize exhibitions, sell artwork online, or teach skills in their communities, thereby integrating elements of entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and social service.

The demand for new courses is evident. As noted, over 50% of China's senior universities now offer IT courses, and 40% offer health management programs (Zhang, 2025). However, a critical challenge is the severe shortage of professionally trained faculty. Currently, 91.27% of teachers in this sector are part-time, often lacking specific training in geragogy (the teaching of older adults) and the principles of empowerment-oriented education (Zhang, 2025). Addressing this requires dedicated teacher development programs, certifications for aged learning facilitators (as in Germany), and incentives to attract full-time, specialized professionals.

3. Digitalization and Technological Empowerment

Technology acts as a crucial amplifier in the empowerment process. Digital literacy is no longer a luxury but a essential skill for accessing services, maintaining social connections, and safeguarding against risks (e.g., online fraud). China has made significant strides, with 75% coverage of digital infrastructure at the provincial level. However, stark regional disparities persist, with coverage in lower-tier cities and rural areas falling below 30% (Chen, 2024).

International models offer valuable lessons. South Korea's use of teaching robots and Germany's integrated digital platforms like SONIA show how technology can be leveraged for personalized, accessible learning. For China, scaling these innovations beyond urban centers is imperative. This includes developing elderly-friendly AI tools, VRAR applications for immersive learning, and ensuring physical and digital accessibility—currently, only 46.2% of facilities have adequate accessibility features (Zhang, 2025).

4. Comparative Insights and Adaptive Strategies

A comparative analysis of international models and China's approach reveals both convergent trends and distinct challenges (see Table 1). Globally, there is a shared recognition

of the need to move beyond recreation toward capability-building. Governments are increasingly treating elderly education as a strategic tool for managing demographic change.

Table 1 Comparative Overview of Elderly Education Models

Dimension	China	UK	Germany	South Korea
Curriculum Focus	Arts, hobbies, ICT (50%), health management (40%)	ICT training (Silver Surfer), lifelong learning	Health-linked ICT training (SONIA platform)	ICT + life skills (LiKu robot), anti-fraud education
Governance Model	Gov.-funded, uneven regional development	Gov. guidance + enterprise + community	State-led with strong municipal role	Gov.-led + tech enterprise partnerships
Digital Infrastructure	75% provincial coverage, <30% in lower tiers	Community ICT labs, accessible devices	Nationwide aged-friendly digital platform	Robot-assisted classrooms in urban centers
Teacher Development	91% part-time; limited professional training	Continuous professional development, volunteer tutors	Certification for aged learning facilitators	Specialized training for “Old Trainers” over 55
Evaluation Methods	Participation and product-based evaluation	Competency-based, ICT proficiency	Health + learning outcome integration	Digital literacy tests and project outcomes

Note. Data compiled from national statistics, institutional reports, and scholarly sources (Chen, 2024; Hori et al., 2018; Zhang, 2025).

International Experiences, Examples, and Common Challenges

International experiences provide valuable insights for understanding the transformation of elderly education from recreation to empowerment. For instance, Peking University's Senior University has recently expanded its curriculum beyond traditional courses such as calligraphy and dance to include “smartphone applications” and “health management and psychological adjustment.” These programs have significantly improved digital participation and health awareness among elderly learners (Li, 2022). Similarly, several universities in Shaanxi Province have collaborated with local communities to implement the “Elderly Digital Literacy Promotion Project,” where university student volunteers provide

hands-on guidance in using digital devices. This initiative not only enhances intergenerational interaction but also promotes social integration among older adults (Huang, 2021).

Beyond China, the United Kingdom's "University of the Third Age (U3A)" model emphasizes "self-help and mutual help," encouraging elderly learners to share personal experiences and engage in lifelong learning through community networks (Formosa, 2019). Germany's SONIA platform promotes elderly participation in society through digital courses and health-related interventions. Unlike the offline classroom model in China, the German approach features higher digital coverage and strong professionalization of teaching staff (Schmidt, 2020). South Korea, on the other hand, has integrated smart robots and remote learning platforms into elderly education, showcasing the potential of technology-driven learning in strengthening digital literacy and social connectedness (Kim & Lee, 2022).

Despite these positive examples, common challenges across nations remain evident. Uneven resource allocation continues to affect accessibility and quality, as economic disparities shape how elderly learners engage with educational opportunities (Chen, 2024). Curriculum-instruction misalignment is another problem, since many programs still rely on outdated pedagogical methods unsuited to the cognitive styles and practical needs of older adults (Zhang, 2019). Additionally, there are persistent faculty shortages, with a global lack of professionally trained geragogues and limited incentives for teacher professionalization (Xie, 2024).

China's model, while demonstrating strong policy impetus and rapid growth in empowerment-oriented content, faces unique challenges due to its scale and regional diversity. Its government-heavy funding model requires complementary multi-stakeholder collaboration, similar to the UK's community and NGO-based partnerships. Furthermore, deeper technological integration, as seen in South Korea, would help bridge the digital divide. Lessons can also be drawn from Japan's community-embedded approach, which fosters stronger social integration, and from Germany's systematic professionalization of teaching staff, which ensures sustainable quality in elderly education delivery (Schmidt, 2020; Xie, 2024).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the transformation in Chinese elderly education, it is subject to several limitations that also point toward fruitful avenues for future research.

First, this research is primarily conceptual and qualitative, based on literature synthesis and policy analysis. There is a pronounced lack of longitudinal and quantitative data tracking the long-term outcomes of empowerment-oriented programs. Future research should employ rigorous empirical methods to measure the impact of these educational interventions on older

adults' mental health, digital literacy competencies, social network size, and overall quality of life over time.

Second, the psychological and social mechanisms through which empowerment education achieves its effects are underexplored. Quantitative studies are needed to isolate the impact of specific course types (e.g., digital skills vs. health management) on various empowerment indicators and to understand the mediating role of factors like self-efficacy and social capital.

Third, the issue of scalability and rural-urban disparity requires dedicated attention. Research should focus on developing and evaluating low-cost, high-impact models of empowerment education suitable for rural and underdeveloped regions, where the need is often greatest but resources are most scarce. Exploring the potential of mobile platforms and community-based peer learning could be particularly valuable.

Finally, there is a need for critical adaptation of international models. Future work should not merely transfer models but investigate how concepts like the UK's multi-stakeholder approach or Germany's professional certification can be effectively localized within China's unique socio-cultural and institutional context.

Conclusion

The transformation of elderly education in Chinese universities from a recreation-oriented model to an empowerment-oriented paradigm represents a critical and necessary evolution. It is a response to the profound challenges and opportunities presented by population aging, digital transformation, and the changing aspirations of older adults themselves. This shift redefines learning in later life from a leisure pastime to a vital tool for fostering social inclusion, maintaining health and autonomy, and enabling meaningful participation in a rapidly changing society.

This analysis has highlighted that while China has made significant progress-evidenced by policy support, curriculum innovation, and expanding digital infrastructure-significant challenges remain. The shortage of professional faculty, stark regional inequalities, and the need for more age-appropriate teaching methodologies and technologies are major hurdles to overcome.

The international landscape offers a rich repository of strategies for addressing these challenges. The UK's collaborative governance, Germany's integrated and professionalized system, South Korea's technological innovation, and Japan's community-focused approach all provide valuable lessons. For China, the path forward lies in synthesizing these insights into a uniquely Chinese model that leverages its policy strength and technological capacity while aggressively addressing issues of equity and teacher quality.

Ultimately, empowering elderly education is more than an educational reform; it is an investment in social resilience and a commitment to building an inclusive society for all ages.

By enabling older adults to remain active, healthy, and engaged contributors, China can not only improve the well-being of its massive aging population but also unlock a vast reservoir of experience and potential that will benefit society as a whole.

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