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Research on the change of China's elderly service policies—An empirical analysis based on 117 policy texts

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Abstract: Population aging has emerged as a significant global concern. This article analyzes 117 policy texts in China since the reform and opening-up, borrowing Rothwell and Zegveld's classic policy instrument theory to create a two-dimensional analysis framework. The X-dimension of the framework represents the three fundamental policy tools of supply, environment, and demand, while the Y-dimension consists of internal elements such as service subjects, service targets, service content and methods, and guarantee measures. Using this framework, the elderly service policies are categorized into three stages: the budding stage, the developing stage, and the perfecting stage. The study finds that China's elderly service policies are primarily driven by environment-type tools, with supply-type and demand-type tools serving as secondary tools. The policy system is structurally imbalanced as a result. Over the long term, the trend is towards an increasing number of issuing subjects for Chinese elderly service policies. Moreover, the number of policies jointly issued by different departments is gradually increasing, and the issuing subjects are becoming increasingly diverse. The positioning of responsibilities among government, market, society, and family has been optimized, and the role of the government is becoming more rationalized.

Keywords: policy instruments; elderly care service; government functions; policy texts

1. Introduction

Population aging is becoming an increasingly pressing issue globally, with the physical and mental health of the elderly being a major concern [1]. The decline in global birth rates and the trend towards aging societies have profound implications for economic and social development worldwide [2]. The challenges posed by an aging population are significant, affecting both developed and developing countries [3]. In China, the aging problem is particularly acute, with a persistently low fertility rate and increasing life expectancy contributing to a rapid increase in the proportion of elderly citizens since entering an aging society in 2000. Establishing an effective elderly service system is an urgent and critical task for the Chinese government [4]. Such a system should be based on active aging strategies that involve the joint contributions of citizens and society [5]. As the responsible body for aging, the government should take the lead in addressing this issue [6].

Under the pressing challenge of population aging, building an efficient and sustainable elderly care system has become a critical issue in China's social policy. Since the beginning of the reform and opening-up period, China's elderly care policies have undergone systematic evolution, transitioning from their nascent stage to development and eventually reaching a phase of refinement. The development of China's elderly care policies can be divided into three major phases: The first phase (1978–2001) is the nascent stage, starting with the reform and opening-up in 1978.

During this period, the government began to address aging issues by establishing foundational elderly welfare systems through environmental-type policy tools. For example, the enactment of the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly law in 1996 marked the initial formation of a national elderly care policy framework. The second phase (2002–2011) is the development stage, characterized by the shift towards marketization and socialization of elderly care policies, following the introduction of the “people-oriented” concept at the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2002. This phase emphasized the establishment of a tiered system with “home-based care as the foundation, community services as the support, and institutional care as the supplement.” The third phase (2012 to the present) is the refinement stage, marked by the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, which proposed the policy of “actively addressing population aging”. This period has seen the rapid development of elderly care services with innovative concepts such as “integrated medical and elderly care” and “smart elderly care”, aiming to enhance the quality and sustainability of the elderly care system through coordinated policy tools.

This paper has collected highly relevant policy texts on elderly services from authoritative websites, including Beijing University’s Faber website, the Central People’s Government website, and official websites of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Ministry of Social Security, Ministry of Finance, and China Association of the Aging. The selection criteria were as follows: Firstly, only the elderly service policy at the central level was included, while the policy at the provincial level and below was excluded. Secondly, policy content must be specifically related to elderly services, rather than general policies related to elderly services. Thirdly, the policy types include opinions, notices, bulletins, and decisions, while speeches, approvals, and instructions were excluded. Using these criteria, 117 elderly service policy texts from 1979 to 2021 were obtained. Through analyzing the evolution of elderly service policies since the reform and opening up, this paper aims to answer the following questions: How has the Chinese government used elderly service policy tools at different stages within the whole policy system? What is the development logic of the elderly service policy systems? What are the trends in policy development? By interpreting the contents of these policy texts, this paper intends to analyze the development stages and changing characteristics of China’s elderly service policies, providing references for optimizing the elderly service policy systems.

2. Literature review

This paper has referenced a large number of domestic and international literature to systematically review the research status, hotspots, and trends of elderly service policies. The research found that current studies on elderly service policies are mainly contextualized and based on demographic characteristics, sociocultural factors, governmental organization, and political environment [7,8] and exhibit characteristics such as systemic and continuity. Some studies suggest that by 2060, there will be one retiree for every working staff member. Although the demographic trends and their two main causes (low fertility and increasing life expectancy) are clear, not enough is known about the consequences and effects of population aging or its control through

public policies. Understanding the aging process and revealing the impact of different cultures, histories, and policies is an important task for researchers in anthropology, demography, economics, epidemiology, gerontology, history, and sociology, so that the challenges of population aging can be turned into opportunities [9].

The demand for elderly care services has increased rapidly in the public sphere since the Second World War [10]. State policies on elderly care services have changed significantly in terms of quantity, content, orientation, and focus. Some scholars have studied aging policies at the economic level and discussed their potential impact on national public health policies [11,12]. An aging population often implies lower labor force participation and savings rates, which raises concerns about slower future economic growth. Contemporary researchers and policymakers are particularly concerned about measures aimed at encouraging older people to work longer. Attempts to raise the effective retirement age are incorporated into economic policies focused on population aging, while demand-side barriers (such as age discrimination) are taken into account [13]. Governmental behavioral responses (including greater female labor force participation) and policy reforms (including raising the statutory retirement age) can mitigate the economic consequences of population aging [14]. Meanwhile, one of the major policy trends in recent decades has been socialized elderly care [15,16], and domestic public long-term care policies are actually directing social and corporate provision of services to different groups [17–19].

Globally, elderly care systems vary significantly due to differences in social and economic development, cultural backgrounds, and policy orientations. Developed countries, such as those in Northern Europe, often feature highly socialized and universally covered elderly care systems. For example, Sweden has implemented a comprehensive publicly funded elderly care system. This system, driven by government leadership, community support, and professional institutions, provides multi-level and multi-dimensional elderly care services to meet the individual needs of the elderly [20]. In contrast, the United States leans towards a market-oriented approach. Its long-term care services rely on private institutions for nursing insurance and commercial services.

However, it also provides basic security for low-income elderly individuals through programs like “Medicare” and “Medicaid” [21,22]. As East Asian countries facing similar severe population aging issues, Japan and South Korea have each developed unique elderly care systems, resulting in service models that share similarities with China while also exhibiting significant differences. Japan’s “Long-Term Care Insurance System”, implemented since 2000, serves as a core pillar of its elderly care system. This system, funded jointly by the government, employers, and individuals, provides comprehensive support for services ranging from home care to institutional care [23]. This system emphasizes universality and equity in service provision, categorizes elderly care needs, and implements graded services to provide efficient and personalized care for elderly individuals at different levels [24]. Additionally, Japan places a strong emphasis on community-based care and the integration of healthcare and elderly care services. Through specialized caregiver training and the application of information technology, Japan has significantly improved the quality and efficiency of its services [25].

Unlike Japan, South Korea's approach to elderly care emphasizes family involvement, alongside a growing role for public services. In 2008, South Korea implemented a 'Long-term Care Insurance System' to alleviate the financial strain on families caring for the elderly. While South Korea's nursing services are not as extensive as Japan's, its efforts to enhance home care support and develop community services offer valuable lessons for coping with an aging population [26]. Additionally, South Korea has been increasingly focusing on smart elderly care services, utilizing technology like the Internet of Things and artificial intelligence to make care more accessible and efficient, thereby supporting the independent living of seniors [27].

Unlike in Nordic countries with their well-established social welfare systems and the United States with its mature market-driven approach, China's elderly care service system is still evolving. It struggles to meet the rapidly increasing needs of its aging population, particularly in terms of policy tools that cater to demand, the extent of service provision, and the quality of care available. Despite recent improvements through innovative policies like integrating medical care with elderly care and promoting smart elderly care [28], China still lags behind developed countries in efficient resource allocation, equitable service distribution between urban and rural areas, and collaborative governance involving multiple stakeholders. These comparisons offer valuable insights for this study, highlighting the need for China to tailor its elderly care policies to its unique national context while learning from international best practices to build a more comprehensive and sustainable care system.

Although populations worldwide are aging rapidly, there is little evidence that increased longevity is accompanied by increased physical health. There is therefore an urgent need for coherent and focused public health policy responses across multiple sectors and stakeholders. Prospective studies have shown that social participation is positively associated with physical and mental health [29,30]. Social participation plays a more important role in promoting the health status of older adults in urban areas compared to rural areas. To improve the health of older adults in China and promote healthy aging, the government should not only improve access to effective health services but also encourage older adults to become more socially engaged [31]. A large number of scholars have systematically studied "healthy aging" policies, including support for spousal caregivers [32], informal caregivers (especially women) [33], the phenomenon of high levels of "structural and functional solidarity" in Chinese grandparent-grandchild relationships [34], ethical and individualized issues of caregiving between caregivers and care recipients [35–37], intergenerational and social class resource inequalities [38], and inequalities between urban and rural public health policies [39,40], which are increasing [41,42], among others. As "healthy aging" becomes a fundamental tenet of current aging policy in China, it is critical that policymakers understand how best to encourage, support, and sustain positive health-related behaviors and health status among the growing number of older adults [43]. However, given the policy-induced further growth in the number of elderly care facilities, weak regulatory frameworks, and a lack of enforcement capacity, Chinese policymakers face increasing challenges in regulating the rapidly growing elderly care sector [44].

From the perspective of elderly service policy evolution, Chinese scholars have engaged in extensive discussions. One approach has been to divide the different stages of social development in order to clarify the government’s responsibility. For instance, Liu has classified the development of elderly services in China into three stages: the family-oriented stage, the social welfare socialization stage, and the government responsibility highlighting stage, based on the main body of elderly service provision [45]. Another approach, as analyzed by Zhu, is to explore the market transformation of elderly services since 1986, from the initial stage of “government-run” to the later “marketization and industrialization of elderly services”. This evolution reflects the characteristics of China’s economic and social transition period [46]. From the perspective of welfare pluralism, Shi and Luo discuss how the role of the state has undergone a process of development from expansion to contraction, weakening to adjustment, and strengthening [47]. In terms of the target group of elderly service policy, Lin and Zhu analyze the process of expanding the targeting of China’s social elderly service system from a specific group of people with welfare needs to the general elderly population [48]. Additionally, Han proposes that the policy object has gradually expanded, the number of elderly service items has increased, the role of the community-based home care approach has been highlighted, more market-based and mobilization-based policy tools have been used, and more attention has been paid to policy effects and the improvement of elderly service quality [49].

Table 1. Differences between previous literature and this research.

Research contents	Previous research	This research
Focus on a single policy tool (supply, environment, or demand type)	✓	
Systematically analyze the evolution process and synergy of policy tools		✓
It involves the interaction between policy tools and service subjects, service content and safeguard measures.	✓	✓
Focus on the leading role of environmental policy tools.	✓	
Investigate the synergy of supply-based, environmental-based and demand-based policy tools.		✓
Analyze the influence of policy tools on the elderly care service quality and system optimization.		✓
It involves the dynamic changes and impacts of multi-stage policy tools.		✓

The research of the above scholars provides useful references, opening up ideas for this paper’s study on the systematic changes in elderly care policies from different perspectives. However, most of the research focuses on the adjustment of the national role, the expansion of service recipients, and the changes in elderly care methods. There is less content that studies the changes in the elderly care policy system since the reform and opening up from a systematic thinking perspective, and there is also limited discussion on the guiding ideology throughout and its manifestation in different periods. Therefore, this study will focus on the systematic changes in China’s elderly care service policy tools, starting with the evolution and synergy of the three types of policy tools: supply-type, environment-type, and demand-type, conducting an

in-depth analysis of their dynamic changes and comprehensive effectiveness at different stages. Compared to previous studies that focused on single tools or specific aspects, this study emphasizes the synergy between policy tools and their role in optimizing the elderly care service system. **Table 1** summarizes the main differences between previous literature and this study, highlighting the unique contributions of this study in multi-tool collaborative analysis, dynamic evolution research, and elderly care service system optimization.

3. Theoretical framework

Policy instruments refer to the various methods, techniques, and strategies used by the government to achieve policy goals and desired outcomes. They are the core elements of government governance. Since the 1980s, policy instruments have increasingly become a focal topic in Western public management and policy science research. In the context of elderly services, policy instruments can be defined as “the ways, methods, and means adopted by the government to actively respond to the challenges of population aging and to achieve the goal of effective provision of various elderly services”. As the main body of policy, the government should coordinate the relationship between temporal and spatial levels and make reasonable use of elderly service policy tools to create policy synergy and achieve desired policy outcomes [50].

3.1. Theoretical framework

3.1.1. X-dimension: Basic policy tools dimension

According to the classical classification by Rothwell and Zegveld, the X-dimension of the two-dimensional analysis framework for elderly service policy is composed of three basic policy tools: supply, environment, and demand. Supply-type policy tools involve the continuous promotion of elderly services’ upgrading and sustainable development by providing talent, capital, information, technology, and other factors to elderly services. This is achieved through means such as talent training, capital investment, technology investment, facility investment, and information services. Environment-type policy tools refer to the macro environment in which the government influences the development of elderly services through financial taxation, laws and regulations, and development planning. The government uses tools such as tax incentives, technical support, land policies, administrative measures, and other economic policies to shape the environment and facilitate the growth of elderly services. Demand-type policy tools refer to the government’s measures to reduce the uncertainty of the elderly service market, stimulate the prosperity of the elderly service market, or create a new market. This is achieved through measures such as elderly service procurement, service outsourcing, market shaping, and international exchange, among others. The policy instrument theory suggests that a balanced policy instrument content is necessary for policies to be most effective.

3.1.2. Y-dimension: Dimension of the elderly care service system

In a certain sense, a single dimension of basic policy tools cannot fully describe all the characteristics of elderly service policies, and a multidimensional analysis must be made from the internal laws and characteristics of elderly services [51]. As “accelerating the establishment of a social elderly service system” is an important

strategy for China to actively cope with aging, all elderly service policies should serve to achieve this goal [52]. From the perspective of system theory, the social elderly service system is a systematic existence that meets the various service demands of the elderly. This service system includes many internal elements such as service subjects and targets, service contents and methods, and guarantee measures that echo and cooperate with each other. In this paper, the above elements of the elderly service system are simplified into the Y-dimension of the two-dimensional analysis framework of the elderly service policy (as **Figure 1**).

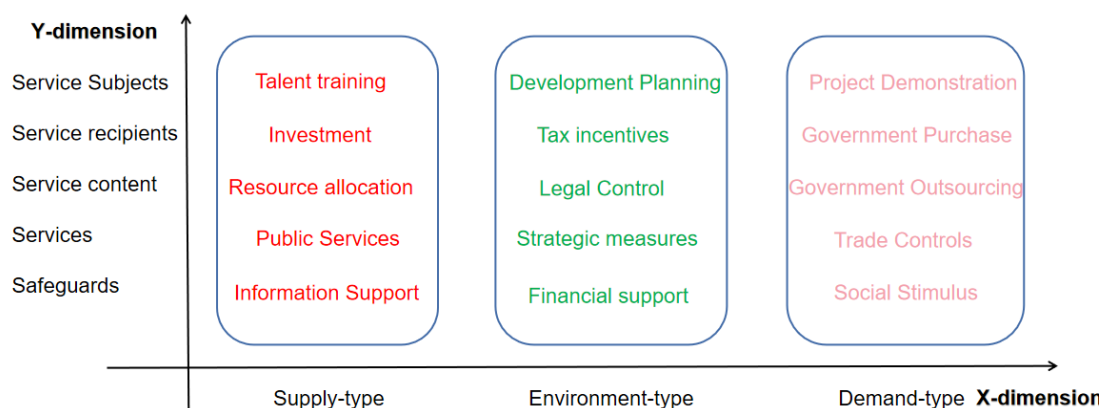


Figure 1. Two-dimensional analysis framework of Chinese elderly service policies.

3.2. Research hypotheses

As China’s population aging accelerates, its elderly care policy system has evolved from an initial stage dominated by a single policy tool to a more diversified governance model. However, there is still a lack of systematic research and empirical analysis on how different policy tools specifically function and collaborate within the elderly care system. Although existing literature has revealed the functions and characteristics of supply-type, environment-type, and demand-type policy tools, there is still a lack of in-depth exploration of the interactive relationships, synergy, and comprehensive impact on service quality and system optimization of these three types of policy tools in the elderly care policy system.

Therefore, based on the characteristics of the development and evolution of China’s elderly care policy tools, this study proposes the following hypotheses: The strategic combination and joint effort of supply-type, environment-type, and demand-type policy tools can significantly enhance the overall performance of the elderly care system and have a positive impact on service quality and collaborative effectiveness.

4. Systematic analysis of elderly service policy tools in different periods

During the more than 40 years since the beginning of China’s reform and opening up, the policy tools for elderly service have undergone significant changes. The use of supply-type, demand-type, and environment-type policy tools in the X-dimension has varied greatly across different periods, resulting in changes in the service subjects and targets, service contents and modes, and safeguards in the Y-dimension. Reviewing

the evolution of China’s elderly service policy system from the reform and opening-up period to the present, it can be divided into three stages based on the different contents of elderly service policies: the budding, developing, and perfecting stages. Analyzing the use of the three types of policy tools in each stage can help to better understand the historical changes in China’s elderly service policy system.

4.1. 1978–2001: The budding period of the elderly service policy system—Dominance of environment-type policy

In 1982, China participated in the World Assembly on Aging for the first time and presented a speech on the current state of aging in the country. The conference mainly focused on discussing the global aging population, the factors leading to population aging, and the impact of population aging on society and the economy. The consensus of the conference was that aging is not solely a problem of developed countries, and that the scale and speed of population aging in developing countries will surpass that of developed countries in the future. In the government work report in 1989, it was proposed for the first time that “population aging is becoming an important issue in Chinese society, and all regions and departments should be concerned about it”. The issue of aging was once again included in the work agenda, and China began issuing a series of policy documents related to elderly care services. During this budding stage, the dominant policy tool was environment-type policy, and the focus was on developing laws, regulations, and economic policies related to elderly care (as in **Table 2**).

Table 2. Introduction of policy documents for elderly services at the budding stage.

Year	File name	Document content	Type of tool
1994	China’s Seven-Year Development Programme for the Aging Work (1994–2000)	The outline highlights the issue of China’s rapidly aging population, which will lead to various problems and impacts on society. To address this challenge, the outline suggests that developing productive forces should be the fundamental countermeasure. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of combining family and social old-age care and actively establishing and improving the social old-age security system. To support the elderly, it proposes increasing welfare facilities and expanding the scope of socialized services.	Environment-type
1996	Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly	To safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of the elderly, develop the elderly care industry, and promote the virtues of respecting, supporting, and assisting the elderly in the Chinese nation.	Environment-type
2000	Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Strengthening the Work of the Elderly	Starting from the basic national conditions of the primary stage of socialism in China, efforts should be made to establish and improve elderly social security systems and mutual aid systems with Chinese characteristics. This includes establishing a mechanism for elderly care based on family care, supported by community services, and supplemented by social care.	Environment-type
2001	The State Council on Issuing the Outline of the “Tenth Five-Year” Plan for the Development of China’s Aging Work (2001–2005)	Accelerating the pace of development in the elderly care industry, focusing on addressing prominent issues in its development, and implementing the principles of “providing support for the elderly in terms of food, clothing, medical care, education, work, and entertainment.” This will push the elderly care industry into a new stage of comprehensive development.	Environment-type

In 1996, China introduced and implemented the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of the Elderly for the first time. This law primarily focused on two aspects of elderly services. The first aspect was family support and maintenance, which provided specific provisions on the main forms of elderly care and the concept and

obligations of supporters. The second aspect was social security, which specified the functions of the national old-age insurance system, the distribution and sources of old-age pensions, the main bodies of support for the “three noes” elderly in cities and the “five-guarantee households” in rural areas, and the government’s old-age relief and support agreements [53]. In 2001, China issued its first outline for the development of the aging process, the State Council’s “Tenth Five-Year Plan for the Development of China’s Aging Program” (hereinafter referred to as the “Outline”). The Outline was the first systematic and scientific formulation of the aging issue in China and made active planning and deployment to cope with aging. It was also an early exploration of the social elderly service system at the national level.

Prior to 2001, China did not have a well-established elderly service policy system. Environment-type policy tools had always appeared in the policy alone without demand-type and supply-type policies. Environment-type policy tools showed independent characteristics and dominated the content of the policy for a long time. However, in 1999, China officially entered into an aging society with the number of elderly people reaching about 10%. This serious situation of aging made elderly service a priority [54], and a series of policies to strengthen the protection of the elderly and promote the development of elderly services began to be introduced.

4.2. 2002–2011: The period of development in the elderly service policy system—The emergence of supply-type and demand-type policies

The Third Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee proposed to “adhere to the people-oriented approach, establish a comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable development concept, and promote the comprehensive development of the economy, society, and people”. The guiding ideology of “people-oriented” set the tone for the development of policies in the social field. During this period, the issue of elderly care began to be taken seriously as an important social issue, and the term ‘elderly care’ became a separate and exclusive concept that began to be used. On 9 February 2006, the Committee on Aging and 11 other departments jointly issued the “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Elderly Service Industry” (hereinafter referred to as “Opinions”). For the first time, the “Opinions” clearly put forward the concept of “elderly service industry”, highlighting its importance and ways to realize it. It also requested the establishment of a “service system based on home care, community service, and institutional care”.

The term “elderly service industry” marks the beginning of the shift from social welfare to a modern service industry that provides life care and nursing services to meet the special living and spiritual needs of the elderly. This industry contains the connotation of building an independent, complete, scientific, and healthy industry system [55]. The term “service system” implies that elderly service is a whole containing different parts, with a certain structure, order, and interconnection. The system reflects the subdivision of categories and the increase of complexity and also implies the improvement of coordination and wholeness.

The opinions listed home care, community service, and institutional care as the three components of the elderly service systems, which mark the inclusion of home care services on the national agenda. The 17th Party Congress began to focus on

4.3. 2012 to present: The period of improvement in the elderly care service policy system—The three policy tools present a “parallel” feature

In the report of the 18th Party Congress, it was clearly proposed to “actively respond to the aging of the population and vigorously develop the cause of aging services and industries”. The words “actively” and “vigorously” reflect the seriousness of China’s senior care problem and indicate the attitude and determination of the new government to deal with aging. This is a strategic plan made by the Party Central Committee in response to the increasingly serious situation of population aging. It is also a major move by the Chinese government to elevate elderly services from a family matter to a national policy. Under the guidance of this guiding ideology and development idea, China’s social elderly service has entered a stage of comprehensive and accelerated development. This includes policies and regulations on institutional management, evaluation systems, talent training, social development, financial support, medical and nursing integration, and intelligent elderly care. These documents provide good policy conditions, a social environment, and intellectual support for the development of the elderly service systems. They also optimize the structure and improve the quality from within to strengthen its accessibility, usefulness, timeliness, and service quality in response to aging.

“Several Opinions of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of the Elderly Service Industry,” “Several Opinions of the State Council on Promoting the Development of the Health Service Industry,” and “Notice of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Launching the Pilot Reform Work of Publicly-run Elderly Institutions” are all intended to accelerate the development of social elderly services. These policies aim to give full play to the decisive role of the market in resource allocation, explore various ways of supplying elderly services such as public construction and private ownership, and government purchase of elderly services, gradually making the social forces become the main body of the development of the elderly service industry. In 2014, relevant government departments also issued the “Notice on the Government’s Purchase of Elderly Services,” “Guidance on the Use of Welfare Lottery Funds by Civil Affairs Departments to Purchase Services from Social Forces,” and “Announcement on Encouraging Foreign Investors to Set Up For-Profit Senior Care Institutions in China to Engage in Elderly Services”. In 2015, the “Opinions on the Implementation of Encouraging Private Capital to Participate in the Development of the Elderly Service Industry” was issued to continue to support and encourage private and foreign capital to enter the field of elderly services. In 2016, “Opinions on Fully Liberalizing the Elderly Service Market to Improve the Quality of Elderly Services” and “Notice on Supporting the Integration and Renovation of Idle Social Resources to Develop Elderly Services” were issued, which aimed to increase the total supply of elderly services and improve their quality. These policies mainly focus on the innovation of the supply mode of elderly services and the improvement of their quality as a further extension of the systematization and socialization of elderly services. In February 2017, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and other departments jointly issued the Notice on Accelerating the Reform of the Administration of elderly services, which aimed to further mobilize social forces to participate in the development of elderly

services. In early 2018, “fully liberalizing the elderly service market” was explicitly listed as one of the key tasks by the Ministry of Civil Affairs for that year.

During this period, the number of supply-type policies for elderly services increased significantly, and the use of environment-type, supply-type, and demand-type policy instruments showed a “parallel” feature (as **Table 3** and **Figure 3**), as the government became more proactive and involved in elderly services due to the increasingly obvious aging of China. The number of supply-type policy instruments has been on the rise, while the proportion of environment-type policy instruments has been decreasing. Supply-type and environment-type instruments show an intertwined state.

Table 3. Statistics on the distribution of the number of the three policy instruments since the 18th congress.

year	demand-type	supply-type	environment-type	aggregate
2012	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	3 (100%)	3 (100%)
2013	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	11 (100%)	11 (100%)
2014	2 (16.67%)	2 (16.67%)	8 (66.67%)	12 (100%)
2015	1 (12.50%)	2 (25.00%)	5 (62.50%)	8 (100%)
2016	1 (12.50%)	4 (50.00%)	3 (37.50%)	8 (100%)
2017	1 (12.50%)	2 (25.00%)	5 (62.50%)	8 (100%)
2018	0 (0.00%)	4 (57.14%)	3 (42.86%)	7 (100%)
2019	0 (0.00%)	6 (31.58%)	13 (68.42%)	19 (100%)
2020	1 (5.00%)	2 (10.00%)	17 (85.00%)	20 (100%)
2021	1 (8.33%)	3 (25.00%)	8 (66.67%)	12 (100%)
Total	7 (6.48%)	25 (23.15%)	76 (70.37%)	108 (100%)

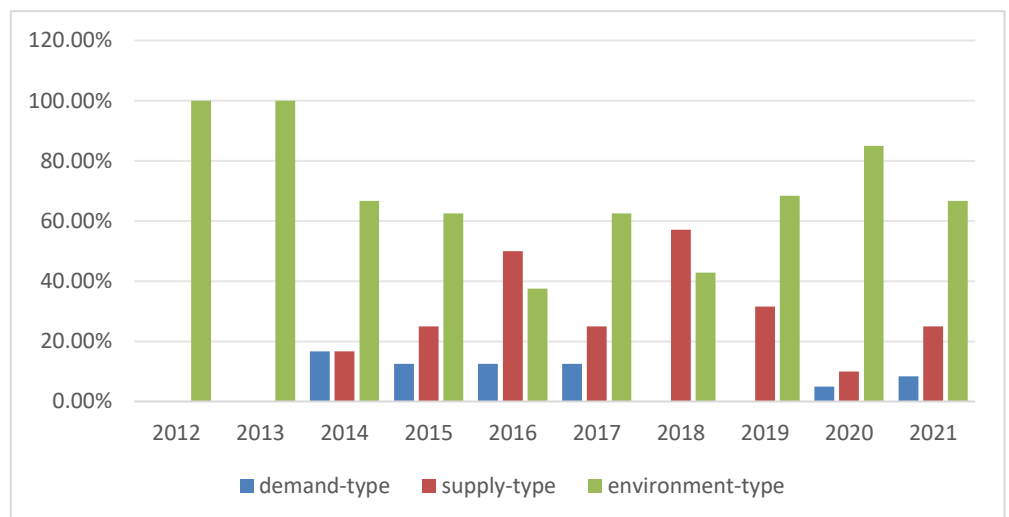


Figure 3. Changes in the number and type of instruments of the three types of elderly services policies since the 18th congress.

Since then, the supply-type policies for elderly care services have significantly increased, and the use of environment-type, supply-type, and demand-type policy tools shows a “parallel” pattern [57]. As China’s aging population has become increasingly

prominent, elderly care services have gradually emerged as a critical social issue. The government has taken a more proactive approach to intervene in elderly care services, leading to a significant rise in the use of supply-type policy tools. Meanwhile, although the number of environment-type policy tools has continued to grow, their proportion has decreased, resulting in a state where supply-type and environment-type tools are intertwined. Subsequently, both supply-type and demand-type policies have maintained a high frequency of usage. Demand-type policy tools have made steady progress during this period, but their usage frequency remains far lower than that of supply-type and environment-type tools.

Overall, during this period, the government's approach to formulating elderly care policies has become more coherent, with notable improvements in both the quantity and content of policies. The focus has primarily been on innovating elderly care service delivery methods and improving the quality of elderly care services, representing a further extension of the systematization and socialization of the elderly care service system.

5. Research finding

Since the reform and opening up, the structure of China's elderly service policy system has been optimized, evolving from a monolithic environment-type instrument to a combination of environment-type, supply-type, and demand-type policy instruments. Specifically, the policy tools for elderly services are mainly supply-type tools and environment-type tools, supplemented by demand-type tools. Among the three policy tools, environment-type policy tools are used most frequently and have been dominant. They provide a favorable environment for elderly services and play an important role in building a framework for the development of a social elderly service system. The supply-type policy tool is a policy support and guidance to encourage market players and social organizations to provide quality elderly care services. It is used less frequently than environment-type policy tools, but it is an important tool to promote the development of the elderly service industry [58]. Demand-type policy tools appear the least frequently and still need to be strengthened in terms of government purchase of elderly services and promotion of international exchange of elderly services. The specific study findings are as follows:

5.1. Structural imbalance in the elderly service policy systems

The elderly service policy system has an over-reliance on environmental policy tools, with a significant lack of demand-type policy tools. Statistical data reveals that environmental policy tools constitute almost 77% of the basic policy tools utilized in elderly service policy texts, while demand-type policy tools only account for 6% (as shown in **Figure 4**). This results in a structural imbalance, with environmental policy tools being used nearly 13 times more frequently than demand-type policy tools. There are several reasons for the excessive use of environment-type policy tools. Firstly, dictated by the urgency of the provision of elderly services. At present, China's aging phenomenon is serious; in order to maximize the enthusiasm of all parties to provide elderly care services, the policy formulation must be as flexible as possible. Environment-type policies are perceived to be effective in mobilizing all parties to

provide elderly services and promote rapid solutions to elderly service problems. Secondly, elderly service is a complex system project involving multiple subjects and dimensions. There are significant differences in the delivery of elderly service among different groups of people in different regions, and elderly service is embedded in other public service supply and service industry development. As a result, policy formulation needs to consider the diverse demand for elderly service and the existing policy reality of “multiple and incompatible policies”, which requires a significant number of environmental policy tools for debugging [59]. Out of the total frequency statistics, demand-type policy tools only accounted for 6%, which included policy tools such as government procurement and outsourcing. These tools can be particularly beneficial for the nonprofit or low-profit middle and low-end elderly service market, as they can reduce market uncertainty, stabilize the market, and actively develop the elderly service industry. This, in turn, can boost the development of the elderly service business and industry [60]. In terms of the policy instrument itself, government procurement and service outsourcing can also promote the entry of enterprises and private organizations into the elderly service industry, reducing the pressure on the government in terms of financial and human investment. As a result, demand-type policy tools can promote the development of elderly services more effectively than environment-type policy tools. To strengthen the elderly service policy system, it is important to increase the use of demand-type policy tools in policy texts. Additionally, policymakers should pay attention to the use of multiple policy tools in combination to ensure that the market can play an important role in the resource allocation of the senior care industry.

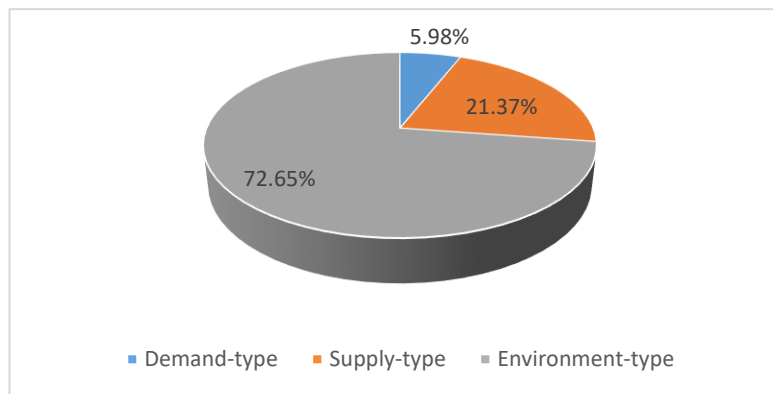


Figure 4. Share the number of the three policy instruments.

Note: Since the reform and opening up.

5.2. The main bodys of issuing policies are becoming increasingly diverse

Through the observation of different stages of budding, developing and perfecting elderly service policies, it can be seen that there is a growing trend towards increasing the number of subjects issuing elderly service policies, diversifying the subjects issuing policies, and enhancing the systemic and synergistic nature of policies. As elderly service projects and contents have improved and matured, multi-departmental collaboration has become increasingly necessary to meet the diverse needs of the elderly and their caregivers. Prior to the 18th National Congress of the Party, there were hardly any policy documents issued jointly by multiple departments

specifically for elderly service issues. However, after the 18th National Congress, the trend of joint issuance by multiple subjects gradually emerged and became more apparent. The construction of the elderly service system is a social and systematic work that involves many aspects and has a wide coverage. As China's population ages, the elderly service industry has gradually broken through the scope of civil affairs and increased its interaction and cooperation with related departments, such as land and resources, finance and planning, housing and urban construction, health and education, culture and sports, public security, and firefighting. The joint issuance of documents by multiple departments promotes the overall effect of the policy, strengthens the coordination and convergence between policies, and forms a policy synergy to promote the development of the elderly service industry. This shows a trend towards increasing systematicity, and the number of various types of policy tools has started to increase significantly and comprehensively, resulting in the improvement of the elderly service policy systems.

5.3. The government's functional positioning tends to be more precise

It is essential to establish clear boundaries of responsibility among different elderly service providers during the process of building the elderly service systems. The elderly care business is a non-profit and public welfare basic elderly care service that must be led by the government to ensure social equity [61]. In terms of vertical development, the government's functional positioning in the field of elderly care services has been continuously rationalized, and the positioning of responsibilities among the government, market, society, and family has been optimized. Although the government has been in a dominant position for a long time, the content of dominance differs at different stages of development. In recent years, there has been an increasing number of policies focused on supply-type policy instruments, indicating that the government vigorously supports the elderly service business. At the same time, the government has gradually introduced competitive mechanisms in investment and operation, operational mechanisms, service mode, and content to meet the diverse and multi-level demand for elderly services. With government support, guidance, and supervision, the market is playing an increasingly important role in the production and operation of elderly service projects. Social forces such as enterprises, social groups, and individuals are investing in the elderly service industry, which is becoming a modern service-oriented industry of scale.

5.4. The synergistic impact of three policy tools in enhancing elderly care efficiency

The systematic analysis of China's elderly care policy tools reveals that the combined effect of supply-side, enabling, and demand-side policy tools is essential for boosting the efficiency of the elderly care service system. As the system shifts from a single-tool dominance to a multi-tool parallel approach, the interplay between different policy tools becomes crucial in optimizing resource distribution, meeting diverse needs, and enhancing service quality. Supply-type policy tools increase the availability of resources for elderly care, providing fundamental support for meeting the basic needs of the elderly. These tools directly improve service accessibility and

coverage, laying a strong foundation for the development of the elderly care service system. Environment-type policy tools create a favorable external environment by optimizing the policy landscape, encouraging market and social forces to actively engage in the construction of the elderly care service system. These tools not only lower barriers to industry entry but also provide mechanisms to ensure efficient resource allocation. Demand-type policy tools closely align with the actual needs of the elderly, stimulating market vitality and promoting the diversification and personalized development of elderly care services. They also enhance service efficiency by reducing market uncertainty and stabilizing supply-demand relationships. The three policy tools work together in the elderly care service policy system, with supply-type policies providing resource support, environment-type policies creating a supportive operating environment, and demand-type policies ensuring the precise matching of services. This collaboration not only broadens the reach and quality of elderly care services but also strengthens the overall effectiveness and sustainability of policies.

6. Conclusion

This study has thoroughly examined the evolution and collaborative effectiveness of China's elderly care policy tools. The findings reveal a shift from a dominance of single environmental-type tools to a coexistence of supply-type, environment-type, and demand-type tools. Environment-type tools, due to their broad applicability in shaping the macro-environment and resource allocation, have long been predominant. However, the importance of demand-type tools, which have a more limited practical application scope, has not been fully recognized, leading to structural imbalances in the policy system that hinder its adaptability and effectiveness. As policy tools increasingly exhibit a parallel nature, the synergy between different types of tools has become a significant factor in the elderly care service system. Supply-type tools directly enhance service supply, environment-type tools optimize the policy environment and provide institutional support, while demand-type tools, by precisely aligning with service needs, significantly improve service quality and fairness. These findings not only illuminate the dynamic evolution of policy tools but also underscore the critical role of collaborative governance in optimizing the elderly care service system.

Based on these findings, the study proposes several recommendations for optimizing China's elderly care policy system. First, the application of demand-type policy tools should be increased, and mechanisms such as government procurement and service outsourcing should be strengthened to stabilize and stimulate the participation of market and social forces. Second, the coordination among the three types of policy tools should be improved, and an inter-departmental policy coordination platform should be established to avoid the adverse effects of fragmented policies on service effectiveness. Additionally, the support for smart elderly care technology in the policy system should be enhanced, utilizing information technology to improve service efficiency and coverage, with a focus on addressing the imbalance between rural and urban elderly care development.

Future research can concentrate on analyzing the practical effectiveness of policy tools, exploring their performance in region-specific policies, and giving special attention to the medium and long-term impact of collaborative models involving multiple stakeholders on the effectiveness of policy implementation. This research aims to provide more comprehensive theoretical support and practical guidance for advancing the scientific and sustainable development of the elderly care policies.

Data availability statement: Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found at <http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zwfwzck/> (accessed on 19 December 2024).

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