

URBAN PARK AND AGING PEOPLE IN CHINA: A NEW CHALLENGE FROM OLD PEOPLE'S “PARENTS BLIND DATE”

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ABSTRACT

Older people are the fastest-growing age group in the world. What accompanies the trend of rapid population ageing is a sustained increase in urban population. To improve urban older people's quality of life (QoL), World Health Organization (WHO) [1] proposed a framework of “Age-friendly Cities” and green space has been identified as one of the most important age-friendly features. The park is an important element in green space, and it provides a place for the older people of this specific group. However, a unique cultural phenomenon in China named “Parents blind date”, which means parents attend to the blind date like a marriage interview instead of their children who are single, has appeared in the social networking and activities of elderly in the park. This gradually evolved into a new form of activity setting up the place in the main area of park and has become the main purpose of part of the elderly going to the park. In this content, the park management and strategies are facing a dilemma: on one hand, the park becomes more age-friendly by providing spaces for older people's “parents blind date”, but it may lead the potential risk of park management for assuring this group of older people's “security”. On the other hand, the emerging activity is taking up public space increasingly in the park, most of the urban parks in China have been built. Therefore, urban planners need to reflect on how to transform and update the needs of the elderly to help existing Chinese urban parks to serve the elderly better.

Keywords: parents blind date, aging people, social participation, urban park, planning recommendations.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since June 2005, a public area of Shanghai people's Park has been spontaneously organized and formed a new way of social activities for the elderly to set up a list of stalls and signs to help their children find marriage partners in [2], which is called Parents blind date. Parents blind date (PBD) is a unique Chinese culture of dating to select marriage partners, and it refers to the new mode of spouse selection that parents on behalf of their children find marriage partners. Peidong [3] reports that the majority of marriage seeker are female, white-collar workers, ranging in age from 20 to 40. The educational background of men and women to marry is generally a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree or even a doctor is not uncommon. The occupation of them are mostly staff of the company, the civil servant, or the professional personages such as the accountants and the scientific researchers. According to the Chinese middle-class standards proposed by Ravallion [4] and Barton et al. [5], these marriage seekers are mostly middle class in Chinese city.

On one hand, parents should be proud of their children's success in the middle class of the city, on the other hand, however, those parents who actively participate in the PBD are anxious and worried about their children's marriage. Therefore, they turn available some parts of public area in the parks into a “talent fair”, with a piece of paper on the rope, the umbrellas and the bushes, writing the information and request of their children to the partners (Fig. 1). The area where the activity is held is called blind date corner. Recently, in China's large and medium cities the blind date corner tend to refer to the blind date occasions in some public green spaces, in particular, parks. So far, park dating corner has become an important





Figure 1: Parents gather in a park in Shanghai to search spouses for their single children. (Source from VCG Photo.)

part of Chinese urban public space. Most of the parks in the centre areas of Chinese cities have their own dating corner. PBD has become a new form of social activities for the elderly, which is attached to the unique dating culture in China. From the initial blind date, the PBD has evolved into a social activity of friendship and communication among the elderly.

2 PARENTS BLIND DATE: SOCIAL PARTICIPATION OF THE ELDERLY IN CHINESE AGEING SOCIETY

PBD is a process of social interaction of sources in the elderly blind date scenario. This type of social group activity belongs to the category of social participation of the elderly. Davidson



et al. [6] defined the concept of social participation of the elderly is put forward with the concept, the contribution of the elderly to society. Dahan-Oliel et al. [7] argued the contribution of the elderly to society is participation in social development, trying to make a worthy contribution to society. The elderly participation under this definition includes the means of reusing and rededicate the resources of the elderly. Similarly, Cook [8] believes that the elderly participation in the society refers to participate in social economic, political and cultural activities. The elderly participation in social development can be understood as the contribution of the elderly to society. However, they note that the elderly to participate in social cultural activities is a feeling of happiness for them, not the contribution of the elderly to society. In this article, in fact, they exclude the recreational activities of the elderly outside the category of social participation. Unlike the scope of social participation, Levasseur et al. [9] believes that the social participation of the elderly should include all activities beneficial to the society, including five aspects: participation in social and economic development activities, participation in social and cultural activities, participation in social interaction and tourism activities, participation in household work and participation in cultural and recreational activities within families. Though summarizing the above social participation scope, but before it, Levasseur et al. [9] also emphasizes the value of social participation of the elderly in social and political development. However, it seems that social participation of the elderly in politics is not included in his final definition the scope of social participation. Besides, Wang [10] divides social participation of the elderly in China into five levels according to whether they engage in activities, whether they include household chores, whether they cover cultural and spiritual activities as well as whether they involve political activities. To put it in a nutshell, this paper argues that Parents blind date is a new activity of the social participation of the elderly as a behaviour mode in social interaction, through the form of social labour and social activities, to achieve their own value.

China entered an "Ageing Society" in 1999. Since then, the ageing population in this country has increased continuously and rapidly. At the end of 2015, more than 10% of Chinese people were above 65 [11], and in 2050 there might be about 36.5% of Chinese aged 60 and over [12]. In the meantime, China's urbanization will reach a rate of about 60% in 2020 [13], and probably around 75% in 2050 [14]. Therefore, the two significant trends in urbanization and population ageing in China merge to change the landscape of the country profoundly. China's population would be very likely 1.35 billion in 2050 [12]. Drawing on these projections, we can predict that the population of older urban Chinese would be 0.39 billion, which accounts for 28.5% of the total population.

In light of the fast growth of older urban population, an increasing volume of research has been inquiring into how to enhance older people's QoL. In 2002 WHO promoted the concept of "active ageing" that emphasized the health, participation and security of older people [15]. The "active ageing" policy framework by WHO has become the mainstream in academic circle shortly after its emergence in [16]. Later, based on the framework of "active ageing", WHO [17] published a document of framework *Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide* in 2007. In short, an age-friendly city *"encourages active ageing by optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age"* [17].

According to the guide, green space is one of the most important age-friendly features [17]. This argument was based on a wide discussion of older people from 33 cities across the world. However, two gaps can be identified in the part of green space in the framework. First, the concept of "green space" in the guide is relatively broad, in other words, WHO does not specify the types of green space and elaborate on their specific influences on older people's life. Second, against the background of active ageing that the guide is based on, WHO does not clarify the relationship between the elements of active ageing and the impacts of green

space on older people. Park is one important form of public green space, and in this paper, Parents blind date presents that the frequency of elderly's daily communication is greatly enhanced with the increase in public green space. There are mainly two reasons for this activity to thrive in parks. First, park is a public place with open public space and free interaction among people. It has high credibility and social support system. Second, as the urban public living space, the park provides an equal exchange platform for the participants. The new informal relationship has been constructed, and the park has also increased the possibility of the establishment of this informal relationship. For example, in the process of Parents blind date, the relationship among the elderly is not only confined to the exchange of children's mating preferences, but a close circle of friends. They frequently communicate with each other in the blind date corner and establish relatively reliable connections. When they need anything in life, they could help each other through this circle, which is a reflection of the establishment of informal relations.

As discussed previously, PBD is helpful to older people to enhance their social participation. Compared with other places, park, which serves as the place for older people's PBD, has some unique characteristics. In addition to offering space for PBD, the research tries to investigate whether park could be able to deliver more benefits for older people's well-being, especially health and security, which are another two elements of active ageing.

3 URBAN PARK AND AGING PEOPLE

Urban park is an important part of urban public green space. Chiesura [18] defines parks as public activity occasion, where the public could do some activities, such as visiting, sightseeing, recreation, conducting scientific culture and physical exercise. It has good facilities and green public environment. In China's urban green space classification standard [20], the park's clear definition is, green space in the city is open to the public where takes recreation as the main function, has certain recreational facilities and service facilities as well as the comprehensive functions of improving the ecology, beautifying the landscape, preventing and reducing disaster. The functions of urban parks in cities are closely related to the self-positioning of urban parks. The location of urban parks is usually determined by the layout of the whole city and the content of the park, including the historical and cultural background, location, scale and objects of the park. The dominant functions of different types of parks will be different. The functions of general comprehensive parks are more comprehensive. Amusement parks are mainly recreation and leisure. Cultural heritage parks emphasize tourism, leisure and education. For community parks, in addition to the weak function of the education science, its other functions are more average, while the ecological park emphasizes the ecological value. In this article, the city park refers to the large comprehensive park in the city. In 2006, the Chinese State Council issued a document that the urban leisure park, which is closely related to the people, which should fully reflect the public welfare and carry out free opening [20]. A park that does not have free open conditions should be priced at a low price. In response to these policies, many cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou and Chengdu, have opened urban parks, to some degrees. For example, at the end of 2008, 140 of the 180 parks were free in Beijing. By the end of 2014, there were 319 parks in Beijing. Besides a few historical and cultural sites, heritage sites and special parks, more than 290 parks were open free [21].

Park Leisure in park is a recreational activity carried out by citizens in the park. The park is free to open and convenient for people's leisure. Park leisure has become a part of many citizens' daily leisure activities. The study of the demographic characteristics of park users by Ren et al. [22] has found that the majority of the Park leisure people were middle-aged and elderly in China, which was the main range from 50 to 80 years. And Li and Fan [23]



pointed out that among the people who had a record of the park's exercise, the average number of retirees who accounted for 40% of the total number of retirees went to the park for more than 26 days per month in China. This situation is related to the acceleration of the aging of urban population and the increase of the absolute number of the elderly population. At the same time, it is also related to the small scale of family, no more housework to be done for retirees and the special physical and mental health of the elderly. For them, the choice of leisure places is limited, and parks are the best and most available fitness sites. It is precisely because of the increasing size of the elderly group, the increase of leisure time, the decrease of urban transportation cost, and the reduction of park free cost, that parks cater to their psychology. The elderly are increasingly becoming the main body of parks.

There is a close relationship between environment and behaviour, and the influence and restriction are the way of expression of the potential relationship. The impact of environment on human activity is reflected in the support and guidance of human behaviour, and functional demand is also satisfied. The restriction of environment to human activity is manifested in the restriction of human behaviour, and the environment set limitation for the perception of human behaviour. The elderly have a larger proportion of their leisure time. Their physical and psychological characteristics determine that they are more likely to be lonely emotionally, eager for outdoor activities and interpersonal communication. Therefore, Portegijs et al. [24] believe that outdoor activities have become the main way for the activities of leisure time and interpersonal communication for the elderly. Chodsko-Zajko et al. [25] also suggest that older people should have a higher desire to exercise more than other age groups. The economic income of the elderly is limited, and the social welfare and security are the important pillars of their source of life. In [23], it shows that in China, due to the influence of history and the development of the age, the elderly's ability to proactively consume social activities and activities is far lower than that of other age groups. As a public outdoor activity place, the urban park bears the main responsibilities of public outdoor activities. The functional space, natural scenery and fitness facilities provided by the city park are good guarantee for the outdoor activities of the elderly.

Before the emergence of PBD, according to the state of behaviour, the activities of the elderly in urban parks can be divided into static and dynamic activities. Static activities are relative, such as sitting quietly, basking in the sun, enjoying the cool and reading newspapers. Dynamic activities can also be divided into personal dynamic activities and collective dynamic activities, which are mostly based on slow aerobic exercise, such as walking, walking dogs, caring children, playing taijiquan and dancing. PBD can be considered a new type of collective nature of the static and dynamic combination of activities. And its problems are particularly prominent. First, China's comprehensive park takes the whole public as the starting point, and its design environment, space and equipment can be suitable for all people. Therefore, it lacks enough concern for the aging people.. Most of them haven't realized barrier free design, which are specially embodied in road, seat space, public toilet and other aspects. For example, in some areas with high difference, there is a lack of ramp for wheelchair users, so that elderly people who can't move well and can't get there smoothly, which is a certain obstacle to the activities of the elderly. Second, the size and quantity of the active site are closely related to the quality of the activities of the elderly. However, the contradiction among the comprehensive parks is more prominent, especially because of the limited site. The elderly have to take PBD on the main roads of the park, which occupy a large part of public space, that is, the traffic impact on the park is not conducive to safety. Moreover, due to the irrational distribution of the activities, the congestion in the PBD space is serious, and the utilization rate of other space in the park is insufficient. Third, the number of venues or facilities for the activities of the old people in the park is not enough to meet



their needs. For example, when the elderly participate in PBD, they also take into account other activities such as physical exercise. There are fewer facilities equipped with fitness in the park, and there will also be a state of overcrowding at peak hours. Due to the lack of fitness facilities, many elderly people will use the trunk, railings and benches to stretch and other activities, so as to cause the destruction of the environment and to form the hidden danger for the elderly security. In addition, due to the lack of rest facilities, most of the elderly participating in the PBD come with a seat or sit on the road, which is not conducive to the elderly recreational activities for quality and safety. Finally, the elderly as the most important recreational group in the park, they should be given enough attention. However, because of the imperfect park management, the elderly are still dissatisfied with all the service measures. Because of the lack of channels for opinions and suggestions, the managers of the park cannot be able to know the real needs of the elderly in time, which will cause the renewal and improvement of the service facilities in the park slowly. Although PBD has become a popular activity in China, there is still no improvement in the management of urban parks.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHINESE URBAN PARK PLANNING

For the design problem considered by planning and construction of urban park for the elderly, on the one hand, the new urban park should be fully implemented in the early stage of the design and planning. On the other hand, it also needs cover a large number of urban parks that have been built. The new requirements of the humanistic care for the elderly should be considered in their future renovation and renewal design. From the perspective of China's current development situation, most of the urban parks have been built. Therefore, how to transform and update the needs of the elderly is the focus of this paper. It needs to be mentioned that these suggestions are not just for the narrow sense of PBD, but to encourage Chinese urban parks to serve the elderly better.

4.1 Ground surface

The design of ground surface in Park is very important for the elderly, because it is difficult for them to shift their attention from the surrounding environment to their feet, so it is easy to overlook some potential risk factors and reduce the safety factor. First, the ground should make sure that it is flat and avoid excessive changes in height. In the material aspect, and the ground should choose hard pavement as far as possible, such as concrete, brick, stone, wood, etc. It should avoid using sand and gravel whose surface is concave and convex and not conducive to skid-proof in order to reduce the risk of tripping. Second, the ground should have a good drainage system, to avoid rainy days skidding and water to the travel of the elderly. At the same time, it should avoid drains and some rubbing objects to bring safety hazards to pedestrians who use crutches. Third, using suggestive ground materials to remind the elderly to reach the steps or traffic routes. At the same time, a strong reflective material should also be avoided. Because the eye function of the old people gradually degenerates, it is very sensitive for them to the glare produced by the reflective material. In addition, the ground of the park should also take full account of the visually disabled elderly people who need ground markings on the ground.

4.2 Slope and steps

Ramps and steps should be set up for the handicapped people or children's cars who are inconvenient to move. The steps can be designed with a rest platform, combining traffic and recreational functions. The steps also need to have strong visibility and identifiability. The



edge of the step should be paved with a material with strong contrast color to ensure that the elderly can be clearly identified. The slope is easy to skid in the rain and snow, which threatens the safety of the elderly, so there should be a higher requirement for the material. The slope should be considered in combination with the length of the slope, and a rest platform for the elderly should be set on a long distance ramp. The easy identify signs should be added to the entrance of the ramp. In addition, the armrest should be set on both sides of the ramp so as to avoid falling or sliding, and the elderly can also generate a sense of security through the armrest.

4.3 Outdoor seats

The outdoor public seat is an important element of the park space, and it is a necessary facility for the elderly. The layout of the seat needs to consider how to meet the physiological and psychological needs of the elderly. For example, in the sports space, the elderly people feel tired when they walk a little longer, so the frequency of the public seats on both sides of the road should be more frequent. The seats in the park should be considered to meet the various activities of the elderly, such as playing chess, playing cards, chatting and so on. Some elderly people repel the busy crowd and enjoy the sense of safety and privacy brought by the enclosed space, so it needs to create a privacy rest space for them. The form and arrangement of the seats will also have a certain impact on the activities of the elderly, and need to be planned in combination with the psychological needs. For example, in PBD, a side seat can keep the two sides close and keep the same direction of sight. And the opposite seat is just suitable for the elderly to play chess, poker and other recreational activities. Wood should be selected as far as possible. Other material seats exposed in the air are easy to be hot or cold in summer or winter and not suitable for the elderly.

4.4 Outdoor lights

Many elderly people show different degrees of adaptation to the light and dark, and the speed of light and dark adaptation gradually decreases with age, which makes them more difficult at night. Especially in the night after the rain, wet ground and dim light will become the obstacle to the elderly travel or recreation. The lighting in the park is first to meet the visual requirements of the elderly, and they have higher requirements for lighting than those of other age groups. In a dangerous location with a step, ramp, through lighting configuration of different heights, the formation of overlapping shadows, which can avoid the strong light glare, but enhance the ability to distinguish for the elderly. Effective lighting classification should also be set up, as this will help the elderly to determine the direction in the night. The main road, secondary road, path and other levels should be paid attention to set a certain difference of light on the road. There is also a discernable difference in lighting of the different functional areas of the garden to facilitate the differentiation of the elderly. By setting different light distribution and brightness, changing the distance, color and height between the lamps and lanterns can be better clarify the lighting classification.

4.5 Services facilities

In the comprehensive park, the service facilities provide convenience for the recreational activities of the elderly. Good service facilities can enhance the enthusiasm of the elderly. So there should be plenty of public toilet, hand wash and drinking water facilities in the park. Because the elderly's body is special, they have higher requirements for safety in outdoor activities. In addition to guaranteeing the basic safety needs of the elderly, the emergency



rescue for elderly people must be considered as a rigid requirement for every city park outdoor activity place. Although many of the park can be seen in the emergency instruction and corresponding measures but should not only as a park management form. Emergency rescue equipment should be improved more widely in park design, and we should plan for all kinds of sudden signs, guidance sites, emergency facilities and emergency facilities. On weekdays, a certain amount of staff can be arranged in the park to help the old people in need.

4.6 Law and management

In addition to the suggestions above, the development of China's urban comprehensive parks should also have corresponding norms and regulations as support and guarantee. However, as a group that needs more care, the elderly do not get the deserved attention and serious treatment in China's current park design code. Facing the problems and contradictions between the highlighted green parks and the elderly's recreational activities, the government should fundamentally guarantee the policies and regulations, and put the needs of the elderly in various parks and green spaces into the overall planning of the park green space. In addition, the good operation of the park is inseparable from the perfect management mechanism. Many parks are caused by the lack of late maintenance and management, resulting in the decline of the whole environment of the park, which seriously affects and restricts the recreational activities of the elderly. The essence of the city park is to improve the quality of life of the citizens, so the basic attribute of the public welfare infrastructure must be emphasized in the management. While managers pay attention to the actual needs of the elderly, they should timely communicate with the relevant administrative departments, and constantly improve in the process of park construction and maintenance. Because of the large area of the comprehensive park, there will be a certain blind area in the management. Therefore, the author suggests that an efficient and complete property management organization should be set up in the park, and the overall system supervision of the park should be carried out to fill gaps in the traditional management and to find out the problems in time.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Facing the increasing trend of the aging population in China, a series of changes are taking place in the social structure. The social contradictions caused by the aging of the population are becoming more and more prominent. As far as urban planners are concerned, it is also a kind of care and respect for the elderly to create more comfortable and pleasant urban environment for them. Social participation is beneficial to the mental and physical health of the elderly. Therefore, PBD reflects the strong desire of the elderly to realize and to identify their own values. PBD, the emerging social activity of the elderly, exposes the problems between urban green space and the aging society. As a public outdoor activity place, the urban park bears the main responsibilities of public outdoor activities. The functional spaces, natural scenery and fitness facilities provided by different functions are good guarantee for the outdoor activities of the elderly. Because the elderly is significantly different from other groups in the psychological characteristics and needs of humanity and have the unique perception of the environment and experience, the design should be analysed according to the psychological characteristics of elderly people, and environmental areas and facilities for the corresponding design. Based on the research contents above, this paper puts forward the optimization and upgrading strategy of the middle aged and the elderly in the urban parks, hoping to play a positive role in promoting the park construction in line with the needs of the elderly. But because of the limited time and energy, the author just makes preliminary research related to the issue. There are still many further problems to be continue to discover



by the future scholars, such as how to solve the problem of aging can also take into account the Universal Design, which meet the special requirements of the elderly under the condition without any distinction to make the elderly fully participate in social life and meet the elderly psychological sense of social identity.

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