

Study on the Impact of Community Music Activities on the Spiritual and Cultural Life of the Elderly

Yuxin He

Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH8 8AQ, UK

Abstract: With the accelerating aging of my country's population, improving the quality of the spiritual and cultural life of the elderly has become a crucial component of the strategy for actively addressing this aging population. As the core of the elderly's daily lives, community music activities, with their accessible and highly interactive nature, have become a key vehicle for enriching their spiritual and cultural lives. This paper systematically analyzes the connotations, types, and organizational models of community music activities, drawing on case studies from multiple communities across China. It focuses on their impact on emotional regulation, psychological health, social interaction, and self-realization among the elderly. The study found that community music activities can effectively alleviate loneliness and anxiety among the elderly, build stable social networks through collective participation, and help them achieve a sense of accomplishment through music practice, thus addressing the gaps in their spiritual and cultural needs. Currently, some communities still face challenges with insufficient resources for music activities, a monotonous format, and a lack of personalized design. Based on these issues, this paper proposes approaches to optimizing the provision of community music activities, including increasing resource investment, introducing professional guidance, and customizing differentiated activities. This approach aims to provide practical insights for improving the quality of the spiritual and cultural life of the elderly and building age-friendly communities. All data and case studies in this article are sourced from public policy documents, academic research results, and community practice reports to ensure authenticity and verifiability.

Keywords: Community Music Activities, Seniors, Spiritual and Cultural Life, Social Participation, Mental Health, Senior-Friendly Communities.

1. Introduction

According to the seventh national census data, the proportion of the population aged 60 and above in China has reached 18.7%, and the aging population has entered a stage of deep development. With the improvement of material living standards, the elderly have an increasingly urgent need for spiritual and cultural life, while issues such as spiritual emptiness and social isolation have become prominent contradictions affecting the quality of life of the elderly population. The 14th Five Year Plan for the Development of National Aging Industry and Elderly Care Service System clearly proposes to enrich the spiritual and cultural life of the elderly, support the community to carry out cultural and sports activities suitable for the elderly, providing policy guidance for elderly spiritual and cultural services at the community level. As a public space at the doorstep of the elderly, the accessibility and convenience of community activities make it an important link between the elderly population and society [1]. Among them, music activities, due to their combination of emotional expression and collective interaction attributes, are more likely to gain recognition from the elderly compared to other cultural activities. Whether it is community choirs, square song concerts, or simple instrument learning classes, they cover different age groups and physical conditions of the elderly with low cost and high participation [2]. However, existing research mostly focuses on material security or macro cultural policies for elderly care services, and there is still a lack of specialized research on community music activities as a micro carrier, especially a systematic analysis of how they specifically affect the spiritual and cultural life of the elderly. Based on this, this article takes community music activities as the research object, and

combines the practical experience of domestic communities to discuss from the definition of connotation, type analysis, influence mechanism to problem optimization. The theoretical significance of the research lies in supplementing the interdisciplinary study of gerontology and music sociology, while the practical significance lies in providing actionable paths for optimizing elderly spiritual and cultural services in the community, ultimately helping the elderly achieve their life goals of enjoying and contributing in old age [3].

2. The Connotation of Community Music Activities and the Real Needs of Seniors in Spiritual and Cultural Life

2.1. The Core Connotation of Community Music Activities

Community music activities are community-based, offering public welfare or low-cost cultural activities for seniors. Their core focus is to create interactive spaces through music, highlighting local, participatory, and inclusive elements. These activities are not professional musical performances, but rather accessible activities tailored to the cognitive abilities of seniors, such as choruses of classic red and folk songs, beginner erhu and electronic keyboard classes, or music gatherings in conjunction with Double Ninth Festival and Spring Festival celebrations. Community neighborhood committees are primarily responsible for organizing these activities, but they also collaborate with social organizations such as senior cultural associations. Some communities employ professional music teachers or

university student volunteers to ensure the continuity of these activities. Participation is primarily collective, while also addressing specific needs, such as providing home-based instrument performances and simple song lessons for those with limited mobility. Unlike commercial senior music training, these activities focus not on skill development but rather on using music as a connection to meet the emotional and social needs of seniors [4]. As a community worker in Beijing put it, We organize choirs not for professional singing, but to allow seniors to gather and chat regularly every week. The joy of singing together is the most precious thing.

2.2. Current Needs and Gaps in Seniors' Spiritual and Cultural Life

With the increasing life expectancy and the rise of empty-nest families, the emotional support of traditional family-based care is weakening, and the elderly's demand for spiritual and cultural life is becoming more urgent and diverse. The Report on the Development of Spiritual and Cultural Life of the Elderly in China (2023) shows that these needs are concentrated in three areas: emotional comfort: empty-nest and childless elderly people need group activities to alleviate loneliness; social interaction: the transition to a new role after retirement leaves them socially disconnected, requiring them to rebuild their interpersonal networks through activities [5]; and self-worth: healthy seniors seek recognition through activities to avoid social marginalization. However, the current supply gap is significant: older residential communities often face difficulties in hosting regular music activities due to limited space and outdated equipment. Most communities only offer basic activities such as square choruses and music performances, lacking differentiated programs for younger and older adults, and for traditional opera and modern music. This leaves some elderly people wanting to participate but lacking suitable activities. For example, a Shanghai community piloted a piano class, but due to limited facilities, it could only accommodate 10 people, far from meeting the needs of over 200 elderly people in need. Rural communities are even more limited, relying on temporary, unsustainable village committee-run programs. This supply-demand imbalance highlights the low-cost and easy-to-organize advantages of community music activities, making them an effective way to fill the gap in spiritual and cultural services and meet the core needs of the elderly [6].

3. Main Types and Organizational Models of Community Music Activities

From the perspective of domestic community practice, there are several types of community music activities aimed at the elderly, each meeting different needs. Choral singing is the most common, and we often choose songs that are familiar to the elderly such as Singing the Motherland and Jasmine Flower. Without any musical background, the Sunset Red Chorus in a community in Guangzhou has been running for more than 10 years, growing from 8 people to over 50 people. It also participates in district level competitions twice a week, helping the elderly find a sense of collective belonging [7]. Musical instrument learning is aimed at elderly people aged 60-75 who want to learn home style musical instruments. A community in Hangzhou has partnered with a university for the elderly to offer hulusi classes, which are free and only charge textbook fees. The first batch of 32 people registered,

and after the class, a performance was held to help the elderly boost their confidence. Music appreciation and sharing are suitable for elderly people or those with limited mobility. The Time Music Tea House in a certain community in Beijing is held once a month, where the elderly listen to music and chat about memories. An 82 year old person said that talking about their experience of jumping the queue in Hubei is particularly heartwarming. Combining festival performances with the Double Ninth Festival and Spring Festival, a community in Chengdu will hold a Sunset Red Music Concert in Double Ninth in 2023. The elderly will create their own programs, which will be watched by more than 200 people, making them feel useful [8]. The activity needs to be long-lasting and relies on appropriate organizational methods. There are three main types in China. Led by the community itself, most of the community venues are used by neighborhood committees or elderly associations. The choir of an old community in Xi'an relies on old sound systems for activities, although small in scale, it is flexible and serves as a spiritual support for empty nest elderly. Collaborating with professional institutions, such as a community in Shenzhen and a cultural center, to launch a Music Popularization Plan. Two professional teachers teach every month and provide free musical instruments, serving over 500 elderly people [9]. The program is highly professional, but some may charge a fee. The government has purchased services, and a district in Nanjing will purchase the Elderly Music Companion service in 2022. Social work organizations are operating in 10 communities, providing free coverage to over 800 people, with sufficient resources but slightly less flexibility. Some communities will combine the three, organizing daily choir performances by themselves, seeking professional institutions for instrument classes, and relying on the government for major events, forming a comprehensive coverage system.

4. The Impact of Community Music Activities on Emotional Regulation and Mental Health in the Elderly

Music can convey emotions without language, which directly helps elderly people regulate their emotions and maintain their mental health. Community music activities rely on everyone's participation, amplifying this help and becoming a practical way to alleviate the psychological problems of the elderly. Loneliness is a common problem for elderly people, especially those who are empty nesters or have lost their only child. Without someone to accompany them and talk to, they are prone to falling into loneliness [10]. Community music activities provide an opportunity to gather together, whether it's singing or learning musical instruments. Elderly people can express their emotions through music, chat with peers about daily life, and find resonance. Just like the Empty Nest Elderly Music Group in a community in Wuhan, where there is a weekly song sharing session where the elderly take turns telling stories from the songs. A 78 year old person said that in the past, watching TV at home felt like the days were long, but now he looks forward to going to the group to sing and chat, and he sleeps much more soundly at night [11]. In addition, elderly people are worried about their health and are prone to anxiety when they get sick. Music activities can help them focus on singing and playing, and reduce their worries. A survey conducted by a community health service center in Beijing shows that elderly people who participate in music activities have an average anxiety scale

score 3.2 points lower than those who did not participate, indicating a significant relief effect. After retirement, elderly people no longer have job roles, and some may feel useless, which affects their mood. Community music activities enable the elderly to learn skills and showcase their achievements. Whether it's learning a new song, practicing playing a musical instrument, or receiving praise for their performances in the community, they can feel that they can still create value and have more confidence. For example, in an electronic keyboard class in a community in Suzhou, a 65 year old retired worker initially felt that he lacked education and dared not come. However, after studying for three months, he could play Jasmine Flower and perform at the community Spring Festival Gala. He said that he used to think retirement was useless, but now he is praised for playing the piano for everyone and feels like he has come back to life [12]. The Chinese Elderly Mental Health Report (2023) also mentioned that elderly people who participate in cultural activities, especially music activities, have a 28% lower risk of depression and an average 15% higher sense of happiness than those who do not participate. A community choir in Chongqing often sings inspirational songs such as I Believe. The elderly say that when singing, they have strength all over their body, can open up their worries, and think that life will get better and better. It should be noted that the psychological benefits of community music activities are not immediate and need to be persisted for a long time. Generally, elderly people who participate for more than 3 months have more significant improvements in emotional regulation and mental health. Therefore, community activities should be normalized and not stopped for a while [13].

5. The Role of Community Music Activities in Building Social Networks and Enhancing Social Engagement for the Elderly

After retirement, the social circle of the elderly often shrinks, with no colleagues to interact with, children not around or having limited mobility, making it more difficult for them to interact with the outside world and prone to social isolation. Community music activities use music as a link to build low-cost social platforms, which can help elderly people rebuild their social networks, enhance their sense of social participation, and avoid being marginalized. The collective nature of community music activities comes with social attributes, such as choir rehearsals, instrument group learning, and music sharing sessions, which allow elderly people to have frequent close interactions - this is different from occasionally visiting relatives, relying on common interests for long-term interaction, which is more likely to form stable peer relationships [14]. A senior choir in a certain community in Tianjin has been running for 5 years. Members not only chat during rehearsals, but also support each other in daily life: some people visit each other when they are sick and help buy groceries; Some people prepare cakes and sing songs together on their birthdays when their children are not around, filling the support gap for many elderly families [15]. It can also break the sense of unfamiliarity with neighbors. It is common for people in the city to live opposite each other without knowing each other. After participating together, the elderly can get to know their neighbors in the same community and have a stronger sense of belonging. A survey conducted in a community in Beijing showed that 76% of elderly people who

participated met three or more new friends, and 62% would proactively greet their neighbors, significantly expanding their social circle. Social participation is important for the spiritual life of the elderly [16]. They feel that being able to contribute to the community will generate a strong sense of being needed and lead to higher life satisfaction. Community music activities are not just about participation, but also provide opportunities to participate in community building: being the captain of a choir, organizing parties, teaching new members how to play musical instruments, changing from participant to organizer, and having a sense of community ownership [17]. The Sunset Red Music Society in a community in Chengdu is fully managed by the elderly, with a management team consisting of five core members who plan and recruit new members. The community only provides venues. They also took the initiative to engage in public welfare, performing at nursing homes and singing self composed songs on anti drug propaganda days. Some members said, I used to think that community affairs were the responsibility of the neighborhood committee, but now I realize that we can also make contributions. If the elderly's performances are recognized, such as the community Spring Festival Gala and Double Ninth Festival performances, they will feel valued and be more willing to participate in community affairs. In rural communities, this value is more prominent. Rural elderly people have narrow social and monotonous spiritual lives, while village level yangko dance teams and folk song choirs not only enrich their lives but also serve as carriers of cultural inheritance. A rural elderly folk song team in Shaanxi Province teaches young people to sing local folk songs through activities, enriching their own lives and protecting local culture. This role as inheritors has gained them more recognition.

6. Current Problems and Optimization Paths for Community Music Activities for the Elderly

Although community music activities have many benefits for the spiritual life of the elderly, in reality, many communities still have problems such as insufficient resources, uneven services, and lack of professional guidance, which affect the coverage and quality of activities and require targeted optimization. In terms of resources, old residential areas and rural communities often lack venues, outdated equipment, and limited funding. Rural areas rely heavily on elderly people to raise funds through the AA system, making it difficult for activities to last long and for elderly people with limited mobility to participate. The activity format is too single, mostly consisting of choir singing and playing music, without considering the needs of elderly people with advanced age, basic knowledge, or ethnic minorities. The one size fits all approach has made many people unwilling to participate [18]. Professional guidance is also lacking, mostly led by elderly people or social workers without professional backgrounds. Even if teachers are hired, they are mostly short-term volunteers, and the activities lack novelty. Elderly people may withdraw if they cannot learn anything. The urban-rural gap is also significant. Urban communities can hold 3-4 activities per month, with 60% receiving professional guidance, while rural communities only have 1-2 activities per quarter, with only 15% receiving professional guidance. The needs of elderly people in rural areas are difficult to meet [19]. To solve these problems, we can start

from four aspects. In terms of resources, it is necessary to rely on the government, communities, and society to build a diversified investment framework - the government will include funds in the budget to support the renovation of old and rural communities' sites and equipment; The community can seek donations from enterprises for equipment, universities can send volunteers, and also collect some textbook fees to supplement funds. For example, a district in Guangzhou relies on the government to provide 50%, the community to raise 30%, and society to donate 20%, which has enabled 20 old communities to have music activity rooms, increasing coverage from 30% to 85%. Activity design should be layered, providing door-to-door services for elderly people with limited mobility, organizing advanced classes for energetic individuals, and organizing characteristic activities for ethnic minorities. A community in Shanghai has divided basic classes, advanced classes, and special care classes, resulting in a 40% increase in participation rate. A long-term mechanism should be established for professional guidance, with regular visits from professional teachers, training of elderly people in the community as guides, and the addition of university volunteers. After doing so, the quality of activities in a community in Nanjing has significantly improved. In terms of urban-rural balance, the government provides more support to rural areas, pairing urban and rural areas, breaking restrictions with online classes, and also tapping into local music resources in rural areas. For example, in a county in Hunan, 30 rural communities were equipped and 15 folk song teams were formed. The participation rate of elderly people in rural areas increased from 10% to 45% [20].

7. Conclusion

Community music activities provide a spiritual and cultural platform for the elderly at their doorstep. Their proximity and accessibility make them uniquely enriching. This article analyzes their content, types, and impact, finding that they can help elderly people regulate their emotions, alleviate loneliness and anxiety, rebuild their social circles, and enhance their sense of social participation, allowing them to truly experience the fulfillment of living happily and contributing meaningfully through musical practice. Today, most communities in China recognize its value and have explored organizational models such as community autonomy, cooperation with professional institutions, and government purchase of services. However, the problems of insufficient resources, uneven services, and lack of professional guidance are still prominent, and such problems are more obvious in rural and old communities. To improve these, it is necessary to rely on diversified investment to ensure resources, design differentiated activities according to the needs of the elderly, establish a long-term professional guidance system, promote balanced urban and rural services, and ensure that activities are accurately connected to the spiritual needs of the elderly. This study has limitations: it did not compare the differences in the effects of music activities in the eastern, central, and western regions, and in urban and rural areas. Future research could expand the scope of the survey for in-depth analysis. It could also track participants for at least three years to observe changes in their mental health and life satisfaction, providing a more precise basis for optimizing the program. Community music activities are not simply small things that enrich the lives of seniors; they are also major undertakings that contribute to building age-friendly communities and

proactively addressing population aging. Their value should be further emphasized in the future. Through policy guidance, resource support, and professional services, we can help more seniors find joy and happiness in music, allowing them to truly live a dignified and quality life in their later years.

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