

Artistic Living for the Elderly of Shanghai

Yong Fei



This article comes from the Shanghai Theatre Academy, a TDR Consortium member institution.—Ed.

In 2020 the Chinese government announced their achievement of an overall well-off society, pointing to a comprehensive improvement in livelihood and well-being. The term “well-off” or “moderately prosperous” (小康, *xiaokang*) is imbued with tones of traditional Chinese culture, alluding to a grassroots fundamental peace, social and economic stability, a tranquil life, and diverse social groups living in harmony.¹ Following a rising economic status that has improved from adequate

1. The strategic plan of China’s economic development is generally divided into three steps, a strategy proposed at the 13th National Congress in October 1987: 1) double the 1980 GNP from 1981 to 1990 and solve the problem of food and clothing for the people; 2) from 1991 to the end of the 20th century, the GNP will double again and people will live a “moderately prosperous life”; 3) by the middle of the 21st century, per capita GNP should reach the level of moderately developed countries, people’s lives should be relatively prosperous, and modernization should be basically realized (The Paper 2021). Specific measures such as August 1980, the 15th meeting of the Fifth National People’s Congress, approved Guangdong and Fujian. The two provinces have set up special

to well-off as part of China's strategic plan that began in 1981, and cultural consumption entering a long phase of fast growth during the same period, citizens' expectations for a full spiritual and cultural life have only increased. This has driven a pressing need to address the shortfalls in cultural development and to render the cultural domain "well-off" too. Individual and national spiritual well-being need attention as well. The development of a harmonious society and economic development are inextricable. Political, scientific, and educational development are also key to spiritual strength as they support values, ideals, faith, and morals. In *Capital*, Marx wrote, "Desire implies want; it is the appetite of the mind, and as natural as hunger to the body [...M]ost commodities have value because they fulfill a spiritual need" (Marx [1867] 1975:47).

The Current State of Artistic Living among the Elderly in Shanghai

Rapid social and economic development since the 1980s has greatly improved medical sanitation and living standards, gradually increasing life expectancy, from age 67.9 in 1981 to 76.7 in 2017 (Zuo 2018). By the end of 2021, Shanghai had more than 5.4 million people over the age of 60, making up 36.3% of people with permanent residence in the municipality, with just 4% newborns and 61% all other ages (*Shanghai Quality* 2022).² Combined with a slowing birth rate, the higher percentage of elderly among the population has emerged as an inevitable trend.³

Huang Weimin began to learn how to play the piano at age 69, when he heard that doing so could help prevent Alzheimer's disease. He first took lessons with a teacher at a music conservatory and gradually developed a love for playing. However, he did not have a piano at home—so how could he practice?

He found his answer through a public piano initiative that was set up by British artist Luke Jerram. Jerram and his team installed more than 2,000 pianos in over 70 cities from Tokyo to New York, covering a population of several million all over the world. According to Jerram's ethos, "anyone can play the piano." After the program, the Taikoo Hui mall in Shanghai kept 4 of the

economic zones in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen. In 1983, a special subsidy fund for agricultural construction was set up in the "Three West" areas (Hexi and Dingxi in Gansu Province and Xihaigu in Ningxia). In 1978, China's GDP was 406.26 billion yuan, and the per capita was only 419 yuan. After the reform and opening up, China's economy developed rapidly. By 2000, China's per capita GDP had reached 949 US dollars, but it was only 17.9% of the world average of US\$5,303. On 17 April 2020, the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee stated that China's GDP exceeded 100 trillion yuan for the first time. By late 2020, the last nine impoverished counties in China realized poverty withdrawal. From 26–29 October 2020, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee was held. The plenum pointed out that decisive achievements have been made in completing the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects (The Central Institute of Party History 2021).

2. In China, people are officially retired when they turn 60 years old. Of course, depending on the nature of your employer and your personal situation, you can also apply for retirement at the age of 50 or 55. Therefore, the "old/elderly" people mentioned in this article mainly refer to people aged 60 and above.
3. Shanghai permanent residents' birth rate in 2022 was 0.7, far lower than that of Singapore (1.2) or Tokyo (1.09) in 2021 (Guandian 2023).

Figure 1. (previous page) Well-known actor Li Qiuping teaching Beijing opera singing and posture at the Shanghai University for the Elderly, 8 May 2024. (Photo by Zhao Zhurong)

Yong Fei (Shanghai Theatre Academy), PhD, is Associate Researcher and Director of the Broadcasting and Hosting Department of Film School. She teaches and researches theory and performance studies. Her published monographs include Research on Chinese Opera and Television (2012), Training on Performance Elements of TV Hosts (2015), and Research on the Creation and Integration of TV Artistic Programs (2022). 2359472884@qq.com

20 pianos that had been installed there and the remaining 16 were donated to the Shanghai women and children's service and guidance center, the Shanghai glass museum, and Shanghai Fudan Institute of Visual Arts for display (Zhang C. 2022).

Huang practices from 9am to 10pm every day, taking breaks for meals (fig. 2). As he plays, Huang feels as if the piano transports his mind into another world. Likening the writings of his favorite poets—Heine, Goethe, Shakespeare, Pushkin, Tagore, and Lermontov—to music, Huang feels that through music and poetry he can build mental strength and resist bodily

aging and a reduced quality of life. Despite having been in a failed marriage, Huang's positivity gave him hope for a happy romance. In early 2022, when he was practicing the piano piece *Still Water* repeatedly, he met a woman 28 years younger than him. He initially found it very difficult to embrace being in a relationship with such a large age gap, but as time went on, he saw that she was very willing to make it work. She was also passionate about literature and poetry like him, and he thought this was something worth cherishing (Zhang C. 2022).

While someone playing underground in the metro is an exceptional case, more elderly people might be inclined to enjoy arts educational resources from government and society if they were available in their local neighborhood elderly activity centers. Programs are also offered at universities for the elderly. Rich curricula in those programs include dance, painting, calligraphy, and classical Chinese cultural studies.

Arts Courses at Shanghai Universities for the Elderly

In China, only at a university for the elderly can one graduate without sitting for an exam (Zhang X. 2020). Originally called Shanghai College of Continuing Education for the Elderly, Shanghai University for the Elderly was founded in 1985, and received its current name one year after it was established. Admission to these programs is often highly competitive with limited spots available; people who had worked in teaching and research organizations are prioritized as students. Shanghai University for the Elderly is now a directly affiliated work unit of the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission. Shanghai is also home to the Shanghai Municipality Old Cadre University, founded in 1986, mainly for the use of those who worked at the division head (正处级, *zhengchū*) level and above;⁴ Shanghai Municipality Retiree Labor University, founded in 1987, affiliated with Shanghai Municipality Federation of Trade Unions, where many company retirees are enrolled; and Shanghai Old Age University, founded in 1992, aimed at retirees from work units (单位, *danwei*) directly affiliated with the municipal government for students who were career administrators and civil servants. Along with Shanghai University for the Elderly, these institutions make up the city's four universities for the elderly, together promoting a framework for the development of elderly education in Shanghai (Zhang X. 2020).



Figure 2. Huang Weimin plays a public piano in the subway corridor at West Nanjing Road, Shanghai, 16 March 2023. (*The Paper*, 23 March 2023, m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_17143789)

4. *Zhengchu* (正处级) is the seventh-highest level of cadre in the People's Republic of China civil service.

Shanghai University for the Elderly is headquartered in Huangpu district's city center. There is a sub-branch at 500 Qinzhou South Road in Minhang district, with an area of 8,000 square meters, around twice the size of the main campus. Across the two campuses are 10 departments, including painting and calligraphy, foreign languages, piano, computer science, literature and history, health care, culture and arts, music, and studies abroad. There are also seven faculties, including Chinese classics, life studies, modern intelligence, international cultures, music and arts, and dance and Chinese opera. The two campuses together offer more than 260 courses, covering the 15 major curricula categories of the Association of Chinese Universities for the Elderly. As of early 2024 there are around 15,000 registered students (with some taking more than one class for a total of 24,000 class enrollments) per semester, according to Fang Guoping, staff member at the Academic Affairs Office of Shanghai Elderly University (Fang 2024).

Courses in artistic training are the most popular among elderly students. According to a 2019 report, there were at that time 475,825 people enrolled in arts courses at Shanghai educational institutions for the elderly, accounting for 50% of all students at such institutions (Office of Shanghai Elderly Education 2020).

Hu Haihua used to be a middle school physics teacher, mentoring several students to win national physics prizes. At age 14, she played the role of Li Tiemei in the model opera *The Legend of the Red Lantern* to much acclaim, causing her to fall in love with Beijing opera. When Shanghai Theatre Academy was recruiting students in Anhui province in 1971, due to admissions quotas, she lost out to the local commune secretary's daughter, missing her chance to become an actor. She was later accepted into Anhui junior teachers' college (now Anhui Normal University) and moved to the city of Tongling, Anhui Province, where she worked as a middle school physics teacher for 17 years. Her teaching produced notable results and she was later brought to Shanghai based on her talent. She first taught at Baoshan district Xingzhi Middle School and then at Xiangming middle school. Once she retired, in 2012, she began to pursue her dreams. In 2016, at the age of 59, she started studying Beijing opera under Professor Wei of the Dongbei (northeast) Beijing Opera College, also acting as class monitor. Classes were every Thursday afternoon from 12:30 to 14:15 and students could learn the operatic roles of *laosheng* (老生, old male role-type), *hualian* (花脸, painted face role-type), and *qingyi* (青衣, elegant female role-type).⁵ In 2018, after completing the elementary class over two years, Hu Haihua organized for her peers to perform at elementary and middle schools, retirement homes, and residential areas, much to the delight of audiences young and old. During the Covid-19 pandemic, she even composed an opera song, *Coronavirus Is Nothing*, to boost morale among elderly people (Hu 2021).

There are many elderly people like Hu Haihua in Shanghai. Qinzhou Institute Beijing opera class monitor Lü Shuang has been studying Beijing opera for five semesters. She says the more she practices, the more excited she is to continue her studies, finding greater beauty in Beijing opera the more she performs (Lü S. 2021). Du Jinlian originally studied Western opera and now wishes to explore Chinese opera. After learning *The Pear Flower Song* she decided to continue studying:

The extroverted nature of Western opera compared to the introverted nature of Beijing opera meant that when I first started, I felt like I was on another planet, unable to make head or tail of anything, but under the patient guidance of Li Qiuping, one of the country's best opera teachers, I got more of a feel for it as I went on. Now I actually feel like I can handle Beijing opera with ease. (Du 2021)

Student Shang Shengrong grew up watching her father sing daily. After she had retired, she stumbled upon online sign-ups for lessons and decided to try taking classes. Singing Beijing opera evokes

5. *Laosheng* roles include generals or high-ranking officers of the military, albeit of a more cultivated disposition than those of real life. *Hualian* roles are "rough" or "mighty" male characters; *hualian* means "colorful face," due to the heavy face paint required for the role. *Qingyi* is the role of middle-aged women, mostly married and dignified.



Figure 3. Well-known actor Li Qiuping teaching Beijing opera singing and posture at the Shanghai University for the Elderly, 8 May 2024. (Photo by Zhao Zhurong)

childhood memories; the intonations of the songs makes her nostalgic for their father (Shang 2021). Li Huafang from Beijing majored in English at university. She originally only had a superficial knowledge of Beijing opera but later discovered meaning with each skill learned—singing, reciting, acting, and martial arts:

Take for example *Picking up the Jade Bracelet*. Everything from how actors open the door, pick up the bracelet, changes in their heart, expressions in their eyes, these all have to be displayed through performance, down to very fine details. When actors present a lifelike image, it's really entrancing! Through opera I feel the same kind of vivid spirit as when I do Chinese painting. (Li 2021)

She says that when she sings the opera *Mu Guiying Takes Charge*, she feels an unstoppable burst of energy that really lifts her spirit:

I heard the vigor of the gong oscillate with the bugle
 Calling me to break through the imperial gates with lofty aspirations
 The buffoon that is King Pan isn't worth a thought
 I can ward off one million men with just one sword (Jiang, Huang, and Wei 1981)

There are 20 students in the Beijing opera class at the Qinzhou Institute, the oldest of whom is 74 and the youngest 55. Whether they're working on vocalization, enunciation, an aria, or training their voice and movement, walking in circles to signify travel, they are disciplined. Unlike many younger students, they never arrive late or leave early. The serious enthusiasm with which they learn has also really moved their teacher, Li Qiuping. Li is an opera performer who graduated from the Opera School of Shanghai in 1966. Specializing in the *huadan* role, the vivacious female character, she is an experienced teacher of *dan* roles at opera schools. To teach her students to sing, she specially invited professional fiddler Professor Hang Lu, who is also an alumnus of Shanghai Theatre Academy, to come and play the *jinghu* (京胡, a Beijing opera fiddle) for them. As Professor Li demonstrates each posture while correcting movements, the students have learned an array of Beijing opera classics with the interplay of the smooth string music, including *The Drunken Beauty*,

Farewell My Concubine, Return of the Phoenix, The Front of the Universe, Susan Leaves, and modern plays like *The Wind Is Close*. They perform scenes from traditional operas as Li guides them with instruction on their voice and movement to help them to develop their speaking voice. Being with her students and performing with and for them takes 77-year-old Li Qiuping back to her unforgettable years on the stage (Li 2021).

Regardless of the opera genre or the roles that would be taught, classes fill quickly. But it's not just opera lessons that are popular. Courses in calligraphy, Chinese painting, oil painting, gouache, photography, musical instruments, singing, dancing, and acting are all popular in recent years. Former Director of Academic Affairs at Shanghai University for the Elderly Fang Guoping says that the university increases enrollment every year but there are limited seats for the small classes (Fang 2021). With no entrance exam or strict requirements for graduation, combined with low fees, long queues form as soon as registration opens, while online sign-ups are closed in seconds. Many people rely on their families to act as placeholders in the queue from early in the morning, and sometimes people still miss out on getting a place. Manager of Qinzhou Institute's Office of Academic Affairs Lü Xueyuan does her best to promote other opportunities for classes, including online courses, elderly community universities, and any relevant centers for elderly activities (Lü X. 2021). Meanwhile the university is constantly increasing its number of courses and collaborations with other higher education institutions, strengthening the caliber of the teaching, building a series of quality courses to offer on an online platform, and developing a hybrid model. In August 2023, the State Council report on the progress of strengthening and advancing programs for seniors proposed that by 2025, every county (including municipalities, districts, and administrative divisions) should have at least one university for the elderly (Song et al. 2022).

The State of Elderly Community Arts Activities

Shanghai's neighborhood communities have provided all kinds of platforms and services to fulfill the diverse needs of elderly people. Take for example Guangzhong Road neighborhood in Hongkou district. As of 2023, the neighborhood had a population of 111,700 people, of which 39,000 were over the age of 60 (*Zhoudao Shanghai* 2023). The neighborhood has set up four recreational centers for senior citizens to offer a rich and varied range of recreational and leisurely activities. Every Monday to Friday, seniors within the neighborhood have opportunities for enrichment classes and activities as well as a large stage for performances right on their doorstep.

The first such center at 120 Shuidian Road was opened in 2018 and now has 26 activity programs, including a choir, poetry recitals, folk dance, aerobics, tai chi, Shanghai opera, Yue opera, and Chinese painting. The elderly can take part in activities as well as use the platform for displaying their talents. On the Lunar New Year's Day and for other festivals, they have a place to stage cultural performances in the neighborhood.

Zhang Jianwen is a 76-year-old model coach for Longxiang Modeling Group. Modeling is a popular activity for retired men and women. Zhang set up his group with the support of the neighborhood office and has taken participants to Beijing to compete in the middle-aged to elderly modeling competition. They've won the group prize money and several individual prizes. This attracted even more participants to the Longxiang group, several of whom have gone on to lead or coach other modeling groups (*Zhoudao Shanghai* 2023).

While modeling groups have height requirements,⁶ dancing in public squares is a form of exercise open to all who wish to participate. All you need is music and you can dance at any time, in whatever style suits the group filling the square. The epitome of mass dancing for exercise, communal dancing can be found everywhere in Shanghai on its roadside squares, in parks, and on street corners. Styles include *jiamusi* step, baba, and water soldier dance (*shuibing wu*). Free and easy, the

6. Modeling groups have height requirements. The average height of male models at Longxiang Models is 182.5 cm; the average female model is 169.5 cm tall (Li and Ding 2023).



Figure 4. Practicing *shuibing wu*, the *Water Soldier Dance*, in the Shanghai Meilong Park public square, 5 May 2024. (Photo by Zhao Zhurong)

upbeat rhythms frequently attract passersby who stop and watch. Having danced for 10 years and now over 60 years old, Bao Lei is the only male member of the dance group he joined (see fig. 14). He tells people who watch from the side and want to learn that “while it’s the *Water Soldier Dance*, every month there are changes and developments. There are people who teach it online as well, and if you want to learn, you need to practice every day, polishing your moves, otherwise you’ll never get it down and others will find it hard to dance with you” (in Zhu 2022). Mr. Lu has been practicing the water soldier dance for 10 years, dancing two hours a day, and says it is now something he couldn’t live without (Zhu 2022).

Community choirs are also available for seniors. Shanghai’s Huaihai community cultural activity center’s senior New Sound Choir (Xinyin hechangtuan) has brought together many talents. Zhang Daxiang reports that he first studied mechanics and went on to become his company’s core technician before being promoted to a managerial position. Since falling in love with singing at age 17, he’s never stopped: “Although I’m a mechanic and not bad at management, truthfully, the amount of time I could happily spend learning to sing is so much more than I could on mechanics.” The greatest reward he gets from singing bel canto is feeling young again: “How can people who sing get old? First, doing anything you like will always make you feel good. Second, studying singing in itself is about learning to use one’s breathing properly, it’s a great form of practice and even better for your health!” Chen Qi, who just turned 80, says, “I’d be truly lonely if I couldn’t sing with everyone and talk with my friends” (in Zhu 2022).

Singing, playing an instrument, modeling, and dancing in public squares are mass cultural pastimes for local communities that cannot only strengthen neighborhood relations and communication, but also enhance people’s physical, mental, and spiritual health.

The Impact of Arts Education for Seniors

Given how fond the elderly are of taking part in arts courses and various recreational activities, arts education clearly has a positive impact. For example, according to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) theory, singing can release pent-up energy and tension around the diaphragm. The stress relief can affect the secretion of various hormones, spurring the release of natural stimulants in the

form of endorphins. It is extremely effective in treating irritation to the liver, vitality unable to flow through the spleen, *qi* (气) and blood flow, depression, and breast cancer (Sun 2016). According to reports, the Choral Specialist Committee of the Shanghai Musicians' Society recorded over 140 choirs that regularly rehearse, over half the members of which were elderly people (Sun 2016). Meanwhile, elderly neighborhood choirs and groups that form organically in parks are numerous, as I've seen in my hometown of Suzhou where my mother, uncle, and aunt participate in choir classes. Through various arts activities and education, elderly people can better manage their own lives, unearth their potential, boost their confidence, and reduce pressure or anxiety. Lifelong learning helps elderly people keep their brains active, delaying cognitive decline (Sohu 2023; Ferguson et al. 2023). Learning and creating together with others is a form of social activity, remedying loneliness and bringing individuals recognition in their communities. Picking up skills in things like horticulture, cooking, flower arranging, or photography brings joy and even new work opportunities.

According to Fang Guoping from the Academic Affairs Office of Shanghai Elderly University, some elderly graduates are imparting the knowledge and skills they have learned to other elderly students in community schools after completing their courses at the Elderly University:

Lin Yahui, female, 56, has learned to play the cucurbit flute (a traditional musical instrument) at Shanghai Elderly University. As her son works in Australia, she often travels there. After receiving the honorary graduation certificate, she went to Australia and taught at a community school there.

He Daixin, female, 61, is now a teacher in a community school in Huangpu District after obtaining the honorary diploma in seal carving.

Lu Peirong, female, 63, was a student in aerobics and folk dance and obtained an honorary diploma from the Elderly University. She is now teaching at community schools in Minhang and other districts.

Chu Xueqin, male, 64, is now working at the Study Tour Department of the Elderly University after finishing the literature and history course.

Ma Meifang, female, 64, has been teaching at the Elderly University after finishing the dancesport course there. (Fang 2023)

The range of arts education offered by elderly educational institutions is incredibly broad. In addition to arts courses, many courses related to internet use are being launched to help seniors get more familiar with online entertainment and commerce.

An Overview and Characteristics of Elderly Arts Education

Shanghai is China's provincial administrative region with the highest aging population. According to official statistics, as of the beginning of 2019, the elderly population over 60 years old, with registered residence in Shanghai, has reached 5.0328 million, accounting for 34.4% of the total registered population (PCYangLao n.d.). Throughout its 38 years of development from 1985–2023, elderly arts education in Shanghai has received widespread attention and support from the municipal government and from the community. The area has become one of the most developed regions for elderly education, having now formed a combination of schools for elderly education, elderly remote learning, and community learning. The Shanghai municipal government supports various arts institutions that organize arts training and cultural events for the elderly, and even provides subsidies. Government departments, businesses, higher education institutions, and public schools at a range of levels provide a wide-ranging and high-quality education system in Shanghai (see fig. 5; Zhang X. 2020).

Since the year 2000, Shanghai has factored the development of elderly education into its wider education planning. Shanghai University for the Elderly has led the way in forming the nation's largest elderly education alliance, which includes Fudan University and Shanghai Jiaotong

Key statistics for Shanghai municipality elderly education, 2018

Type of institution	Number of institutions	Total teaching staff	Specialist part-time teaching staff	Number of classes	Number of students	
					Total	Students aged 60+
Municipal level university for the elderly	4	516	394	1,710	33,448	26,015
Municipal university for the elderly branch or neighborhood center	65	2,737	2,243	7,428	137,255	94,362
Street, industrial park, elderly study center, or elderly school local admin and study center	5,793	25,430	16,570	29,871	644,466	484,374
Total	5,793	28,683	19,207	39,009	815,169	604,031

Figure 5. Office of Shanghai Elderly Education, Shanghai elderly education information center. From the 2018 collection of Shanghai municipality elderly education statistics. (Shanghai: Shanghai municipality education committee, 2018:3)

University's elderly universities among its 21 members. The alliance has around 3,000 classes across more than 1,000 subjects, with around 100,000 students enrolled per semester (AAO 2021).

By the end of 2019, China had 76,296 educational institutions for the elderly, with around 10.9 million students (Shao and Li 2022). This accounted for just 4.3% of the population over the age of 60 (*The Paper* 2020). Currently, all kinds of universities for the elderly can only accommodate 20–30% of those seeking to take classes. The unserved 70% reflects the state of the refined arts education system. It is still an imperfect system, with courses' objectives not clear, services not up to standard, or one-to-one interaction inadequate (Sui, Wang, and Zhu 2022).

Chinese elderly education is still developing and resources for each art form can still improve. Choice is limited and cannot meet the needs of the many new students looking to register each year. While government departments have continuously increased investment in community infrastructure, it seems that cultural activities have remained the reserve of holidays and festivals.⁷ Special festive activities (those that meet the requirements of government and arts educational specialists or academics) are not geared toward the arts nor do they satisfy the cultural needs of the elderly.

To address some of these shortfalls, I make the following recommendations:

Programs Should Be Better Positioned to Meet Students' Artistic Needs

The University for the Elderly's teaching model in Shanghai began in 1985. Now with 40 years of history, it has gradually grown from simple programming to a large, complex operation covering a comprehensive range of courses. Against the backdrop of China's economic development, its material conditions have reached a level that would be envied by seniors in any developed country.

7. Take the Changning District of Shanghai for example. Changning District is located in the western part of the central urban area of Shanghai, with an area of 37.19 square kilometers and a permanent population of 693,600 in 2019. Since the establishment of the National Public Cultural Service System Demonstration Zone over two years ago (2018–2020), the total investment in public cultural services in Changning District has reached 786 million RMB (Zhao 2020).

This is especially noticeable in the arts. However, since it is a university with no time limit on graduation, there are some students who enroll after retirement and spend over a decade studying a subject, some even longer. Although some schools have graduation ceremonies and required years of study, it's certain that some students continue studying after graduation. This means that others who wish to enroll cannot, and even existing students cannot progress to more advanced classes. Faced with this problem, many schools have teachers use the same syllabus for all their courses so that students do not move from one course to the next ad infinitum—as if course content is the problem.

It is clear from higher education teaching and training that specialist arts teaching starts from foundational topics before moving to specialist courses on theory, practice, and the synthesis of all of these (see Yang 2015). Universities for the elderly should introduce more research-intensive courses, designing tracks for those with higher artistic aspirations as well as for those interested in foundational classes. Refining services for segments of the population with different artistic needs will not only ease the competition for enrollment but will also allow students to either explore the depth and breadth of an artistic field or learn new skills in several different areas. These programs could even help them to pursue new careers beyond the usual retirement age and advance their own artistic work. The universities for the elderly could run a variety of MFA programs, such as drama, Beijing opera, photography, painting, calligraphy, and the relevant theory and criticism; students could choose to research an art form in more depth or focus on creating work of a certain style or theme, pursuing a higher level of artistic expression.

Elderly arts education can also learn from systematized course content in general arts education, fully respecting the individual and providing more diversified and individualized arts courses and activities. Programs can be adjusted and arranged according to local elderly groups' actual needs and the resources available. Leveraging digital platforms to set up social groups, such as WeChat and QQ groups, increases the level of social interest and support by providing the resources to learn about arts activities in their area. The government should encourage groups and institutions to offer courses, develop community-run elderly education, and set up community education hubs within walking distance in neighborhoods. The sustained output of high-quality, meaningful, pluralistic, and individualized content allows the elderly to develop their own place in the art world, increasing self-confidence and self-respect. Raising funds for schools from numerous parties would help to acquire enough to fully cover elderly arts education programs.⁸

Community Centers Should Improve Interpersonal Interaction

A widespread problem among retirees is loneliness and social marginalization. Community arts activities can fulfill the need for social interaction by expanding their own social networks and rebuilding social circles in neighborhood community spaces and parks including, in addition to courses, more performances, community activities, and regular artist exchanges. Showings and competitions, cultural festivals, and art exhibitions encourage the elderly to display their cultural talents. Artist talks and workshops provide an opportunity to interact with professional artists and learn about the artist's creative process.

Living in Harmony with Nature

Ancient Daoist Zhuangzi's life philosophy is the theoretical basis of artistic living. He believed that the true realm of art and spirit is without desire for fame and wealth. The true meaning of life

8. I propose that some specific measures could involve the following: 1) require students to enroll nearby and devote community funding to expand the coverage of school for the elderly; 2) encourage communities to engage professional art services (for example, drama troupes, art colleges, intangible cultural heritage departments, and other entities can perform, give lectures, hold workshops, and so on, in the community); 3) encourage private enterprises to provide funds to build venues such as yoga studios, photography studios, etc., and profit from them. Recently, the government has started to envision the development of an economy in service of the elderly (Wan 2024).

does not lie in pursuing fame and material wealth but in realizing harmony with the self, pursuing an inner calm and freedom. He thought that by shirking material desires and the pursuit of fame, people could truly experience the beauty and meaning of life. “The complete person does not pursue the self, the spiritual person does not pursue success, the sage does not pursue fame” (Zhuang 2022:116). Zhuangzi proposed a form of thinking he referred to as “carefree wondering” in the hope of undoing what constrains us so that we may live poetically and enjoy every instant of a care-free life. Research supports that maintaining a generally peaceful and harmonious state can help relax nervous tension, reduce blood pressure, and enhance the secretion of beneficial hormones, enzymes, and acetylcholine, which would strengthen the immune system, thus increasing the probability of longevity (Wei 2022).

Aside from Zhuangzi in China, the renowned painter Marcel Duchamp (28 July 1887–2 October 1968) simply stopped painting for a long time. He spent his days playing chess, believing that this leisurely lifestyle constituted art. He famously remarked, “My best work of art is my life.” Duchamp’s profound insight lies in his aim to elevate the human spiritual realm. For instance, he often cited the act of drinking tea. Drinking tea quenches one’s thirst, and for a person lacking spiritual depth, this act is its only purpose. However, someone with spiritual depth can discern poetry in the act of tea drinking, thereby finding beauty therein (Zhang S. 2015).

In daily life, there is a “way of tea,” a “way of flowers,” and a “way of calligraphy”; the artistic value of these perspectives is evident in many aspects of life. For example, the gardens of Suzhou display a range of artistic elements. The Canglang Pavilion, Lion Forest, Humble Administrator’s Garden, and Lingering Garden were built over the course of many years, during the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, respectively. The artistry is seen in their architecture, bodies of water, plants, and statues. The gardens are a practical example of ancient people rendering life artistic. By connecting people and nature in an artistically composed space, Suzhou’s gardens highlight the harmonious interaction between people and nature. The garden’s many elements—rocks, water, plants, and statues—convey beauty and tranquility, while the composition of space is clearly layered and complex, with winding paths leading to seclusion. The artistry of the design throughout the Suzhou gardens demonstrates the longstanding Chinese ideal of allowing people to simultaneously appreciate the gardens and sense the harmonious coexistence of people and nature.

Viewing every aspect of life as art and pursuing the aesthetic value of all aspects of life continues as one grows older. Artistic living allows people to realize the harmonious coexistence between people and nature, heightening their aesthetic and emotional experiences. It can provide joy and meaning to the elderly, mediating physical and emotional discomfort, preventing disease, and generally helping them to maintain a healthy and happy lifestyle. Exploring and emphasizing artistic living throughout life and applying it to programs that support elder care through education and lifelong artistic learning can help solve problems of aging and offer elders healthy and fulfilling lives.

References

- Academic Affairs Office of Shanghai University for the Elderly (AAO). 2021. “Basic Information of Shanghai University for the Elderly.” Informational brochure.
- Du Jinlian. 2021. Personal interview with author. Shanghai University for the Elderly, 24 December.
- Guandian. 2023. “The total fertility rate of registered residence population in Shanghai in 2022 will be only 0.7, far lower than that of Singapore and Tokyo.” 21 February. baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1758412807507244396&wfr=spider&for=pc
- Fang Guoping. 2021. Personal interview with author. Shanghai University for the Elderly, 31 December.
- Fang Guoping. 2023. Personal interview with author. Shanghai University for the Elderly, 30 January.
- Fang Guoping. 2024. Personal communication on WeChat with author, 2 April.
- Ferguson, Leah, Debaleena Sain, Esra Kürüm, Carla M. Strickland-Hughes, George W. Rebok, and Rachel Wu. 2023. “One-Year Cognitive Outcomes from a Multiple Real-World Skill Learning Intervention with Older Adults.” *Aging & Mental Health* 27, 11:2134–43. doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2023.2197847

- Hu Haihua. 2021. Personal interview with author. Shanghai University for the Elderly, 31 December.
- Jiang Fengshan, Huang Baoguang, and Wei Guide. 1981. *Mu Guiying Takes Charge: Beijing Opera Performed by Mei Lanfang, The Score Book*. People's Music Publishing House.
- Li Haiwei and Ding Ting. 2023. "Old age can also be so beautiful! Look at this Shanghai model group with an average age of over 60." *Xinhua News Agency*, 8 March. baijiahao.baidu.com/?id=1759786588971177737&wfr=spider&for=pc
- Li Huafang. 2021. Personal interview with author. Shanghai University for the Elderly, 24 December.
- Lü Shuang. 2021. Personal interview with author. Shanghai University for the Elderly, 24 December.
- Lü Xueyuan. 2021. Personal interview with author. Shanghai University for the Elderly, 24 December.
- Marx, Karl. (1867) 1975. *Das Kapital, Vol 1*. People's Publishing.
- Office of Shanghai Elderly Education. 2020. "Shanghai Elderly Education Statistics Compilation 2019." 7 July. yd.xhedu.sh.cn/sq_shslnjytjhb/index.html
- PCYangLao. n.d. "Shanghai: Highest Percentage of Aging Population in China, with a Combination of Approaches to Protect Them." Accessed 5 April 2024. www.pcyanglao.com/news/ylxw/24326.html
- Shanghai Quality*. 2022. "A survey of Internet use among the elderly in Shanghai." *Shanghai Quality* 10:28–31.
- Shang Shengrong. 2021. Personal interview with author. Shanghai University for the Elderly, 24 December.
- Shao Xiaofeng, and Li Mingxu. 2022. "The Inner Characteristics, Current Analysis, and a Logical Framework for the High-Quality Development of Elderly Education." *Employment and Education Forum* 6. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzUzODk4OTQzNA==&mid=2247538811&idx=1&sn=ceecae37cd5afe53e45570322247ef0&chksm=facd5e6ecdbad7789fa6954a307a5351f44328bf4d4f2ac3e3ed7eb4d8e84690dd82977b0d4f&scene=27
- Sobu*. 2023. "Learning New Skills Can Prevent Dementia and Improve Cognitive Abilities of the Elderly." 3 May. www.sohu.com/a/672340718_121649167
- Song Jia, Tian Xiaohang, He Leijing, Liang Jie. 2022. "A Perspective on the Intense Registrations for Elderly Universities." *Xinhua News*. 7 November. export.shobserver.com/baijiahao/html/547848.html
- Sui Zhangsheng, Wang Qiao, and Zhu Zhiyi. 2022. "The Status and Policies of Modern University Arts Education for Elderly Groups." *China National Exhibition*, 7.
- Sun Xiaoqi. 2016. "Did You Know? Shanghai Now Has Over 140 Registered Choirs, Half of Which Are Elderly People." *Shangguan News*, 26 October. www.jfdaily.com/news/detail?id=34597
- The Central Institute of Party History and Literature of the Communist Party of China. 2021. "The Annals of Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects." *Xinhua News*, 27 July. www.xinhuanet.com/2021-07/27/c_1127701824.htm
- The Paper*. 2020. "Authoritative Data: National Statistics Clearly Show that the National Population Aged 60 or Above Has Reached 253.9 Million." *The Paper*, 20 January. m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_5595821
- The Paper*. 2021. "The 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and the 'Three Step Development Strategy.'" *The Paper*, 3 December. m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_15695949
- Wan Jing. 2024. "Both the 'Economy for the Elderly' and the 'Economy for the Preparation for Aging' Are Included in Developing the System of Economy Serving the Aging Population." *Rule of Law Daily*. 27 January. baijiahao.baidu.com/?id=1789200306399052396&wfr=spider&for=pc
- Wei Qinguo. 2022. "Purification and Peace as Health Preservation for Longevity." *Chinese Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, 29 September. mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzI5MDE1ODE1Nw==&mid=2655149155&idx=4&sn=273f818a9851fe7e22386828f004ee1e&chksm=f792df41c0e55657482ec441e9b1c8c90994fdf7d50dbb3db48dab9b317f284be8693d64c4ed&scene=27
- Xinhua News*. 2022. "A Perspective on the Intense Registrations for Elderly Universities." *Xinhua News*, 7 November. <https://export.shobserver.com/baijiahao/html/547848.html>
- Yang, Peiyuan. 2015. "'The Sound of the Elderly Playing'—an Inquiry into Arts Education at Universities for the Elderly, Part 1." *Mass Literature & Art*, 17.
- Zhang Shiyong. 2015. "Art Becomes Life, and Life Becomes Art." Keynote speech for the 1st China Literature and Art Criticism Annual Conference. 2 December. www.zgwypl.com/content/details78_48666.html

- Zhang Chenyang. 2022. "I, 74 years old, Play the Piano on Nanjing West Road." *DT-Tamen* (WeChat Channel). Repost on *The Paper*. m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_17143789
- Zhang Xing. 2020. "Forty Years of Elderly Education in Shanghai." *Adult Education in China* 07. cdce.eol.cn/1031/353718.html
- Zhao Yue. 2020. "Promoting 'Public Culture+'—How Shanghai Changning Model Works." *Xinming Evening News*, 29 July. wap.xinmin.cn/content/31776149.html
- Zhuang Zhou (Zhuangzi, Pre-Qin Dynasty). 2022. *Carefree Travel* (Xiaoyao you), Chinese Language Grade 8, Volume 2. People's Education Press.
- Zhoudao Shanghai* [*Shanghai Morning Post*]. 2023. "Being a Model, Practicing Tai Chi, Learning Musical Instruments, Doing Handicrafts... Just be happy, the Goal Is to Be a Hundred Years Old! Take a Look at the World of Cultural and Sports Activities for the Elderly in Shanghai!" *Zhoudao Shanghai*, 23 February. www.163.com/dy/article/HU9IOLIQ0514A42S.html
- Zhu Yuan. 2022. "Beautiful Daily Life | This 76-year-old Choir Has Placed their Dreams and Warmed their Lives." *Xinmin Evening News*. 9 November. baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1749019851411299805&wfr=spider&for=pc
- Zuo Yan. 2018. "Starting from Reform and Opening Up | From 'Treating Diseases' to 'Healthy,' Life Expectancy Has Increased by 10 Years per Person." 18 October. wap.xinmin.cn/content/31443276.html

TDRreadings

- Huang Changyong. 2021. "Shanghai: The Road to a Modern Performing Arts City." *TDR* 65, 2 (T250):150–66. doi.org/10.1017/S1054204321000137
- Seetoo, Chiayi, and Haoping Zou. 2016. "China's Guangchang Wu: The Emergence, Choreography, and Management of Dancing in Public Squares." *TDR* 60, 4 (T232):22–49. muse.jhu.edu/article/638825
- Shen Liang. 2014. "Performing Dream or Reality: The Dilemma of Chinese Community-Based Theatre." *TDR* 58, 1 (T221):16–23. doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00325
- Shen Liang. 2021. "Drama Etudes: A Pedagogical Experiment in China." *TDR* 65, 2 (T250):131–49. doi.org/10.1017/S1054204321000125