

Developing Community-Based Senior Apartment Service Models in Dalian: An International Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

As China confronts the challenges of a rapidly aging population, community-based senior apartments have emerged as an essential component in the transformation of eldercare models. This study investigates the development of such models in Dalian, a key coastal city in Northeast China, through the lens of international comparison. Drawing on practices from Japan, Germany, and the Netherlands, the study analyzes the current features and shortcomings of Dalian's community-based senior apartment services and explores how international experience can be localized to enhance sustainability, accessibility, and integration. Based on qualitative data collected through field research and stakeholder interviews, the study highlights the importance of service integration, professional staffing, and community involvement. It concludes with policy and practice-oriented recommendations for building a resilient, community-centered eldercare model in Dalian.

KEYWORDS

Community-based care; Senior apartments; International comparison; Service model; Dalian

1 Introduction

China is undergoing an unprecedented demographic transformation as its population continues to age at a rapid pace^[1]. According to the latest national statistics, by the end of 2024, the population aged 60 and above in China reached 310.31 million, surpassing 300 million for the first time, and the proportion is expected to rise significantly in the coming decades. This demographic shift poses severe challenges to the traditional eldercare system, which has long relied on family-based support and underdeveloped institutional care^[2]. Additionally, shifting family structures, reduced household sizes, and increasing urban migration have weakened the traditional caregiving capacity^[3]. As a result, the demand for diversified and sustainable eldercare models is growing more urgent. The younger generation, often burdened with dual responsibilities of work and childcare, is less able to provide full-time care for aging parents, exacerbating the need for formal eldercare solutions. In urban centers such as Dalian, which combines rapid urbanization with an increasingly aging population, new eldercare solutions are urgently needed. Community-based senior apartments have gained attention in recent years as a promising alternative that bridges the gap between institutional care and home-based support^[4]. These facilities aim to support aging in place while providing essential services that preserve autonomy and dignity for the elderly. They also offer a middle ground that allows seniors to live independently while receiving tailored care as needed, fostering social interaction and a sense of belonging within their local communities.

Despite their potential, community-based senior apartments in Dalian are still in the early stages of development. Most facilities are privately run, lack integration with public health services, and are unaffordable to low- and middle-income groups. Moreover, there is limited engagement with the surrounding community, and services are often fragmented and inadequately staffed. In contrast, several countries have developed mature models of community-based senior living that offer valuable references. Drawing insights from these international experiences may provide practical guidance for constructing a sustainable and inclusive eldercare model in Dalian. Moreover, the urban planning context in Dalian, characterized by high population density and modern infrastructure, offers unique opportunities to experiment with compact, integrated eldercare communities that can serve as blueprints for replication across other Chinese cities. Additionally, Dalian's coastal geography and relatively high quality of life have made it an attractive location for elderly people to settle, further reinforcing the importance of developing sustainable eldercare options.

This study aims to explore the current landscape of community-based senior apartments in Dalian, assess the challenges they face, and evaluate how global best practices in eldercare can be adapted to suit the local context. It also aims to inform policymakers and practitioners by providing practical recommendations based on international comparisons. In doing so, this study contributes to the evolving discourse on aging-in-place strategies and the future of eldercare in China.

2 Literature review

Community-based senior apartments, distinct from institutional nursing homes, emphasize independent or semi-independent living supported by accessible social and health services^[5]. These settings enable older adults to remain in familiar environments while accessing varying levels of assistance according to their individual needs. In recent decades,

countries with advanced aging policies have explored various approaches to balance autonomy, affordability, and care provision. Japan, for example, has developed a comprehensive system that integrates housing, healthcare, and social services under its long-term care insurance program^[6]. Its concept of 'serviced housing for the elderly' provides individualized support while maintaining community connections^[7]. Germany has promoted decentralized assisted living arrangements where care is delivered flexibly through mobile teams supported by long-term care insurance^[8]. These arrangements are bolstered by government standards that regulate care quality and workforce qualifications. Meanwhile, the Netherlands has emphasized deinstitutionalization and the separation of housing and care, enabling seniors to remain at home with support from neighborhood networks^[9]. The Dutch model also underscores social participation, where older adults are empowered to contribute to their living environment through shared governance and community events^[10].

Existing Chinese research on eldercare has largely concentrated on institutional care and home-based services, with less attention paid to community-based senior apartments^[11]. Recent pilot projects in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Dalian show the emerging role of these models in urban eldercare. Although such models are gaining traction in major urban centers, research is still in a nascent stage. Most studies are descriptive in nature and fail to provide strategic or policy-oriented frameworks for sustainable development. Identifying transferable lessons while accounting for local cultural and institutional contexts is essential for successful reform. However, there is limited theoretical and practical guidance on how to structure these facilities for long-term viability, particularly in terms of policy design, financing, and community integration. Researchers have called for more empirical studies that connect global best practices with localized implementation strategies. Furthermore, there is a lack of a unified national framework guiding the establishment and management of community-based senior apartments, resulting in varied quality and inconsistency across regions^[12]. Bridging this gap requires both top-down policy alignment and bottom-up innovation^[13]. The decentralization of eldercare governance in China means that local governments often interpret national directives differently, leading to fragmented practices. International comparative research highlights the significance of regulatory clarity, financing mechanisms, and inter-agency coordination in scaling up community-based eldercare^[14]. For example, the success of Japan's model lies not only in its policy design but also in the establishment of care managers who coordinate between service providers, families, and elderly residents. China currently lacks such intermediaries, making service integration more difficult. As such, this study fills a critical gap by analyzing community-based senior apartments in Dalian in comparison with established models abroad, identifying transferable lessons while accounting for local cultural and institutional contexts.

3 Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative case study methodology to explore the current status and developmental potential of community-based senior apartment service models in Dalian. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the complexities and contextual nuances involved in developing sustainable eldercare solutions. Data collection consisted of three primary components: field observations at selected senior apartment facilities, in-depth interviews with service providers, residents, and policymakers, and a review of relevant documents such as policy reports, planning documents, and service brochures. The selected apartment facilities varied in size, ownership structure, and location across Dalian, allowing a more representative understanding of the broader system.

A total of 5 senior apartments were selected as case sites, including both privately-operated and mixed-ownership models. Fieldwork spanned over three months between October and December 2024. A total of 25 in-depth interviews were conducted, including 10 elderly residents, 8 care workers, 3 facility managers, and 4 representatives from local government or health bureaus. Interview questions focused on perceptions of care quality, service integration, affordability, community interaction, and satisfaction with living conditions. The fieldwork aimed to capture a diverse cross-section of operating conditions, service quality, and user experiences. Thematic analysis was used to process and interpret the qualitative data, focusing on three core dimensions: service provision structure, management and staffing, and resident experience. These themes were then compared with international models using an interpretive framework to evaluate adaptability, innovation, and gaps in service delivery. This comparative approach helps identify not only what has been done in Dalian but also what can be improved by learning from global experiences. The triangulation of data sources enhanced the reliability and validity of the findings, providing a comprehensive foundation for policy and practice recommendations.

Secondary data were gathered from government reports, national aging policy documents, and eldercare market analyses. These documents provided contextual understanding of how local strategies are evolving and what regulatory mechanisms exist to support the sector.

4 Results and analysis

The results of this study reveal a diverse yet underdeveloped landscape of community-based senior apartments in

Dalian.

4.1 Service provision and integration

Fieldwork findings show that most senior apartments operate under a semi-commercial model offering basic services such as housing, meals, housekeeping, and limited recreational activities. However, health and social care services remain weakly integrated. While some facilities have informal partnerships with nearby hospitals or community health centers, these relationships are mostly limited to referrals or occasional visits by doctors, rather than continuous care coordination. In emergencies, elderly residents often need to rely on family members or external services.

In contrast, international models often feature built-in medical rooms or dedicated care coordinators who manage chronic disease support and personalized health plans^[15]. In Dalian, such features are rare. The lack of digital health infrastructure further restricts timely access to medical records or online consultation.

4.2 Staffing and professionalism

A critical challenge identified is the shortage of well-trained care professionals. Most staff in the surveyed facilities have minimal training, often receiving only short-term certification courses that do not equip them with sufficient knowledge in geriatric care or psychological support. Facility managers report high turnover rates and difficulty in recruiting qualified personnel, particularly younger staff. This staffing gap undermines service quality and resident confidence.

In comparison, countries like Germany and Japan have robust systems of vocational training and licensing for eldercare workers^[16]. Their professionals receive continuous education and career development support, which enhances job stability and care quality. Dalian currently lacks such a pipeline, suggesting an urgent need for policy-driven training initiatives in cooperation with local colleges or nursing institutions.

4.3 Resident experience and community life

Interviewed residents expressed high satisfaction with the cleanliness, safety, and physical layout of the apartments. However, they also raised concerns about affordability, lack of companionship, and limited interaction with the surrounding community. Some residents mentioned feeling 'lonely' despite living in close proximity to others, which reveals a gap in the social design of these apartments. Social isolation remains a hidden risk, especially for those without family visits.

Community engagement programs, such as intergenerational activities with nearby schools, volunteer programs, or hobby-based clubs, were mostly absent or irregular. In international models, these elements are central^[17]. For example, Dutch eldercare facilities often include community cafés or daycare spaces shared with local families to foster interaction. Such examples suggest that architectural innovation must be paired with programming to create a socially rich environment.

5 Discussion

The comparative findings suggest that Dalian's future path in developing community-based senior apartments should emphasize three core areas: integration, professionalism, and community orientation. First, integrating health, social, and emotional care services requires institutional collaboration and digital infrastructure that enables real-time coordination among stakeholders. This includes building referral networks, telemedicine access, and care coordination platforms that reduce redundancy and improve response time. Second, building a skilled eldercare workforce is essential, and this can be achieved through vocational training programs, professional certification, and international exchange initiatives. Incentivizing caregiving as a respected profession, with clear career pathways and attractive benefits, will be critical for ensuring long-term workforce sustainability. Partnerships with academic institutions and training centers can also help generate a new generation of skilled care workers. Third, the physical design and social function of senior apartments must align with broader community structures to encourage intergenerational interaction and social inclusion. Creating age-friendly public spaces, shared activity zones, and community volunteer networks can enhance residents' emotional well-being and reduce isolation. Cultural and recreational programs can also be co-developed with local stakeholders to reflect the specific preferences and identities of seniors in Dalian.

Policy implications also emerge from this analysis. Local authorities need to create enabling frameworks that incentivize private investment while ensuring service accessibility for disadvantaged groups. A mixed financing model combining user payment, government subsidies, and social insurance could enhance both sustainability and equity. Regulations should also ensure quality control, affordability, and transparent service standards. Moreover, elderly residents should not merely be service recipients but active participants in the planning and operation of their living spaces. This participatory approach not only enhances resident satisfaction but also reflects contemporary values of

person-centered care and community empowerment.

Finally, the successful adaptation of international models requires cultural sensitivity. Concepts such as family responsibility, social harmony, and filial piety still shape how eldercare is perceived in China. Any imported model must respect and incorporate these values to gain public acceptance and policy support. Furthermore, involving local communities and leveraging existing cultural assets will help create eldercare models that are both globally informed and locally rooted.

6 Conclusion

This study explored the development path of community-based senior apartment service models in Dalian, using international experiences as a comparative reference. The findings underscore the importance of integrated services, professional staffing, and community engagement in creating sustainable, inclusive eldercare environments. While Dalian's current models are still evolving, they hold significant potential to be shaped into best practices for urban aging in China. The city's unique combination of policy focus, urban infrastructure, and social transformation makes it a fertile ground for piloting innovative eldercare solutions.

By drawing lessons from countries with mature eldercare systems and adapting them to local cultural and economic conditions, Dalian can pioneer a new generation of community-based eldercare. Continued academic research, policy innovation, and public-private collaboration will be vital in achieving this goal. As more cities across China and the globe grapple with the challenges of aging, the insights gained from this study can contribute to the broader discourse on aging policy reform and community-based care solutions in China and beyond.

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