

# Organized Active Aging: How Urban Elderly Volunteer Groups in China Mediate Role Identity, Social Integration, and Policy Advocacy

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## ABSTRACT

This study underpins the dynamic co-constitution of role identity and social integration, advancing Active Aging during population aging and grassroots governance modernization. Drawing on an integrated framework of Role Theory and Social Integration Theory, this study adopts qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, document analysis) to compare technical, service-oriented, and cultural volunteer groups in Guangzhou. Findings reveal older volunteers shift from passive recipients to proactive agents, with reciprocal reinforcement between multifaceted role identity and social integration. Organizational resource strategies (grassroots autonomy, professional collaboration, governance embeddedness) serve as key moderators. The research adds to Active Aging theory by proposing a novel organized mediation paradigm, clarifying institutional influences on identity-integration dynamics and offering practical strategies for mobilizing senior human capital.

## KEYWORDS

Active aging; Elderly volunteer organizations; Role identity; Social integration; Grassroots governance

## 1 Introduction

Against the backdrop of China's deepening population aging and grassroots governance modernization, cultivating productive senior engagement is a strategic imperative. Policy frameworks identify 'productive aging' (*lao you suo wei*) and volunteerism as key mechanisms to transform seniors from passive welfare recipients into active contributors. China Longitudinal Aging Social Survey (2023) shows 15.7% elderly volunteer participation (mostly healthy younger seniors). Community-based groups in Guangzhou, for example, demonstrate diverse role reconstruction; however, extant research inadequately addresses the bidirectional mutuality between role identity and social integration (functional embeddedness, relational networks, institutional participation) and how organizations mediate this process. This study therefore examines: (1) the mechanisms of mutual constitution between identity and integration, and (2) the mediating roles of organizations.

## 2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Global aging has propelled the development of Active Aging theory, which reconceptualizes later life via health, participation, and security to empower elderly agency, with volunteerism increasingly examined through human capital theory, though interdisciplinary synthesis is lacking.

Extant research dichotomizes identity transformation and environmental support. Role Theory examines reconstructing identity from "retiree" to "actor," with volunteerism strengthening role identity through reinforced self-perception, expanded social interactions, and elevated self-efficacy, consequently boosting elderly well-being. Social Integration Theory highlights social networks shaping participation through social capital accumulation, expanding support networks and adaptive capacities for the elderly.

Western scholarship, however, frames role identity as a precursor to social capital (Putnam, 2000), overlooking their dynamic interdependence. Bourdieu's field theory (1986) offers integration potential but remains static in analyzing elderly volunteerism. Three gaps persist: (1) micro-level neglect of "contribution-acceptance" reciprocity (Chen et al., 2020); (2) meso-level under-exploration of organizational mediation, despite Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978); (3) methodological limits in tracing co-evolution (Li, 2022).

To address these, this study proposes a framework integrating Role Identity and Social Integration theories via three organizational mediators: Resource Strategies, Interaction Arenas, and Institutional Linkages, establishing a bidirectional loop contrasting unidirectional social capital theory. This raises three questions: (1) How do multidimensional identity and multilevel integration reinforce each other? (2) How do organizational strategies moderate this relationship? (3) How does such mutuality affect governance participation efficacy?

### 3 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach rooted in the constructivist paradigm, adopting a multiple-case comparative design to explore the subjective experiences and meaning construction of elderly volunteers within organizational contexts. Guangzhou was selected as the research site owing to its mature elderly volunteer ecosystem and accessibility for fieldwork. Three functionally distinct organizations were purposively sampled: Group T (technology-oriented), comprising retired technicians focused on appliance repair and characterized by self-funded tools and grassroots autonomy; Group S (service-oriented), predominantly consisting of female volunteers providing charity haircuts, which utilized community venues and standardized training; and Group C (culture-oriented), comprising retired educators and music enthusiasts engaged primarily in choir activities but also in cultural preservation and home-based elderly care volunteer services. This group was supported by cultural grants and embedded in governance structures.

Data collection employed methodological triangulation, encompassing: 28 semi-structured interviews (with 3 leaders, 10 core members, 12 general members, and 3 community social workers) focusing on participation motives, role perception, and policy awareness, conducted until theoretical saturation. This was complemented by four months of participant observation conducted at service sites, team meetings, and community events. Field notes and audio recordings documented interactions and management styles. Document analysis was also performed on activity logs, meeting minutes, and local policies. Data analysis utilized grounded theory via NVivo 12, involving open coding to extract primary concepts, axial coding to cluster them into core categories (e.g., role identity, social integration), and selective coding to identify "mutual construction cycles in organizational fields" as the core explanatory framework. Quality control measures included triangulation across data sources, respondent validation of interpretations, audit trails of coding procedures, and researcher reflexivity journals to distinguish empirical evidence from subjective inference.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Organizational Typologies: Resource Dependency Configurations

Technology-oriented organizations (Group T) function within a grassroots autonomy model, relying primarily on informal member contributions, with repair tools and components predominantly self-funded, with peripheral support from external programs. They balance technical institutionalization (via "Volunteer Repair Workshops" and master-apprentice traditions) with flexible, flat management guided by unwritten norms, fostering high participation autonomy. Service-oriented organizations (Group S) adopt a professional collaboration model. Core resources (e.g., haircut tools) are member-funded, while auxiliary support—including official endorsement through the iVolunteer platform and rent-free community venues—originates from institutional linkages. Their workflow integrates standardized training (master-apprentice coaching with assessments) with adaptive practices, such as pop-up sessions for homebound elders. Culture-oriented organizations (Group C) follow a governance embeddedness model, with resources (rent-free venues, activity funding) and recruitment tied to administrative structures. They combine cultural activities (including choir) with governance roles (elderly visitation, policy advocacy), aligning repertoire (revolutionary anthems, folk songs) with Party-building goals to merge cultural dissemination and grassroots governance.

### 4.2 Role Identity Construction in Organizational Fields

Organizations mobilize members' capital to transform their self-identity from "retirees" to "contributors." In Group T, members like Uncle Fa, skilled in restoring obsolete devices, forge "gerontotechnical stewardship," merging material heritage preservation with community guardianship. Group S members such as Ms. Qiu redefine their identity through emotional feedback: their "hairstyling-companionship" services earn remarks like "My week feels complete only after your visit," shifting her from "laid-off worker" to "community life sustainer." Group C's Aunt Cen adapts revolutionary songs (e.g., Azaleas with hydraulic narratives), positioning members as "bridges between past and present," fostering a "community cultural inheritor" self-concept.

Social identity consolidates through intergenerational recognition: Group T members are hailed as "living encyclopedias of retro devices" by apprentices, anchoring "technical safeguard" status; Group S's Ms. Qiu becomes "Scissor Grandma" via parent praise, elevating her to "life wisdom transmitter"; Group C's Aunt Cen gains reverence teaching Dragon Boat Tune at gatherings, cementing "voice of grandparents' era" recognition.

Organizational identity reflects resource strategies: Group T uses "golden volunteer" honors to build a "technical elite community"; Group S strengthens "community companion" identity through monthly story-sharing (e.g., Aunt Yuan's Alzheimer's patient haircuts); Group C, through administrative embeddedness (with activities documented in governance white papers), fosters a 'sense of public responsibility,' as Leader Shen notes: 'We see ourselves as contributors to grassroots governance.'

### 4.3 Governance Node Evolution: Service-to-System Transformation

Elderly volunteer organizations transition from service executors to core governance actors via instrumental embeddedness, collaborative governance, and policy advocacy, mediated by their resource strategies.

Instrumental embeddedness establishes community ties through sustained service. Group T builds necessity networks via structured protocols (appointment-based repairs), gaining irreplaceable status; residents exclusively seek them for malfunctions, supported by dedicated tool spaces. Group S transforms haircuts into emotional exchanges with isolated elders, recognized by social workers as critical "emotional bridges." Group C uses volunteer credit systems (service hours redeemable for resources), creating a cycle of cultural service, incentives, and sustained engagement.

Collaborative governance integrates resources into networked ecosystems. Group T co-designs models with street administrations (e.g., repair sessions at community bazaars), formalizing practices (component repositories, repair archives) into district "technical safety-net templates." Group S compiles accessibility needs (e.g., stair handrails) from services, trains local volunteers, and replicates their model across five streets, evolving into community capacity-builders. Group C aligns activities (folk song adaptations for festivals) with governance goals, undertaking policy publicity and elder visitation to relay community feedback.

Policy advocacy elevates micro-practices to macro-policy. Group T documents barriers including obsolete appliance repairs and transport costs to inform district "Elder Volunteer Transport Subsidies" and integrate component-sharing into municipal plans. Group S institutionalizes "companionship haircutting and health consultation" into Guangzhou's Home-Based Elderly Care Service Standards, replicating across ten streets to boost medical-elderly care integration. Group C's "Silver Songs for Sunset Years" becomes a municipal demonstration, embedding their credit model in city-wide Time-Bank trials and promoting "elderly cultural inheritance" in regional plans.

### 4.4 Identity-Integration Dynamics: Organizational Mediation Mechanisms

Role identity and social integration form a dynamic, organization-mediated mutual construction cycle, with two patterns shaped by resource strategies and operational logics.

Technical organizations (Group T) exhibit a reinforcing loop: strong member identification, rooted in technical inheritance and community contribution, drives expanded governance participation. Resources acquired through governance (venues, funding) directly enhance technical capacity, consolidating role identity, a synergy creating autonomous sustainability. For example, Group T's "shared parts repository," enabled by governance support, reinforced members' "technical authority" identity via heightened community recognition.

Service and cultural organizations (Groups S and C) follow a linear progression: resources primarily sustain basic activities (tool renewal for Group S, choir operations for Group C) but do not reciprocally strengthen identity. Group S's resources support tool updates but fail to deepen 'community companion' recognition; Group C's administrative resources ensure activities but do not enhance "cultural inheritor" social status.

Organizational mediation regulates this coupling. Technical organizations achieve cyclical reinforcement through a virtuous cycle between intrinsic identity and resource feedback. Conversely, service and cultural organizations exhibit linearity, stemming from a fragmented alignment between resource strategies and identity construction. This differential mediation clarifies how organizational logic transforms resource-environment tensions into distinct identity-integration pathways.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Expanding Organizational Agency: From Service to Governance

Elderly volunteer organizations surpass the traditional role of "service providers" to function as both governance collaborators and grassroots policy entrepreneurs, with their roles shaped by organizational characteristics and contextual dynamics. As governance collaborators: technical groups (e.g., repair brigades) fill service gaps via expertise and grassroots autonomy; service groups (e.g., haircut brigades) act as emotional intermediaries, turning routine services into social adhesives via standardized protocols; cultural groups (e.g., choirs) embed in governance via policy-aligned activities, serving as "flexible vehicles" for symbolic capital conversion.

As policy entrepreneurs, these organizations translate micro-practices into macro-impact through differentiated strategies: technical groups use empirical data (e.g., repair success rates) to advocate for logistical support; service-oriented ones influence elderly care standardization via replicable models; cultural ones promote institutionalization through cultural symbol appropriation (e.g., adapting revolutionary songs). Their comparative advantages further clarify governance specializations: technical organizations excel in problem-solving governance through skill-based services that elicit sustained community support; service-oriented groups thrive in relational governance via emotional labor that cultivates social cohesion; cultural organizations lead symbolic governance by converting cultural capital into policy internalization, collectively redefining organizational agency in aging societies.

## 5.2 Resource Dependence: Strategic Mediator of Sustainability and Influence

Resource acquisition strategies exert a profound influence on organizational sustainability, member identity, and policy influence, requiring a strategic balance between dependence and autonomy. Institutional embeddedness, as exemplified by cultural organizations, illustrates this complexity administrative resources form the structural foundation through three key mechanisms: complementary venues provided by social work stations resolve spatial instability; targeted funding secures the sustainability of baseline activities; and network-based recruitment enhances legitimacy and outreach efficiency. Collectively, these mechanisms mitigate environmental uncertainties, thereby supporting service continuity and identity consolidation.

Crucially, stability depends on balancing administrative and non-administrative resources. While administrative networks confer institutional legitimacy (e.g., inclusion in governance exemplars like municipal Silver-Hair Culture Week), over-reliance may constrain autonomy by demanding alignment with grassroots agendas. Diversified supports buffer such risks: cultural project funds sustain core activities during administrative shortfalls, and non-administrative resources boost member-driven participation, creating a virtuous cycle where autonomy fosters social recognition. This balance aligns with Pfeffer and Salancik's insight that organizations must "reduce dependency on external resources while controlling environmental contingencies" to maintain resilience.

## 5.3 Organizational Hubs: Co-constitution of Identity and Integration

Organizations mediate the dynamic co-constitution of role identity and social integration through three synergistic mechanisms (resource-identity conversion, identity catalysis, and network connectivity) with distinct manifestations across organizational types. Resource-identity conversion and identity catalysis drive identity formation: technical organizations (e.g., Appliance Repair Brigades) materialize "technical authority" through members' self-investment in tools and shared resources, reinforced by practices like repair workshops; service-oriented groups (e.g., Haircut Brigades) consolidate "community companion" identity via self-financed tools and stable service provision; cultural organizations (e.g., Choirs) link "singing" to community contribution by aligning activities with governance goals. Symbolic ritualization (e.g., awards, story-sharing) transforms individual experiences into collective meaning, motivating broader civic engagement.

Network connectivity anchors identity in social structures: technical organizations build intergenerational learning communities with vocational students, challenging ageism and enabling participation in technical governance; service groups create interactive spaces (e.g., Parent-Child Haircut Days) that accumulate social capital, elevating members from service providers to life wisdom transmitters; cultural organizations form integrated service-advocacy chains with partners (e.g., cultural stations, nursing homes), amplifying their influence in institutionalizing elderly cultural needs. Together, these mechanisms create dynamic loops between identity and integration, which are tightly coupled in technical organizations, while being more resource-dependent in service and cultural groups, thereby elevating individual transformation narratives into collective practices.

## 5.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study advances Active Aging theory through three integrated contributions. First, it constructs a dynamic co-constitutive framework transcending static dichotomies between role identity and social integration, capturing their bidirectional reinforcement: technical organizations drive community embeddedness through "technical authority" (identity-driven integration), while service-oriented groups consolidate "community companion" identity through deep social integration (integration-driven identity).

Second, it highlights the primacy of intrinsic motivation over resources in elderly volunteering, a key insight neglected in organizational theory. Technical organizations achieve autonomy through participation rooted in technical inheritance and community contribution, operating independently of resource constraints; service and cultural organizations anchor motives in core values (emotional companionship, cultural transmission), treating resources as expressive conduits rather than primary drivers. This bridges role theory and resource dependence literature, clarifying elderly populations' unique motivational drivers.

Third, it proposes a novel organizational mediation pathway for grassroots policy advocacy within China's context of collectivism and governance modernization. This pathway transforms micro-practices into macro-policy through a cycle of practice, organizational refinement, and policy output: technical groups use repair data to substantiate support demands; service groups institutionalize integrated life services in formal standards; cultural groups embed elderly cultural needs via initiatives like "Silver-Hair Culture Week." This refines theory by harmonizing grassroots agency with institutional structures in non-Western governance contexts.

## 6 Conclusion and Implications

### 6.1 Synthesis of Findings

An empirical analysis of three elderly volunteer organizations in Guangzhou indicates a hierarchical progression in role transformation, with elderly participants evolving from service recipients to active agents in governance participation. The depth of this engagement is shaped by organizational typology and functional characteristics.

Technical organizations achieve the deepest governance integration, advancing from repairs to policy co-design (e.g., standardized repair sessions, component repositories), enabling members to transition from service providers to grassroots policy consultants and governance collaborators. Service-oriented organizations function as demand intermediaries, systematically identifying accessibility needs of vulnerable groups during routine services, with insights channeled to street-level administrations to catalyze welfare projects translating micro observations into macro interventions. Cultural organizations function as symbolic agents, their activities like choir performances formally recognized and embedded into soft governance mechanisms, leveraging symbolic capital through initiatives such as Songs Accompanying Sunset to indirectly shape priorities. Collectively, these findings confirm a significant shift toward meaningful governance participation, with distinct pathways mediated by organizational structures.

### 6.2 Implications and Research Limitations

This study offers practical implications for operationalizing Active Aging through organized volunteerism, aligned with grassroots governance modernization. For institutional empowerment, technical volunteer groups could be supported through the formalization of component-sharing libraries and repair protocols into district-level service standards, with incentives for tool donations to sustain autonomy. Service-oriented organizations might benefit from integrating their "companionship-through-service" models into home-based elderly care frameworks, emphasizing standardized training for emotional support provision. Cultural groups could see enhanced impact through linking their heritage-preservation activities to regional cultural development plans, strengthening credit systems that recognize service hours with public resource access. Capacity building should prioritize expanding apprenticeship systems for skill transmission, developing need-responsive training modules, and funding models that balance administrative alignment with organizational flexibility. Networked resource governance, meanwhile, could foster cross-organizational collaboration and corporate partnerships, scaling community mutual-aid practices rooted in resource-sharing mechanisms.

Methodologically, the study's reliance on cross-sectional data, combining four months of observations and interviews, limits longitudinal analysis of how role identity and social integration co-evolve over time. While the sample includes elderly participants across a range of ages (50–80), future research could further expand to include more diverse subgroups, such as those with varying health conditions, to enhance generalizability across heterogeneous aging populations. Additionally, longitudinal designs tracking identity-integration dynamics and cross-cultural comparisons would help clarify universal versus context-specific pathways, bridging existing gaps in lifecycle and inclusivity dimensions.

## Funding

This work was supported by the 2023 Institutional Research Grant of Nanfang College, Guangzhou "Toward Collaborative Governance: Practical Transformation in High-Quality Development of Community Social Organizations-Evidence from Guangdong, China" (NO: 2023XK033)

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