

# An Analysis of the Physical and Mental Care Functions and Other Roles of Japanese Nonprofit Organizations for the Elderly

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**Abstract:** NPOs, or nonprofit organizations, play crucial roles in today's society that cannot be replaced by the government or laws. Japanese nonprofit organizations are active in various fields such as social welfare, culture and education, environmental protection, and international activities. Against the backdrop of the continuously rising aging rate in Japan, the care of the elderly has become a social issue that cannot be ignored. Relevant organizations within Japanese NPOs play an important role in elderly care, providing care for the elderly both physically and mentally. At the social level, the existence of NPOs complements government functions and promotes community harmony. Studying the care functions of Japanese NPOs for the elderly can help China prepare for the coming of a severely aging society in the future.

**Keywords:** NPO; Elderly care; Japan; Aging society

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## 1. The definition, origin of NPOs, and their development process in Japan

Nonprofit organizations, abbreviated as NPOs, refer to the general term for social organizations that are independent of the government and the private sector, do not aim for profit, and engage in various nonprofit activities. Nonprofit organizations do not mean that they do not make profits. Instead, the profits obtained from their activities are reinvested into various activities that contribute to society. NPOs cover a wide range of areas, including social welfare, culture and education, environmental protection, international activities, etc., meeting people's needs in many aspects and playing important roles.

After World War II, faced with social unrest and a sluggish economy in Japan, the government was unable to manage issues in many fields effectively. There were many problems to be solved, such as environmental negative impacts brought about by economic growth, elderly care problems due to the deepening aging population, and issues in the education field like school bullying and juvenile delinquency. Against this background, Japan began to explore a path of cooperation between the government and citizens. Thus, some social organizations that

supplemented government functions emerged spontaneously, became active in various fields, and filled in the gaps of government functions.

These organizations that do not aim for profit are called nonprofit organizations. After their establishment, they continued to grow and expand. A landmark event was the 1995 Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. Nonprofit organizations played a huge role in rescue and post-disaster reconstruction. After this event, the Japanese government recognized the importance and value of nonprofit organizations, relaxed restrictions on this group, and introduced corresponding laws to regulate and protect NPOs, enabling them to operate better. In December 1998, the enactment of the “Act for the Promotion of Specified Nonprofit Activities” was another milestone event. This law clearly states that “it grants legal organization status to groups engaged in specified nonprofit activities, promotes the comprehensive development of citizens’ free social contribution activities, and is committed to the promotion of public interests.” At the same time, it greatly lowered the threshold for “public interest corporations”, and citizen groups that meet certain conditions can be recognized as NPO legal organizations<sup>[1]</sup>. The introduction of this law encouraged the emergence of more nonprofit organizations and promoted the democratization process of Japanese society, which is of great significance.

Entering the 21st century, the popularization of the Internet has made nonprofit organizations more widely known. Each organization also uses the Internet to publicize and expand its influence, attracting more Japanese citizens to participate in social public welfare volunteer activities. NPOs can be seen as actively involved in various fields such as social welfare, culture and education, environmental protection, and international activities. As of the end of September 2024, there were a total of 49,642 certified NPO legal organizations. Since the enactment of the Act for the Promotion of Specified Nonprofit Activities, the number has generally shown a significant upward trend.

## **2. The current situation of elderly care in Japan against the background of aging**

Japan is the country with the most serious aging problem in the world. As of October 2023, its total population was 124.35 million. Among them, the number of people aged 65 and above reached 36.23 million, accounting for 29.1% of the total population. It is expected that the aging rate will continue to rise in the future, and it is predicted to reach 33.3% in 2037, which means that one out of every three Japanese citizens will be over 65 years old. Against this severe aging background and with a large elderly population, the care of the elderly has become a major social issue.

The Japanese government implements certain elderly care policies based on the “Long-Term Care Insurance Law” formulated in 1997 and the “Long-Term Care Insurance System” established in 2000. According to the “Long-Term Care Insurance Law”, the so-called “state of needing long-term care” mainly refers to the state where assistance is required for bathing, excretion, eating, etc., functional training and nursing are needed, convalescence and other medical care are necessary, and it is essential to provide necessary healthcare and welfare services so that the elderly can live an independent life with dignity according to their abilities.

Long-term care services are generally divided into two types: home-based long-term care services and facility-based long-term care services. Home-based services include various forms such as home-visit nursing, home-visit rehabilitation diagnosis and treatment, and home-based convalescence guidance. Facility-based long-term care services mean that the elderly live in specialized long-term care insurance facilities to receive care services. When individuals or their families need to use long-term care services, they first need to apply to the municipality, town, or village where they live or the local support center. Then, certifying investigators, such

as employees of the municipality, town, or village, will visit the home and conduct investigations by listening to the opinions of the elderly and their families regarding their physical and mental conditions. In principle, the certification results sent by the municipality, town, or village will be received within 30 days. Finally, depending on the different needs for long-term care services, the local support center and long-term care support operators will develop appropriate long-term care service plans. After users present relevant certificates and bear 10%–30% of the costs, they can enjoy the services. In the more than 20 years since the implementation of the Long-Term Care Insurance System, it has provided strong legal support for Japan's elderly care policies and greatly alleviated various social problems brought about by Japan's high-level aging.

However, it is impossible for the government to shoulder the care of all elderly people in Japan alone. At present, in addition to the care provided by the government, communities, and families, a considerable number of organizations within Japanese NPOs have intervened in elderly care work and become another major force. According to the “Survey on the Actual Situation of Specified Nonprofit Activity Corporations” conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2023, in the survey of the activity fields of each legal organization (single-choice), 40.4% of the certified legal organizations were engaged in “activities for healthcare, medical care, and welfare promotion”, indicating that nearly half of the current NPO legal organizations are engaged in activities related to elderly care. In addition, this survey found that 67.8% of NPO certified legal organizations were over 60 years old, which also shows that NPO legal organizations among the elderly group are more concerned about issues such as healthcare, medical care, and nursing that they face. The results of this survey provide relatively detailed data on the current situation of Japanese NPO-related organizations engaged in elderly care.

### **3. The physical and mental care functions of Japanese NPOs for the elderly**

#### **3.1. Physical care support in daily life**

In response to the large demand for care and the difficulties faced by families and the government in providing care, relevant organizations within Japanese NPOs have widely carried out activities related to elderly care, starting with the care of the elderly's daily life, including daily routines, eating, bathing, and other aspects.

Many elderly care organizations within NPOs are engaged in home-visit care, day-care services, and small-scale multi-functional home-based care services. Home-visit care services are provided by home-visit caregivers (home nurses) who go to the homes of service recipients to offer physical and life care, rehabilitation guidance, as well as consultation, nursing, and rehabilitation training services. This is of great help in delaying the aging process of the elderly and reducing the care burden on family members <sup>[2]</sup>. Take the specific example of the NPO legal organization “Smiling” to illustrate the care functions of NPO elderly care organizations for the elderly.

The “Smiling” care organization was established in 2017 and is an NPO legal organization located in Yokosuka City, Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan. The organization mainly provides home-based care support services and home-visit care services for the elderly, with 50 employees, including 28 professional caregivers. The business philosophy of the “Smiling” care organization is that everyone has the right to live the life they want with dignity until the last moment, and it is committed to enabling every elderly person to “live comfortably in their familiar community” <sup>[3]</sup>. In terms of care support services, the organization provides services for, but is not limited to, the following situations: the urgent need for care services after a patient is temporarily discharged from the hospital; home-based care for terminally ill cancer patients; hospital visit support; and assistance for patients in traveling to and from the hospital. The care services provided mainly include physical care (eating, excretion, bathing, etc.), life assistance (cleaning, shopping, laundry, etc.), and assistance in traveling to and from the hospital (handling

procedures, coordinating vehicles, etc.). At the same time, it can also provide general housekeeping services for customers who are not covered by long-term care insurance.

Since its establishment seven years ago, the “Smiling” care organization has provided convenience and assistance for the elderly care in the surrounding communities and has played its due role in supporting the daily life care of the elderly. There are many NPO legal organizations similar to the “Smiling” care organization. Taking this as an example, the role played by NPOs in elderly care can be seen <sup>[4]</sup>.

### **3.2. Psychological comfort and spiritual care**

In addition to daily care, spiritual care for the elderly is also particularly important. Elderly people who live alone or after retirement are prone to feelings of loneliness and emptiness, believing that they are out of touch with society and abandoned. If such emotions cannot be relieved in time, they may transfer from the spiritual level to the physical level and trigger diseases.

The NPO legal organization “Wadaiko Culture Research Association”, certified by the Cabinet Office in 2002, is located in Taito Ward, Tokyo. While engaging in activities to promote Wadaiko culture and artistic development, the organization is also committed to improving the health and cultural life of local residents, allowing people from all walks of life, including teenagers, people with disabilities, and the elderly, to experience the charm of Wadaiko. The organization has established the “Teenage Wadaiko Classroom”, the “Challenge Wadaiko Classroom”, and the “Health Wadaiko Classroom” for teenagers, people with disabilities, and the elderly, respectively <sup>[5]</sup>. Among them, the “Health Wadaiko Classroom” is open to people aged 60 and above. The purpose of opening this classroom is to allow the elderly to enjoy the charm of Wadaiko while promoting their health, maintaining and strengthening their motor functions and brain functions, making friends, prolonging their lives, and preventing the need for long-term care <sup>[6]</sup>. The main content is not only to enhance brain and motor functions physically by learning to play Wadaiko but also, more importantly, to provide psychological comfort and spiritual care for the elderly. The elderly can relieve stress by playing Wadaiko, and at the same time, through friendly communication and harmonious interaction with their peers, they can eliminate feelings of spiritual loneliness and emptiness <sup>[7]</sup>.

The NPO legal organization “Wadaiko Culture Research Association” combines elderly care with traditional art musical instruments by opening the “Health Wadaiko Classroom”, enriching the daily lives of the elderly and providing them with psychological comfort and spiritual care. This reflects the important spiritual care function of Japanese NPOs for the elderly <sup>[8]</sup>.

## **4. Research on the role of NPOs at the social level in Japan**

### **4.1. Complementing government functions**

The government is the symbol, carrier, and actual actor of national public administrative power. Government functions refer to the responsibilities and functions that national administrative agencies should assume when managing national and social public affairs in accordance with the law. Government functions reflect the basic content and activity direction of public administration and are the essential manifestation of public administration <sup>[9]</sup>. One of the attributes of government functions is publicity, that is, to provide universal, fair, and high-quality public services for all social groups and classes.

The functions of the government determine that it serves the majority of the people and has universality. However, this one-size-fits-all service cannot fully meet the increasingly diverse and rich spiritual and material needs of the people. Some functions that serve a small number of people, which are beyond the scope of legal



regulations but within the scope of social morality, need to be fulfilled by social organizations like NPOs <sup>[10]</sup>. The birth of nonprofit organizations stems from the daily needs of citizens. As a supplement to government functions, they can better cover areas that the government cannot reach. Their flexible forms and diverse services can make up for the shortcomings of the government in public services <sup>[11]</sup>. Whether or not they have obtained legal organization status, NPOs meet the needs of the people in various fields such as healthcare and welfare, education and culture, and environmental protection, playing an important role that the government cannot replace.

## **4.2. Promoting community harmony**

The mass-based and grassroots nature of nonprofit organizations makes them closely connected to the grassroots level of society. As the basic unit of society, the community undertakes the responsibility of meeting the daily needs of residents within the community. At the same time, it also plays an important role in improving and enhancing the living standards and quality of residents. To a certain extent, the responsibilities of NPOs and communities overlap, and their goals are the same. The existence of NPOs can assist communities in better fulfilling their responsibilities, stimulating community vitality, and promoting community harmony <sup>[12]</sup>.

In the above-mentioned examples of the “Smiling” care organization and the “Wadaiko Culture Research Association”, both have played an important role in the care of the elderly in the community. Whether physically or mentally, while achieving care, they have also strengthened the connection of the elderly within the community <sup>[13]</sup>. The existence of the “Health Wadaiko Classroom” has, with the practice of Wadaiko as the center, built a bridge for communication and interaction among the elderly in the community, strengthened the emotional bond among people, and promoted interpersonal communication and harmonious coexistence within the community. It is not just limited to these two NPO legal organizations; other NPOs are also promoting community harmony in different fields and aspects <sup>[14]</sup>.

## **5. Inspiration for the future elderly care model in China**

Japan, currently the country with the most serious aging problem in the world, has elderly care policies worthy of reference for all countries that are in the process of aging or about to enter an aging society. The classification of elderly care levels and the formulation of the “Long-Term Care Insurance Law” are policies developed by the Japanese government in line with its national conditions. In addition to home-based elderly care and nursing home-based elderly care, relevant organizations within NPOs, based on the “Long-Term Care Insurance Law”, provide services such as home-visit care, day-care services, and small-scale multi-functional home-based care services, which are worthy of reference and learning for relevant elderly care organizations and communities in China <sup>[15]</sup>.

The aging situation in China is not optimistic. As of the end of 2023, the number of elderly people aged 60 and above in China was 296.97 million, accounting for 21.1% of the total population. It is also estimated that around 2035, the number of elderly people aged 60 and above will exceed 400 million, accounting for more than 30% of the total population, and China will enter a stage of severe aging. The next decade will be an important period for China’s elderly care construction. The active participation of Japanese NPOs in the field of elderly healthcare and welfare not only reduces the pressure on the government to provide elderly care but also helps communities, families, and individuals better implement elderly care. How to combine China’s national conditions with the current elderly care situation to develop policies that benefit the elderly remains one of the topics to be explored in the future.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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