

CHAPTER 23

“ONE TO ONE” AND “FIVE BY ONE:” THE SENIOR COMPANIONS PROGRAM IN CHINA

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While the US is known worldwide for institutionalized eldercare and China is legendary for old-age care by adult children in extended family households, in both places most seniors age in place in their own homes engaging for long periods in self-care, unwilling or unable to rely on young adults or formal institutions (see Part III Zhang). Older adult volunteerism in the community has been identified by scholars and the United Nations as having great potential for bringing together the needs for productive aging and support for the aged (Anderson et al. 2014, Beard et al. 2015; HelpAge International 2015). Based on the authors’ ethnographic and archival research in Shanghai over the years from 2012 to the present this analysis examines a program there involving senior volunteering in support of aging in place (Shea 2017).

Older adult volunteering has been associated with positive results both for the populations they serve and for older volunteers themselves. Older adult volunteer help to fellow seniors, for example, has been linked with positive effects in terms of the emotional wellbeing (Pepin et al. 2018) and the quality of life of the frail seniors they serve (Rabiner et al. 2003, Butler and Eckart 2007), as well as in falls prevention (Peel and Warburton 2009). Volunteering by older adults has also been correlated with a range of positive effects for those volunteers themselves. Such benefits include better quality of life (Cattan et al. 2011), emotional wellbeing (Greenfield et al. 2004),

functioning (Carr et al. 2015), social engagement (Morrow-Howell et al. 2014), health (Hinterlong et al. 2007), and life expectancy (Butler 2006).

In this vein, the Senior Companions Program (老伙伴计划) was launched in China in 2012 in Shanghai, the city with the oldest population in the nation. Although Shanghai was designated as an age-friendly city by WHO in 2006, in the years leading up to 2012, cases of seniors dying at home alone in Shanghai and lying undiscovered for some time led to concern about social neglect of the elderly. As a result, the municipal government decided that it needed to act to improve monitoring of its frail seniors. At that time, the national government was increasingly emphasizing that families and institutions cannot bear the full load of eldercare, and that more community supports by non-kin are desperately needed (Chen 2012). At the same time, cities like Shanghai have many older adults who, due to early layoffs in their forties or fifties or retirements in their fifties or sixties have been looking for meaningful ways to contribute to their communities. Shanghai launched the Senior Companions program in its urban center in 2012 and by 2015 began to expand it into their suburban areas and rural outskirts (Shanghai Municipal Government 2018). Shanghai's Senior Companions Program is well-known nationwide in social service circles, and many other locales have been adopting similar senior volunteer programs in service to community elders (Li 2012).

Building on informal traditions of neighborly concern, Shanghai's Senior Companions program assigns "young-old" neighborhood volunteers between the ages of their late 40s to 74 years to check in on "old-old" vulnerable elders living alone in their own homes in the local community (Shea 2017). These volunteers are unpaid and chosen for their trustworthiness, reliability, and social skills by the local neighborhood residents' committee, a subunit of urban districts and the smallest unit of local government in urban China. Many of those chosen to be

Senior Companions in Shanghai had previously volunteered in other ways with the residents' committee, establishing a good reputation in their community. As time has gone on and the program has spread geographically across the great metropolitan area assignments have evolved from direct individual appointments by the residents' committee to contracting out to civil society organizations and NGOs who do their own vetting (Old Kids 2018, Shanghai Municipal Government 2018).



Photo 1: Middle-aged volunteer involved with Senior Companions Program in Shanghai, walking through community calling elderly neighbor to check in. Photo by Jeanne Shea, 2018.

In Shanghai's Senior Companions Program, each older adult volunteer is matched with five home-dwelling community elders for a brief one-on-one phone call or in-person visit once a week. Volunteers often refer to the Senior Companions Program as the one-on-one (一对一) or the five-by-one (五对一) program, because the visits were personal visits by one volunteer to individual households, and each volunteer is responsible for five households each. Under Senior Companions guidelines, the households receiving home visits need to have at least one elderly member who was age 80 or older and in some way frail, sick, or disabled (Shanghai Municipal Government 2015). In the early days of piloting the program, volunteers were supposed to both call once a week and visit each client in person at their homes once a week. However, for greater flexibility and mutual convenience, soon either a phone call or an in-person visit once a week was deemed sufficient. In addition, it was decided that the visit could just be saying "hi" on the stoop, not necessarily entering the elder's home if that was not convenient for both parties. The program has continued to grow each year since its founding, with 40,000 volunteers serving 200,000 community elders in 2018 (Shanghai Municipal Government 2018).

Whether by a phone call or face-to-face contact, the first goal of China's Senior Companions Program is to make sure that their assigned sick, frail or disabled elder is alive and not in need of emergency medical attention. If help is needed, the Senior Companions then call 110 for emergency medical assistance and the local residents' committee cadres to alert them to any emergency transport as well as to any concerns that are less urgent. To a smaller extent, Senior Companions check-ins also serve as friendly visits to buoy the spirits of community seniors, knowing that someone outside their own household was looking out for them. However, the calls and visits are usually quite short, sometimes just a quick hello and often no more than a few minutes, although they can run fifteen minutes or longer, depending on the volunteer and

client. The Senior Companions were carefully instructed that it was not their role to do medical or instrumental tasks or errands, but rather to serve as eyes and ears and as a bridge to emergency services and the residents' committee office. The program is viewed as government support to enhance community mutual aid among elderly residents. In keeping with the spirit of the 2010 Shanghai Expo, a kind of world's fair that Shanghai held with the help of volunteers of all ages, Senior Companions in Shanghai pride themselves on being "true volunteers" (真正的志愿者) who are not paid for their efforts. As of 2018, the Shanghai government spent 36 million yuan (over \$5 million) a year on the program, averaging to 181 yuan (just over \$26) per elderly client of the program, to be used on those clients as each urban district saw fit (Shanghai Municipal Government 2018).

As the provided photos intimate, the vast majority of Senior Companions in Shanghai have been middle-aged and young-old women, with men making up a very small contingent. In talking with volunteers about the reason for this gender difference, both cultural ideas about gender and structural reasons are raised. When asked about the gender discrepancy, Shanghai volunteers say that women are better listeners and are more adept at interacting with others in a pleasant and supportive manner. Women are better, they say, at family small talk about how people are doing. Volunteers also say that elderly clients are more likely to welcome neighbor women than neighbor men into their home lives and to share their vulnerabilities with them, as non-related women are not generally seen as a potential threat, but non-related men can be. Structurally, Chinese women have a legal retirement age that is five years earlier than that for men (age 55 for women, age 60 for men) and are more likely to be laid off in their forties than men. As a result, they are more likely to be available for volunteering at a time when they still have plenty of energy to get involved.



Photo 2: A Senior Companions volunteer in her sixties going to visit the tiny apartment of a client. Here she is walking through a communal hallway converted into a shared kitchen space in a low-income apartment building, a common sight in naturally occurring retirement communities there. Photo by Jeanne Shea, 2018.

While there are definite similarities in mobilizing older adult volunteers to support aging in place for neighbors in their communities, it is important to distinguish China's Senior Companions from its doppelganger in the US. Launched in the 1970s in the US, the American Senior Companions program was designed to provide supplemental income to low-income older adult volunteers who would provide companionship and instrumental aid to sick, disabled, or frail senior citizens of modest means living at home in their local neighborhoods (Butler 2006, CNCS 2015). In exchange for a monthly tax-free living stipend and supplemental insurance, American Senior Companion volunteers provide fifteen to forty hours per week of companionship, help with errands, and instrumental assistance to as little as one client, averaging two to four clients per volunteer (CNCS 2018). Linked over the years with benefits for both volunteers and recipients (Hood et al. 2018, Tan et al. 2016), the US program was started in large cities like New York City. Now nation-wide, it is administered by the national government's Corporation for National and Community Service, which runs both Americorps and Senior Corps.

Web Special: Senior Corps <https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps>

Unlike the US program, China's Senior Companions Program is Shanghai-specific, and its volunteers do not help with instrumental tasks or errands. They also do not receive a stipend or any payment for their services, although the residents' committee cadres may give them some small gift items on holidays like bulk-purchased hand towels. If individuals who volunteer with Senior Companions do help with an instrumental task, it is understood that this is on their own time and not part of the Senior Companions program. Shanghai's Senior Companions do not usually see things like errands or housework as things with which they would want to get

involved. Such tasks tend to be seen as the territory of lower status housekeepers from low-income or rural migrant worker backgrounds, who are hired by the government at an hourly pay rate to provide an hour or so of chores per week to needy residents over the age of 80.

While both programs tend to attract a majority of women as volunteers, in terms of their engagement with issues of the age, the two programs are also different with regard to age parameters set for both clients and volunteers. In terms of clients, whereas Shanghai recipients of Senior Companion services need to be at least 80 years of age, American recipients can be much younger, generally age 50 and older, but sometimes those as young as age 21 and up are included if they are chronically ill or disabled adults at risk of being institutionalized. For volunteers, Chinese Senior Companions may begin as early as their late forties, but US Senior Companions are supposed to be at least age 55. Finally, China's Senior Companion volunteers must "retire" from such volunteering before they reach the age of 75, at which time they are considered too old to be burdened with formal volunteer responsibilities, whereas in the US program, there is no clear upper age limit. While both programs clearly question the stereotype that old people are only "vulnerable and needy" (Stafford Part V), the Shanghai program stops short, categorically shutting out the old-old from contributing volunteers.

People in the US ask whether China's Senior Companions Program was influenced by the American program. In interviewing dozens of people involved with the program in Shanghai, not one of them had heard of the US program before I told them about it. Almost everyone felt that China's Senior Companions Program was a Shanghai invention, although one Chinese social work contact there had a vague sense that it must have been modeled after friendly visitor programs in Hong Kong. When I told Shanghai volunteers that the American Senior Companions Program offered a monthly stipend, they tended to be surprised as they

thought that American volunteers were “true volunteers,” that is unpaid. After learning of it, they said that it would be nice to be able to supplement their modest retirement incomes. However, when I elaborated that the American volunteers needed to do 15-40 hours of work a week including things like housework, the Shanghai volunteers said that in China that kind of work was for hired home-helper aunties (阿姨), not for volunteers like them, indicating that such work was below their status level. So they liked the idea of a stipend, but not the idea of needing to do housework. In addition, 15-40 hours per week was considered too much time, as many of the Shanghai volunteers needed to expend a good chunk of time on their own housework, grocery shopping, cooking, and helping to take care of their own parents or grandchildren.

So, in this case, a rose is not a rose. Although bearing the same name, the Senior Companions Program in China was not based on the US program, and the two are quite distinct. Due to differences in cultural meanings and structural circumstances across elderscapes, volunteer service models can be difficult to transfer wholesale from one site or one demographic to another. Shanghai’s Senior Companions Program may be more like America’s Meals on Wheels than its Senior Companions Program in two senses: volunteers in both programs are unpaid older adults, and they typically do quick check-ins, rather than lengthy interchanges. However, Senior Companions in China does not provide meals.¹

The Shanghai Senior Companions Program seeks to improve the “age-friendliness” of communities as discussed by Stafford in Part V, in two ways. First, it strives to provide regular social check-ins for frail community-dwelling seniors addressing their “basic needs” for safety checks and friendly social contact. Second, it aims to provide meaningful “civic engagement” through volunteer work for older adults transitioning out of the labor force. Meanwhile, it does these things within the context of naturally occurring retirement communities, building on and

systematizing a “place-based” ideal of neighborly concern. Interviews and shadowing I conducted over the years with Shanghai Senior Companions volunteers and the recipients of their visits revealed perceived benefits for both. Although the program is a low-intensity effort with a low time investment, elders receiving the visits were emotionally moved, saying that it showed that the local government and some of their neighbors really cared about them. On their end, the senior volunteers felt that the program brought them greater respect and recognition in their community and made the neighborhood feel more like one big family. The volunteers said that they hoped that their example would foster an environment in which there was more concern for the wellbeing of community elders so that if they themselves needed help in the future, there would be new volunteers to visit them.

One problem that has developed over the last few years, however, is that as many old Shanghai neighborhoods are being gentrified, the government is buying up old housing occupied by low and lower middle income seniors so that investors with more capital can develop the land for more commercially lucrative purposes. In doing so, the government is sending these displaced seniors out to live in scattered suburban high rises across the municipality. As a result of this relocation, many of the place-based ties kindled by the Senior Companions Program between older adult volunteers and neighborhood elders are being broken just a few years after the program started. Interviews with such relocated seniors show that many feel lonely and isolated in their new suburban apartments. This finding relates to how the actual age-friendliness of “age-friendly” cities and communities often varies by socioeconomic echelon (Scharlach 2016). While compelling in their physical immediacy, place-based age-friendly environments can be ephemeral when urban landscapes are in flux and neighbors are separated by relocation.

Endnotes

1. To clarify, over the last decade, communities in Shanghai have also begun offering low-cost meals delivery to homebound seniors, as well as subsidized congregate meals for neighborhood seniors in need of such assistance. This is a different, separate program from Shanghai's Senior Companions Program.

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