

Eldercare business set for giant leap

Imaginative new policy measures could be turning China's aging society into a huge opportunity

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Economic risk or hidden opportunity? Or, is it a potential game-changer, even an economic growth driver?

These days, such questions divide experts debating demographic forecasts that China would soon become an aging society, slowing the Chinese economic juggernaut.

Thanks to an imaginative tweak of the country's reform and opening-up policy, the threat seen in an aging society may turn out to be a huge business opportunity, experts said.

By the end of 2017, there were 241 million Chinese, or 17 percent of the population, aged 60 or above. And 158 million of them, or more than 11 percent of the population, were aged 65 or above, as per the data of the National Bureau of Statistics.

The country's elderly population is increasing by 10 million annually. It is estimated that by 2020, those aged 65 or over will account for 14 percent of the population.

A forecast from the World Health Organization said that by 2050, more than 35 percent of the Chinese population will be aged 60 or above, which would make China the country with the most number of aging people.

In any other country, such figures might trigger alarm bells, given the adverse impact that an aging society has had on the Japanese economy in recent years; but in China, the discourse acquired a parallel track with a positive charge.

A report from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences said elderly care is a sunrise industry whose annual sales could reach an estimated 13 trillion yuan (\$1.87 trillion) by 2030 from the current 5.9 billion yuan.

Such stupendous growth is expected on the basis of the experiences of developed countries. A large base of aging people in an economy that has seen both restructuring and sustained rapid growth is a perfect recipe for growing a sophisticated market for senior-care services.

That is because people would have benefited from rising incomes and saved a bit in the past for a stable, financially stress-free, post-retirement life, experts said.

On top of that, when new policy measures enable foreign investment in the potentially lucrative elderly care sector, what could have been a risk may prove to be one of the drivers of economic growth, they said.

Such interpretations appear plausible in the private nursing home in Weihai, in East China's Shandong province, where Sun Ying, 85, and her husband Zhang Wei, 86, experience their sunset years in quiet contentment and peace, in spite of Zhang's neurological condition that was detected three years ago.

Their peace appears to arise from the fact that they live in a community of similar age people. The community is a commercial venture that is operated by professionals who deliver services tailored to exacting standards.

The nursing home, called Dongfa House, was Sun and Zhang's choice when they realized they needed care. They did not want to be a burden on their children who live hectic lives.

Sun said: "Here (in the nursing home), each of us has a health record. Our BP (blood pressure) is checked once a week. We receive medical attention whenever required. I enjoy reading books every day, while my husband often plays with his poker mates.

"Sometimes, student volunteers come here to perform for us. Compared with public nursing homes, we find the staff here to be more patient. Our lives have been enriched."

So are lives of all the stakeholders concerned — nurses, caregivers, doctors, physiotherapists, attendants, plumbers, electricians, mechanics, construction work-

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