

Dissolving Loneliness and Rebuilding Relationships: The Profound Empowerment of Pet Companionship in Active Aging

消解孤独与重建关系：宠物陪伴在积极老龄化中的深度赋能

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Abstract: In the context of population aging, loneliness among older adults has become a critical bottleneck constraining the advancement of active aging. With the weakening of traditional family-based care for older adults, the demand for emotional support and social connection among older adults is increasingly prominent. In this setting, pet companionship, as a non-institutional form of support for care of older adults, is playing a role that cannot be overlooked. This study employs the active aging theoretical framework to systematically examine the internal mechanisms by which pet companionship dissolves loneliness among older adults, the practical pathways for reconstructing social relationships among older adults, and, in combination with China's local sociocultural context, analyzes its logic of empowerment for active aging as well as directions for localized development. The study shows that pet companionship achieves systematic intervention in loneliness among older adults through alleviating emotional loneliness, expanding social connections, reshaping life meaning, and maintaining psychological health. It further promotes the network reconstruction of multiple social relationships among older adults by adjusting family relations, activating neighborhood networks, linking community resources, and stimulating social participation. Ultimately, it realizes comprehensive empowerment for older adults across the dimensions of health, participation, and security, thereby fostering the reconstruction of their agency. This research not only enriches the localized connotations of active aging theory but also provides new sociological perspectives and practical insights for improving China's diversified support system for care of older adults.

Keywords: Pet companionship; Active aging; Loneliness; Relationship reconstruction; Profound empowerment

摘要: 在人口老龄化背景下，老年孤独已成为推进积极老龄化过程中亟待回应的重要问题。随着传统家庭养老功能的弱化，老年人对情感支持与社会联结的需求日益凸显。在这一语境下，宠物陪伴作为一种非制度化的养老支持形式，其作用不容忽视。本文以积极老龄化理论为分析框架，系统考察宠物陪伴缓解老年孤独的内在机制，探讨其重构老年人社会关系的实践路径，并结合中国本土社会文化情境，分析其对积极老龄化的赋能逻辑及本土化发展方向。研究认为，宠物陪伴能够通过缓解情感性孤独、拓展社会交往、重塑生活意义和维护心理健康，对老年孤独形成系统性干预；同时，它还能够通过调适家庭关系、激活邻里网络、连接社区资源和促进社会参与，推动老年人多重社会关系网络的重构。最终，宠物陪伴在健康、参与和保障三个维度上为老年人提供综合支持，并促进其主体性的重建。本文不仅丰富了积极老龄化理论的本土化内涵，也为完善中国多元化养老支持体系提供了新的社会学视角和实践启示。

关键词: 宠物陪伴；积极老龄化；老年孤独；关系重构；深度赋能



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Introduction

Population aging constitutes a major structural issue confronting Chinese society in the 21st century and represents the most emblematic practice field in the global aging

process. As the degree of aging continues to deepen, actively responding to population aging has been elevated to a national strategy (Feng & Gu, 2025). The effective implementation of the active aging concept hinges on resolving the multi-

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ple developmental challenges faced by older adults, among which the widespread prevalence of loneliness among older adults is particularly prominent. Against the backdrop of the continuous weakening of traditional family-based care for older adults and the expanding scale of empty-nest and solitary-living older adults, reliance solely on institutional material provision and daily care can no longer fully address the complex emotional needs and social connection demands of this population.

In this social context, pet companionship, as a non-institutional form of social support, is assuming an increasingly important role in the lives of older adults in both urban and rural China. More and more older adults are transforming pets from traditional functional rearing objects into emotional family members and spiritual companions, seeking to combat late-life loneliness and rebuild connections with the external world through routine cross-species interactions. However, existing studies have largely focused on the intervention effects of pet companionship on older adults' physiological health or single psychological indicators (such as depression scale scores) (Saraiva et al., 2026; Sharpley et al., 2020). Few works systematically elucidate, from the macro-theoretical framework of active aging, how pet companionship achieves comprehensive empowerment for older adults through specific sociological mechanisms, let alone provide a localized analysis of the phenomenon within China's particular socio-cultural context.

On this basis, the present study is grounded in the real national conditions of population aging in China. It introduces active aging theory as the analytical framework to systematically explore the mechanisms by which pet companionship dissolves loneliness among older adults and the practical pathways through which it promotes the reconstruction of social relationships among older adults, thereby revealing the logic of pet companionship's empowerment for active aging. The research aims to enrich the localized connotations of active aging theory and to furnish new theoretical foundations and practical implications for building and improving China's diversified support system for care of older adults.

Theoretical Foundations and Core Concept Definitions

Evolution and localized connotations of active aging theory

The formation of active aging theory has progressed from successful aging and healthy aging to productive aging, ultimately establishing a comprehensive analytical framework that is both inclusive and practical. In 2002, the World Health Organization (WHO) formally proposed the concept, defining it as the process of enhancing older adults' quality of life and maximizing opportunities for health, participation, and security (Paúl et al., 2012; Principi et al., 2014). This definition marked a paradigm shift from a problem-oriented perspective that viewed aging as a social burden to an asset-oriented perspective that emphasizes older adults' agency and developmental potential.

Within this theoretical framework, health serves as the foundational premise, encompassing favorable states at physiological, psychological, and social adaptation levels. Participation functions as the key driver, stressing that older adults continue to engage in socioeconomic and public affairs according to their abilities and willingness, thereby breaking the traditional role assumption of societal withdrawal. Security constitutes the institutional support, ensuring that older adults receive necessary care, economic assistance, and rights protection when functional decline occurs. These three elements are organically unified, forming the complete system of active aging.

As the national strategy of actively responding to population aging advances, the theory has undergone continuous reconstruction and deepening in the Chinese context. Domestic scholars have gradually moved beyond the simple transplantation of Western theory, integrating the ethical traditions of family-based care for older adults and the institutional environment in China. They argue that the essence of active aging in the Chinese context lies in realizing the construction of agency among older adults (Tao & Deng, 2025). This requires a shift in models of care for older adults from passive caregiving to active empowerment, activating older adults' self-development potential while respecting indigenous cultural ethics and constructing practical pathways aligned with China's national conditions.

Theoretical connotations and interpretation of loneliness among older adults

Loneliness, as a key issue in older adult psychological health research, is not merely physical isolation in essence but a negative emotional experience arising from the discrepancy between an individual's subjective expectations of social relationships and the reality obtained (Akhter-Khan et al., 2023; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al., 2020). This discrepancy stems from both the absence of intimate relationships and the alienation of social networks, rendering loneliness among older adults a complex sociopsychological phenomenon characterized by interwoven multiple connotations.

Among existing theories, the most explanatory power lies in the binary classification framework of emotional loneliness and social loneliness (Weiss, 1975). Emotional loneliness originates from an individual's lack of stable and reliable attachment figures and results from frustration of intimate relationship needs. For older adults, the primary triggers are the disruption of original emotional bonds caused by spousal death or structural spatial separation from children. Social loneliness arises from an individual's lack of broad and meaningful social networks and participation channels and reflects the unmet need for social integration; it directly corresponds to the secondary bond disruptions resulting from the loss of social roles after retirement and the contraction of social networks.

In addition, loneliness among older adults possesses life-cycle-specific characteristics. Beyond universal needs for intimacy and socialization, older adults also carry developmental expectations of being respected, needed, and achieving self-

worth. The frustration of these expectations produces significant additive effects, not only readily inducing psychological problems such as depression and anxiety but also accelerating physiological functional decline, becoming the primary risk factor impairing older adults' late-life quality of life (Ong et al., 2016; Vespa et al., 2023).

Theoretical support system for pet companionship

The positive intervention effects of pet companionship on older adults can be explained by a multidimensional theoretical system. Attachment theory constitutes the primary foundation: individuals' need for secure attachment persists throughout the life cycle, and pets provide unconditional, non-evaluative emotional support, facilitating the establishment of stable cross-species attachment (Bowlby, 1969; Zilcha-Mano et al., 2012). This attachment relationship is unaffected by older adults' physical frailty or loss of social capital and can effectively fill the emotional vacuum caused by the absence of intimate relationships, satisfying the fundamental needs for security and belonging.

Social support theory further elucidates the social effects of pet companionship, viewing it as a special form of non-human social support (Barker et al., 2020; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Meehan et al., 2017). This support is characterized by stability, continuity, and lack of pressure, forming an effective complement to human social support networks. When older adults' traditional networks weaken, pet companionship serves as an important buffer; at the same time, pets act as social lubricants, assisting older adults in expanding real-world social networks and realizing spillover and transformation from non-human to human support.

Beyond these, relational ecology theory and the biopsychosocial model provide supplementary perspectives for understanding the comprehensive effects of pet companionship. Relational ecology theory situates human-pet relationships within a broader social ecological system, emphasizing that their interaction is a dynamic process of mutual influence and co-growth capable of driving older adults to reconstruct self-identity within relationships. The biopsychosocial model integrates the mechanisms of pet companionship across physiological, psychological, and social dimensions, revealing its systemic influence on older adults' health and well-being (Gee et al., 2021; Gee & Mueller, 2019).

Core connotations of profound empowerment in the older adult context

Profound empowerment forms the analytical pivot of this study. The essence of empowerment lies in achieving fundamental enhancement of an individual's capabilities, autonomy, and agency through systematic intervention, rather than remaining at superficial satisfaction of single-dimensional needs (Mouchrek & Benson, 2023; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). In the aging context, profound empowerment aims to break the traditional perception that positions older adults as passive recipients of aid, advancing the philosophy of care for older adults from relief-style caregiving to developmental empowerment. It seeks to activate older adults' self-development potential and strengthen their sense of control over life.

Specifically, profound empowerment in the older adult context encompasses four interrelated core dimensions. The first is self-determination, whereby older adults maintain control over decisions affecting their own lives and possess the right to autonomously choose their lifestyle. The second is perceived control, the sense of mastery older adults have over their lives and surrounding environment, which is a core predictor of psychological health and life satisfaction. The third is capability building, through which older adults sustain and enhance their ability to cope with life challenges via continuous practice and learning, thereby dismantling the stereotype that aging equals capability decline. The fourth is agency construction, whereby older adults reconstruct positive older adult identity through social connections with others and achieve confirmation and enhancement of self-worth. These four dimensions progress layer by layer, forming the complete connotations of profound empowerment. The role of pet companionship in active aging is precisely realized through its systematic influence on these four dimensions.

The Loneliness Dilemma Among Older Adults in China's Aging Context and the Rise of Pet Companionship

China's population aging process exhibits distinctive features of large scale, rapid speed, getting old before getting rich, and getting old before getting prepared, profoundly reshaping China's social structure and system of care for older adults. As the scale of the older adult population continues to expand, population aging has shifted from an individual life-cycle event to a major social issue affecting national development as a whole. The transformation of traditional models of care for older adults has also rendered the loneliness dilemma among older adults increasingly salient.

China's traditional model of care for older adults centers on family-based care, with filial piety culture providing profound cultural support. Children not only bear economic support responsibilities for older parents but also assume core functions of daily care and spiritual solace (Liu, 2023). However, with the advancement of modernization and urbanization, China's family structure has undergone fundamental changes. Family size has continued to shrink, average household population has declined steadily, and nuclear families have become the dominant form. The popularization of the "4-2-1" family structure has placed enormous pressure on the middle generation in providing care for older adults (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2011), making it difficult for them to fully shoulder spiritual companionship responsibilities for older parents. At the same time, the normalization of population mobility has led to large-scale geographic separation between children and parents, causing the proportions of empty-nest and solitary-living families to rise continuously. More and more older adults face solitary living in physical space and, even more so, empty-nest dilemmas at the emotional level.

The transformation of family structure has directly resulted in the continuous weakening of traditional family-based care for older adults, whose most immediate conse-

quence is the widespread spread of loneliness among older adults. For Chinese older adults, the emergence of loneliness stems not only from the absence of intimate relationships but also from the comprehensive transformation of social roles—from producers in the workplace to retirees who have withdrawn from social production, and from core decision-makers in the family to objects needing care. Such role shifts are often accompanied by a loss of self-worth, further intensifying the negative effects of loneliness. Urban-rural disparities make the loneliness dilemma more pronounced among rural older adults. Large-scale migration of rural young and middle-aged laborers to cities has caused the proportion of empty-nest older adults in rural areas to far exceed that in urban areas, while rural facilities and social resources for care of older adults are even scarcer, further amplifying the impact of loneliness.

It is precisely against this real-world backdrop that pet companionship, as a non-institutional solution to loneliness among older adults, has gradually emerged among Chinese older adults. China's pet economy has achieved rapid development over the past two decades, and pet ownership has evolved from a fashionable choice among urban youth to a universal lifestyle spanning all age groups, with the proportion of older adults keeping pets rising steadily. More importantly, older adults' pet-keeping concepts have undergone a fundamental shift, from traditional functional rearing for guarding homes and yards to emotional companionship-oriented rearing. Increasing numbers of older adults regard pets as family members, gaining emotional solace and spiritual sustenance through daily care and companionship.

Behind this shift lies an upgrading of older adults' demand structure. With the continuous improvement of China's social security system, the basic economic and daily care needs of the vast majority of older adults have been met. Spiritual solace and social connection have become the core demands of late-life living. Pet companionship precisely matches this demand by providing stable emotional support while creating opportunities for social participation, serving as an important supplement following the weakening of traditional family-based care for older adults. Of course, older adults' pet-keeping behavior also faces numerous practical challenges, including limitations imposed by their own health status on pet-keeping capacity, economic costs associated with pet ownership, the absence of pet-friendly facilities at the societal level, and generational differences in attitudes toward pet keeping. These factors constrain the full realization of pet companionship's positive effects.

Mechanisms by Which Pet Companionship Dissolves Loneliness Among Older Adults

The intervention of pet companionship in loneliness among older adults is not confined to surface-level emotional soothing but constitutes a multidimensional psychological mechanism operating process. From the reshaping of cross-species attachment to the reconstruction of life meaning and

the maintenance of overall psychological health, it achieves systematic dissolution of loneliness in a layered progression.

Cross-species attachment and direct interruption of emotional loneliness

Pet companionship's dissolution of loneliness first manifests in the direct alleviation of emotional loneliness, which constitutes its most core and immediate function (Li & Wong, 2025). The root of emotional loneliness among older adults lies in the disruption of core intimate relationships and the absence of emotional attachment figures. Pets provide older adults with an unconditional, non-evaluative emotional connection. This connection transcends the complexities of human social interaction and remains unchanged by shifts in older adults' socioeconomic status or physiological functional decline, thereby effectively avoiding evaluative pressure and potential conflict in interpersonal interactions. In this sustained emotional interaction, older adults and pets form stable secure attachment relationships (Friedmann et al., 2026). For empty-nest older adults who are widowed or whose children live apart, pets not only fill the emotional vacuum created by incomplete family structures but also awaken older adults' deep sense of being needed through concrete daily care behaviors such as feeding and grooming. Many older adults treat pets as anthropomorphized family members; this sense of being needed based on caregiving responsibility constitutes the key psychological force resisting late-life meaninglessness and emotional loneliness.

Daily order empowerment and reconstruction of life meaning

The core driving force behind the deeper evolution of loneliness lies in the loss of life meaning in late adulthood. With the withdrawal from social roles and the weakening of family decision-making power, older adults readily fall into a negative cognitive cycle of low self-efficacy, which in turn exacerbates the intertwining of loneliness and meaninglessness. The presence of pets endows older adults' daily lives with stable goals and order. Fixed daily routines of feeding, cleaning, and interaction break the loose and disordered state of post-retirement life and help older adults reconstruct the rhythm of daily living. More importantly, in witnessing the healthy growth of pets, older adults continuously receive positive value feedback, effectively repairing damaged self-efficacy and dismantling the negative stereotype that aging equals uselessness (Hui et al., 2020). In addition, to better care for pets, many older adults proactively learn pet care and medical knowledge. This active cognitive investment and learning process not only activates cognitive function but also keeps older adults in a state of continuous mental growth, thereby blocking the generative logic of loneliness at its root.

Physiological-psychological resonance and maintenance of overall psychological health

Ultimately, the profound dissolution of loneliness by pet companionship is externalized as significant improvement and maintenance of older adults' overall psychological health.

Cross-species interaction can trigger positive physiological-psychological resonance. Intimate contact such as stroking effectively lowers stress hormone levels such as cortisol, alleviating physiological tension responses, while simultaneously promoting the secretion of pleasure neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin, achieving natural emotional regulation (Beetz et al., 2012; Nagasawa et al., 2023). For long-term solitary older adults, pet companionship not only alleviates nighttime anxiety and insecurity and improves sleep quality but also comprehensively enhances psychological resilience in coping with aging and life changes. This positive cycle of psychological and physiological states is not only the direct outcome of pet companionship's dissolution of loneliness but also lays a solid micro-level foundation for further expansion of external social networks and realization of social empowerment.

Practical Pathways by Which Pet Companionship Promotes Relationship Reconstruction among Older Adults

The significance of pet companionship extends beyond individual psychological dissolution of loneliness to its role as a relational medium that drives the reconstruction of multiple social networks among older adults. This process exhibits a circle-expansion feature progressing from inside to outside and layer by layer, from micro-level private family adjustment, to meso-level semi-public neighborhood network integration, to macro-level public social participation, ultimately helping older adults re-embed themselves in social structures.

Adjustment of intergenerational communication and family relationships in the micro-level private field

In the micro-level family field, pets often serve as emotional lubricants that break intergenerational alienation. As family structures become increasingly nuclear, differences in values and lifestyles between generations frequently lead to the absence of deep emotional exchange. The introduction of pets creates low-pressure, non-utilitarian common topics for intergenerational interaction, significantly increasing both the frequency and quality of communication and effectively repairing previously alienated intergenerational relationships. For empty-nest older adult couples, jointly assuming pet care responsibilities reshapes internal family interaction scenes. In collaborative processes such as feeding and nursing, the two partners form a new life community, effectively activating emotional interaction and enhancing the stability and tacit understanding of late-life marital relationships. Although differences in pet-keeping attitudes or allocation of care responsibilities may induce brief family friction, through reasonable negotiation and interaction such surface-level conflicts can often be transformed into new opportunities for optimizing family relationships.

Breaking spatial isolation and rebuilding neighborhood networks in the meso-level semi-public field

In the atomized residential patterns of modern cities, high-rise buildings and gated communities sever traditional natural interactions. The “neighbors who do not know each other” isolation leaves older adults highly prone to social network disruption. Daily pet care, especially outdoor activities such as dog walking, forces older adults out of enclosed private spaces and into the semi-public field of neighborhoods. Pets thus become an extremely friendly and low-threshold social medium. They create natural opportunities for encounters between strangers without requiring complex identity preparation; shared pet-keeping experiences alone can break social defenses. Such interaction often follows a gradual logic from shallow to deep, beginning with simple greetings about pets and gradually extending to mutual assistance in daily life, steadily transforming older adults' community interactions from accidental weak ties into mutually supportive strong ties. This not only effectively alleviates social loneliness but also markedly enhances older adults' sense of community safety and belonging.

Community network integration and expansion of social capital

Building on initial connections at the neighborhood level, pets further drive the expansion of older adults' community social capital. On one hand, older adult pet owners frequently form online or offline interest-based communities based on shared hobbies. Such community networks break rigid boundaries of age and occupation, promoting cross-generational interaction and greatly enriching older adults' communication dimensions. On the other hand, pet-keeping behavior naturally links older adults with professional networks inside and outside the community. In the process of accessing and utilizing these professional resources, older adults not only acquire new knowledge but also broaden the boundaries of social interaction. By participating in community activities such as civilized pet-keeping advocacy and stray animal rescue, older adults achieve a shift in identity from bystanders in community life to participants in community governance, completing deep integration of community networks.

Role reshaping and stimulation of social participation in the macro-level public field

At the macro-social level, pet companionship fully activates older adults' willingness for public participation, providing diverse and sustainable pathways for their return to public social life. Retirement typically means the stripping away of traditional social roles and the narrowing of participation channels, whereas social participation based on pets is driven by individuals' autonomous interests and lacks compulsory utilitarian goals, thus possessing extremely high intrinsic motivation. Through involvement in broader animal protection public welfare activities or volunteer services, older adults achieve a role reversal from passive recipients of social welfare to active creators of social value. This public

participation not only powerfully refutes the traditional stereotype that aging equals societal withdrawal but also constitutes a core pathway for older adults to construct positive identity and reconfirm self-worth, marking their genuine social integration and return of agency.

Profound Empowerment Mechanisms of Pet Companionship for Active Aging

Pet companionship's intervention in the aging process is not limited to single-dimensional improvement of physical and mental health but is deeply embedded in the core theoretical framework of active aging. Through synergistic activation of the three pillars of health, participation, and security, it achieves all-round empowerment for older adults and ultimately leads to the reconstruction of their agency.

Cornerstone of healthy aging: Systematic maintenance of physiological, psychological, and social functions

Maintaining the integrity of an individual's physiological, psychological, and social functions is the primary premise of healthy aging. Pet companionship precisely forms a mutually supportive intervention loop across these three dimensions. At the physiological function level, pet care creates continuous embodied practice. Regular moderate-intensity activities such as daily dog walking and cleaning effectively delay the decline of older adults' muscle and cardiopulmonary functions while helping them rebuild healthy, rhythmic daily routines. At the psychological health level, in the face of frequent late-life stressors such as bereavement and serious illness, pets provide an irreplaceable emotional buffer, significantly lowering depression and anxiety levels and enhancing psychological resilience. At the same time, human-pet interaction activates individuals' cognitive functions and exerts positive intervention effects on delaying cognitive decline. At the social function level, daily socialization based on pets offers older adults ongoing opportunities to exercise interpersonal communication and social adaptation skills, preventing the deterioration of social interaction functions.

Expansion of participatory aging: Intrinsic-driven social participation and cross-generational integration

Participatory aging aims to break the negative role assumption of withdrawal from social production and encourage older adults to continue creating social value. Unlike traditional top-down social activities for older adults that often carry task-oriented characteristics, pet companionship constructs a low-threshold, intrinsic-driven pathway for social participation. This participation is entirely driven by older adults' spontaneous interests and inner emotions without compulsory goals and therefore possesses extremely high sustainability. By engaging in public affairs such as animal protection and community civilized pet-keeping advocacy, older adults achieve a leap from welfare recipients to value

creators. More importantly, pets serve as a universal medium that crosses social circles, breaking age barriers in social interaction and promoting deep cross-generational interaction. This interaction helps older adults update social cognition in a timely manner, dissolve intergenerational barriers, and achieve genuine return to social networks.

Supplement to security in aging: Micro-level compensation of informal support networks for institutional systems

Within the macro system of care for older adults, although state-led formal institutional security is continuously improving, enormous structural gaps remain in non-formal security concerning micro-level emotional support and daily companionship. As a flexible micro-level support mechanism, pet companionship provides effective compensation for the formal security system. In emotional and psychological security, pets fill the spiritual support functions stripped away by family structure changes, offering a bottom-line sense of security and belonging. In daily life and safety security, service dogs and even ordinary pets can play a key sentinel role in assisting daily activities and warning of sudden illnesses or accidental falls. At the same time, the neighborhood mutual assistance networks and pet medical service systems established around pet-keeping behavior weave a resilient informal social support web for older adults. When older adults face life difficulties, this network can promptly provide information mediation and practical assistance, becoming an important safety line beyond formal institutions.

Reconstruction of older adult agency

The profound empowerment of pet companionship for active aging ultimately converges on a core focus: the reconstruction of agency among older adults. This is the essential meaning of the empowerment concept. In this process, older adults thoroughly escape the object status of passive aid recipients under traditional models of care for older adults. From autonomously planning pets' diet and medical care (self-determination), to coping with various challenges in the caregiving process (capability building), to relying on pets to return to community public life (social integration), this series of practices continuously strengthens older adults' self-efficacy and sense of life control. It is precisely this re-establishment of dominance over their own lives and even the surrounding micro-environment that declares the completion of positive older adult identity construction and marks the realization of the ultimate goal of active aging.

Particularities and Localized Pathways of Pet Companionship Development in China's Local Context

The empowerment effects of pet companionship on active aging do not float in a vacuum but are profoundly embedded in China's specific sociocultural structure and system of care for older adults. Therefore, it exhibits unique developmental

opportunities while also facing localized practical constraints, urgently requiring exploration of support pathways aligned with China's national conditions.

Cultural tension between traditional intergenerational ethics and modern individualized demands

The primary particularity of pet companionship in China's local context lies in its position at the intersection and collision of traditional filial piety culture and modern individual emotional demands. Traditional family ethics center on "raising children to provide for old age" and intergenerational reciprocity, viewing children as the natural providers of spiritual solace for older parents. Within this traditional cognitive framework, pet companionship is sometimes misinterpreted as a secondary substitute for children's caregiving deficiencies, causing some older adults' pet-keeping behavior to bear dual moral pressure from both inside and outside the family. However, with societal modernization and individualization, older adults' self-awareness continues to awaken, and their demand structure is shifting from material dependence at the survival level to the pursuit of independent emotional experiences and self-realization. In today's context of normalized intergenerational spatial separation, pet companionship, as an autonomously chosen form of emotional support, is gradually having its legitimacy socially reconstructed. How to resolve intergenerational conceptual friction and promote the organic integration of traditional filial piety ethics with modern individualized concepts of care for older adults constitutes the core cultural context for pet companionship development in China.

Practical constraints and fostering anxiety under family structure transformation

Unlike Western pet-keeping models centered on the individual, Chinese older adults' pet-keeping behavior often carries distinct family attributes and is frequently used to fill relational voids left by children leaving the nest or the end of grandparenting. However, the rapid miniaturization and empty-nesting of family structures also create practical dilemmas for older adult pet keeping. As older adults age and face increasing risks of disability, their independent capacity to care for pets gradually declines. The absent family network cannot provide necessary assistance, leaving many older adults in the predicament of wanting to keep pets but lacking the ability to do so. In addition, due to the lack of comprehensive pet trust and follow-up fostering mechanisms, many high-age older adults develop intense fostering anxiety over fears that their pets will become strays after their own death. This has become a core micro-level obstacle hindering pet keeping among Chinese older adults.

Institutional exclusion by the formal system of care for older adults

China is accelerating the construction of a system of care for older adults that coordinates home, community, and institutional care and integrates medical, nursing, and rehabilita-

tion services. However, the current system exhibits significant institutional exclusion toward the needs of pet companionship. On one hand, the vast majority of formal institutions providing care for older adults maintain strict no-pet environments, directly excluding older adults with pet-accompanying residency needs from institutional care systems. On the other hand, community-based facilities supporting care for older adults lack pet-friendly spatial planning; the existing medical security system also cannot share the high costs of pet medical care, intensifying economic deprivation among low-income older adults. Furthermore, subdivided services adapted for older adults such as pet walking, door-to-door medical care, and end-of-life care remain market blanks. The lag in institutional and service supply severely constrains the release of pet empowerment effects.

Construction pathways for localized pet-friendly support networks

Based on the above real-world challenges, advancing the profound empowerment of pet companionship in active aging requires the construction of a support network aligned with local national conditions. First, strengthen conceptual advocacy and cultural inclusion. At the societal level, it is necessary to clarify the value of pet companionship, viewing it as a beneficial supplement to rather than an antagonistic substitute for traditional family-based care for older adults, and to cultivate a social cultural atmosphere of intergenerational understanding and harmonious human-pet relations. Second, promote inclusive design of the policy system. Explore the inclusion of pet-related auxiliary services in home- and community-based service lists for care of older adults; pilot pet-friendly zones in the construction of institutions for care of older adults; and explore targeted subsidies for pet keeping among special vulnerable groups such as childless older adults. Third, cultivate an older-adult-adapted pet service market. Encourage market forces to develop pet fostering, door-to-door care, pet trust, and will-based fostering services targeted at older adults, fundamentally eliminating fostering anxiety among this group; at the same time, standardize and promote the professional application of animal-assisted therapy in interventions for older adults with dementia and depression. Finally, activate non-formal empowerment at the community level. Rely on community governance networks to incubate mutual assistance groups for older adult pet owners; incorporate civilized pet keeping into community residents' covenants to resolve potential neighborhood conflicts; and build resilient pet-friendly support communities at the grassroots level.

Conclusion

Grounded in the macro reality of population aging in China, this study introduces the pet companionship phenomenon into the overall theoretical framework of active aging and constructs an integrated analytical model of loneliness dissolution, relationship reconstruction, and profound empowerment. The research demonstrates that pet companionship is not only a systematic intervention in loneliness among

older adults from surface to depth but also a powerful catalyst for reshaping family, neighborhood, and public social relationships. It fully aligns with the three pillars of healthy, participatory, and secure aging and ultimately realizes the return of older adults' agency from passive care recipients to active controllers of life. At a time when a diversified support system for care of older adults urgently needs improvement, pet companionship, as a low-cost and sustainable non-institutional support network, provides highly valuable localized sociological imagination for addressing aging challenges. It cannot be denied that this study mainly focuses on the construction and logical deduction of theoretical mechanisms and still lacks validation through large-scale empirical data. Heterogeneity among older adults and differences in pet types may lead to significant variations in empowerment effects. Future research urgently requires nationwide scale surveys and longitudinal follow-ups to empirically validate the theoretical model proposed herein and to conduct cross-cultural comparative studies, thereby providing more solid and precise empirical evidence for localized policy support of pet companionship in China. As aging societies develop in depth, the spiritual connection needs of older adults will inevitably become a core issue in public policy. Recognizing the positive value of cross-species companionship, breaking down practical barriers, and enabling every older adult to regain life meaning through connection constitute the necessary path to achieving dignified and high-quality active aging.

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