

Qiuling An & Fei Sun

Support older adults with dementia, China

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Projects to support people with dementia, Shanghai, China

Qiuling An^a & Fei Sun^b

^a China Center for Modern City Studies and School of Social Development, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China.

^b School of Social Work, Michigan State University, 655 Auditorium Rd, East Lansing, MI 48824, United States of America.

Correspondence to Fei Sun (email: sunfei@msu.edu).

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Abstract

Problem China is experiencing rapid population ageing, placing increasing pressure on health-care systems, social services and families.

Approach In 2019, the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau launched a citywide initiative to create dementia-friendly communities that integrate nonpharmacological interventions as an essential component. The bureau invited local agencies to apply for funding and design locally tailored interventions for people aged 55 years with cognitive impairment. Approved projects received funding over a three-year period. The bureau conducted annual assessments of the projects, and projects rated as excellent were showcased during public awareness campaigns for dementia.

Local setting Shanghai, one of China's most populous and rapidly ageing cities, has an estimated 300 000 people with dementia.

Relevant changes By 2023, all 216 subdistricts and townships in Shanghai had implemented a project. These projects provided cognitive training and education and incorporated one or more activities for participants, such as horticulture, games, music, exercise and aromatherapy. Among the surveyed participants in 44 projects conducted in 2023 and 2024, 85.1% (275/323) reported being satisfied or very satisfied, and 90.1% (291/323) believed the interventions met their needs.

Lessons learnt Shanghai's publicly funded model enabled citywide dementia-friendly projects, which were highly appreciated by participants. Future efforts should strengthen academic collaboration for evidence-based practice and adopt standardized protocols with validated measures to ensure consistent assessment and readiness for scale-up. To reinforce progress, the bureau launched the 2025–2030 implementation plan to sustain continued funding and provide technical support.

Introduction

Supporting people living with dementia is a global public health priority.¹ In 2020, an estimated 55 million people lived with dementia worldwide, a figure projected to reach 153 million by 2050.^{2,3}

In China, the number of people living with dementia is projected to rise from 17 million in 2025 to 66 million in 2050, which will account for one tenth of the older population in the country.⁴ However, diagnosis rates remain low: only an estimated 14.0% of people living with mild dementia receive a diagnosis; 34.0% of those with severe dementia are diagnosed; and 49.0% of diagnoses are misattributed to normal ageing, leading to late-stage diagnosis.⁵ Limited public awareness of dementia, constrained access to formal services and a culture that emphasizes family-based care make family members the main caregivers.

To improve dementia care, Putuo District in Shanghai piloted a national dementia-friendly community project in 2015. Based on this pilot project, the Shanghai municipality launched a citywide initiative in 2019, which is aligned with the Chinese national dementia plan.⁶ A key component of this plan is to enhance community-based support for people with dementia and their caregivers, which aligns with action goals 2 and 5 of the World Health Organization's (WHO's) *Global action plan on the public health response to dementia 2017–2025*.¹ Action 2 emphasizes increasing dementia awareness and community friendliness, while action 5 stresses caregiver support.

Here, we report on Shanghai's dementia-friendly community projects, based on agency data, existing evaluation documents and first-hand surveys of participants.

Local setting

Shanghai is China's most populous city and its population of 25 million has the country's oldest age structure. In 2023, 29.4% (7 313 100/24 874 500) of its residents were 65 years or older, with an estimated 300 000 people living with Alzheimer disease or related dementias.⁷ However, one study found only 6.2% (59/951) adults aged 55 years or older sought medical care for memory concerns.⁸

Shanghai has 16 districts and 216 subdistricts or towns under a three-tier city–district–subdistrict governance system. The Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs, through its Division of Ageing Services, regulates and supervises institutional, community and home-based elder-care services.

Approaches

In 2019, the Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs introduced the dementia-friendly initiative, a community-driven, psychosocial and participatory model that promotes social connection, cognitive stimulation and caregiver inclusion. The initiative prioritizes nonpharmacological interventions to enhance quality of life for people living with dementia.^{9,10}

To initiate a dementia-friendly initiative, subdistrict, village and town governments invited local social service and health-care agencies, including elder-care facilities, to apply for funds to run the projects. The application needed to include a project description with a target population, proposed approaches and the intended outputs and outcomes. The agencies were responsible for designing the projects using the bureau's guidelines and drew on proven interventions for dementia prevention, such as cognitive training, physical activity, music and reminiscence, nutrition support and psychosocial interventions.^{11,12} The projects typically include dementia screening, public awareness and social support. When agencies received funding, they conducted local needs assessments of older adults affected by cognitive impairment, their family caregivers and agency staff capacity to inform project content and delivery. Some agencies sought expert consultation, such as collaborating with a university, as needed. Most projects are staffed by three to five people, including a social worker or counsellor, a site coordinator and volunteer(s).

Adults aged 55 years or older who are living with dementia or mild cognitive impairment, and reside either in the community or in residential care facilities, can participate.

To inform eligible adults about the project, the agencies posted notices on bulletin boards at community activity centres. Many agencies also shared information through their official WeChat (Tencent Holdings Ltd, Shenzhen, China) public accounts, while word of mouth was a common way to spread the information.

Each project usually runs 12-week programmes, three to four times per year. Participants meet once a week for about an hour in a group comprising about 50 participants.

Each approved project received city government funding for three years, with a requirement of the same amount matched from the district government. Funds may be used for agency infrastructure upgrades, additional staffing and subsidies for volunteers that facilitate programming operation. Awards are disbursed annually, contingent on passing an annual evaluation set by the bureau. This evaluation combines a self-assessment with a supervisory review. Each year, agencies submit their self-assessments of funded projects to subdistricts, village or town governments, which forward them to the bureau. The bureau also convenes an evaluation team, consisting of administrative leaders, university experts, senior managers and geriatric physicians, to conduct the supervisory review, which includes site visits, hear agency reports, observe activities and rate projects based on team capacity, sustainability of resource development and distinctive project branding. Additionally, there is

a mid-point evaluation conducted after the project has been running for one and a half years. This evaluation focuses on the impact achieved, using the same four rating categories as the annual review: excellent, good, meets expectations and does not meet expectations. Those projects rated as meeting the expectations or higher are designated as official dementia-friendly communities and remain eligible for ongoing support for the remaining year. If a project did not meet expectations, the agency had to submit a rectification plan to address the issues. The bureau considered projects rated as excellent as outstanding case examples and these projects were showcased during public awareness campaigns.

Funded agencies receive 300 000 Chinese Yuan (about 45 000 United States dollars, US\$) in the first year and 150 000 Chinese Yuan (about US\$ 22 500) in the second year to conduct their proposed activities to make their community dementia friendly. Funding for the third year depends on the results of the mid-term evaluation. The cost of running the nonpharmaceutical interventions is approximately 100 000 Chinese Yuan (about US\$ 15 000) per year.

To report on these projects, we obtained secondary data from the bureau and agencies. We also engaged with agencies that had operated nonpharmacological intervention projects for at least one year and were willing to provide additional information as well as to help administer an in-person paper-based survey for free to 323 previous participants from 44 projects. The survey was conducted between March and June 2025 and survey participants provided feedback on the nonpharmacological interventions, including ratings of satisfaction, perceived usefulness and additional comments. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of East China Normal University (IRB #20230427–1006).

Relevant changes

The dementia-friendly initiative in Shanghai began with 28 project sites in 2019 and expanded to 216 projects by 2023, covering all subdistricts and townships in Shanghai.

Box 1 presents an overview of 44 nonpharmacological intervention projects implemented in 2023 and 2024, targeting older adults with cognitive impairment or dementia. These projects were primarily psychosocial interventions and incorporated a range of integrated activities, including eight horticultural, seven game-based, six musical, five exercise and four aromatherapy activities. Five projects combined more than two activities. The remaining nine projects included other types of interventions, such as dietary and craft-based activities. The projects were implemented across diverse settings, including seven

community service agencies, six social welfare elder-care institutions, five nongovernmental organizations and one hospital.

Across the 44 projects, participant responses were largely positive. Among 323 participants who provided feedback, 85.1% (275) individuals reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the project, and 90.1% (291) believed that the interventions met their needs. Overall, 85.4% (276) indicated that they had gained meaningful benefits and 69.7% (225) expressed a strong willingness to continue participating in these projects.

Lessons learnt

Before municipal involvement, community projects for people with dementia were sporadic and largely initiated by local nongovernmental social service agencies and hospitals in Shanghai. Following increased awareness among the public, bolstered by public campaigns such as Alzheimer Month, and the publication of WHO's *Global action plan on the public health response to dementia 2017–2025*,¹ the Shanghai municipal government recognized the challenges of dementia care and created the dementia-friendly initiative. In addition to providing initial funding, the municipal government requested local matched funds, tied continued funding to structured evaluations and publicly recognized exemplary projects. This combination of financing, accountability and recognition motivated subdistricts and townships to expand investment and deepen engagement in nonpharmacological interventions.

Projects that integrated person-centred, culturally familiar elements saw higher participant engagement, satisfaction and perceived usefulness. Older participants especially appreciated activities anchored in 1950s and 1960s music, traditional crafts and local daily routines, like sharing foods aligned with the 24 Chinese solar terms. These findings are consistent with evidence that empowerment-oriented, socially supportive interventions enhance engagement and psychosocial well-being for people living with dementia.^{13,14}

Many community agencies found it challenging to provide effective interventions and some sought collaboration with academic institutions for advice on designing, delivering and evaluating multidimensional interventions. Academic teams contributed to conceptual frameworks, structured manuals, staff training and monitoring the adherence to the implementation protocol, while local agencies ensured cultural fit, logistics and sustained delivery. The academic teams ensured that the project designs were based on the latest evidence for improving quality of life for older people with cognitive impairment. This

collaboration also provided agencies with practical toolkits and trained staff that supported scale-up and sustainability of the projects.

Evaluation revealed variable implementation quality. Most projects lacked an explicit theory of change, standardized protocols and/or quality checks, and project outcome assessments were often restricted to participant attendance or satisfaction (Box 1). These shortcomings reflect agencies' limited prior experience with intervention delivery and rigorous evaluation. While some agencies sought academic partners, many lacked the resources necessary to establish connections with a university or research institution. Recognizing these gaps, the municipal government's recent 2025–2030 plan aims to establish a three-tier support system, involving municipal guidance, district capacity-building and subdistrict implementation for ongoing quality improvement.

Shanghai's publicly funded model catalysed community action, leading to municipality-wide implementation of nonpharmacological, dementia-friendly projects that were highly appreciated by participants. Lessons learnt indicate that such interventions should include generation-relevant and culturally appropriate elements. For future projects, collaboration with academic institutions should be strengthened to support evidence-based practice, and standardized protocols with validated measures should be used to ensure consistent assessment and readiness for scale-up (Box 2). Taken together, Shanghai's experience offers practical guidance for other municipalities seeking to advance dementia-friendly, community-based care.

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Competing interests:

None declared.

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Box 1. Overview of the 44 dementia-friendly projects in Shanghai, China, 2023–2024

Type of activities

- Horticulture (eight projects): activities and discussions based on the Chinese philosophy of harmony between humans and nature.
- Games (seven projects): traditional cultural games linked to seasonal festivals, such as pitch-pot.
- Music (six projects): learning, singing and performing songs familiar to participants.
- Exercise (five projects): traditional Chinese exercises, for example Tai Chi, combined with thematic learning.
- Aromatherapy (four projects): learning, producing and using plant-based essential oils.
- Integrated (five projects): combining more than two activities.
- Other (nine projects): themes not included above, such as nutrition and handicrafts.

Project design collaboration

Most communities or agencies designed the project alone. However, five (11.4%) projects were co-designed by universities, agencies and communities.

Intervention manual

Most projects (39; 88.7%) developed an intervention manual before implementation.

Participant recruitment

Participants joined the project voluntarily following informal invitation shared on community bulletin boards or social media. Most projects (41; 93.2%) recruited participants either from the community where the agency was located or from nearby communities.

Project sites

Half of the projects were implemented in residential care facilities and the remainder in community activity centres. Forty (90.9%) of venues were within a 10-minute walk for participants.

Project management

All projects kept attendance records and post-session feedback logs. For group intervention facilitators, 30 (68.2%) projects provided supervision during implementation as well as process training.

Outcome evaluation

- Satisfaction surveys: 18 projects (40.9%)
- Pre- and post-assessments: 21 projects (47.8%)
- Follow-up assessments: five projects (11.4%)
- Quantitative analysis: four projects (9.1%)

Note: We obtained information about the projects from the Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs and local agencies.

Box 2. Summary of main lessons learnt

- To enhance acceptability and impact of the projects among persons living with dementia, community-based nonpharmacological interventions should incorporate generation-relevant and culturally appropriate elements.
- To promote evidence-based practice and support high-quality implementation across all projects, collaborations with academic institutions should be strengthened.
- Standardized protocols and validated measures are needed for consistent assessment frameworks to improve fidelity, comparability and readiness for replication and scale-up.