

FEEDING THE GAPS

A Collaborative Approach to Sustainable Elderly Meal Service in Guangdong

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Project Team & Acknowledgement

Project Title	Feeding The Gaps: A Collaborative Approach to Sustainable Elderly Meal Service in Guangdong	
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The lack of an integrated, cross-sectoral model for elderly meal services in Guangdong has left vulnerable seniors with inadequate access to affordable, nutritious food.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

By 2050, an estimated 40% of China's population will be over the age of 60, posing serious challenges to its health and social care systems. Although Guangdong currently benefits from a younger demographic due to inter-province migration, it is projected to become a moderately aging society by 2030. This demographic shift brings urgent and complex policy challenges, particularly food insecurity among the elderly.

Elderly meal services, programs that provide affordable meals to the elderly, have been introduced as part of the national elderly care services system. In Guangdong, over 3,600 elderly canteens, typically operated by grassroots organizations, social groups, or for-profit catering firms under government oversight, have been established, cumulatively serving more than two million elderly people as of 2024. Yet the impact of such initiatives remains limited: many elderly canteens are financially unsustainable, fail to reach the immobile elderly, and lack scalability across regions.

MARKET FAILURE

As merit goods with significant positive externalities, elderly meal services are systematically under-supplied and under-consumed, due to the critical misalignment between three key actors - government, market, and social sector - in mobilizing and integrating political, financial, and social capital.

Supply Side. The quasi-market structure creates operational inefficiencies: government funding remains volatile, private sector participation is limited by insufficient incentives, and social organizations lack sustainable resource streams.

Demand Side. Elderly consumers face multiple barriers, including economic constraints, physical accessibility challenges, and behavioural biases that suppress effective demand formation.

The Missing Link

Without effective supply, latent demand goes unmet; without demand, the market fails to grow. The true barrier lies not in resource scarcity but in the lack of coordination across actors and capital flows.

STRATEGIC TRIANGLE

Public value in elderly meal services is co-created when government, market, and society align their efforts – integrating their unique resources to build sustainable and resilient canteen operations.

TWO-TIER POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Macro Level

Establishing district or county-level coordinating bodies under municipal oversight to better align stakeholder efforts and integrate cross-sector resources;

Unlocking market contributions through targeted financial incentives and recognition programs for corporate social responsibility efforts;

Encouraging strategic alignment with canteen needs and business functions to engage more private sector participants;

Activating the social sector through mobilizing community-based networks for donations and volunteerism; and

Empowering community committees as grassroots integrators.

Micro Level

Providing demand-based basic subsidies per meal and introducing performance-based incentives tailored to different canteen models to improve the efficiency and fairness of subsidies;

Promoting self-sufficiency through matching fund mechanisms and fundraising capacity empowerment;

Implementing digital one-stop registration and service management systems to enhance operational efficiency; and

Introducing a community-driven model that combines centralized meal preparation with decentralized delivery to reach immobile elderly.



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1 Introduction

1.1 Food Insecurity among Elderly: Barriers to Accessing Meals

Population aging is one of the most pressing challenges faced by governments worldwide, posing significant risks to the stability of health and social systems. Due to rising life expectancy and declining fertility rates, populations are aging at an unprecedented pace. Being one of the more vulnerable countries in this regard, China is no exception to the trend. In China, the proportion of people aged 60 and above is projected to increase from 17.9% in 2020 to 40% by 2050 (United Nations, 2024), making it one of the fastest-aging economies globally. In Guangdong Province, the focus of this report, the population aged 60 and above reached 17.16 million by the end of 2023, accounting for 16.9% of the total population (Department of Civil Affairs of Guangdong Province, 2024).

One emerging, while often neglected, concern regarding aging is food insecurity – limited or uncertain access to adequate and nutritious food. Such barriers will significantly increase their risk of malnutrition and, thus, poor health (Zhou et al., 2023). The underlying causes of food insecurity among the elderly include food shortages, financial constraints that make food unaffordable, and limited physical access to food. Given the huge progress in poverty alleviation in China, undernourishment is no longer an issue, with only less than 2.5% of its population facing this issue (Roser et al., 2023). However, financial and physical constraints due to the gradual decline in physical and cognitive abilities have limited their access to adequate and nutritious meals. A study on community-living elderly in Beijing found that approximately 54% of respondents experienced food insecurity (Cheng et al., 2015).



Aging brings new food access challenges – financial hardship, limited mobility, and cognitive decline – that contribute to food insecurity, even in a context where undernourishment has largely been addressed.

The financial constraint stems from diminished earning capacity, depleting savings, and rising expenditures on essential services such as healthcare, housing, and long-term care. In economies lacking robust social security systems, this issue is exacerbated, resulting in higher poverty rates and greater income inequality among the elderly. In most countries, including China, the risk of poverty increases with age. The poverty rate among Chinese people aged 60-64 was 8.3% in 2020, rising to 13.4% for those aged 65-74 and 14.7% for those aged 75 and above (Gong et al., 2022). At the same time, China's pension system, the Old Age Insurance System (中國養老保險制度), is under strain due to demographic challenges and has failed to provide a comprehensive safety net for the elderly. With a

“90%

of the Chinese elderly are projected to be "empty nesters" by 2030

shrinking worker-to-retiree ratio, estimates suggest that basic pension assets for urban employees may be depleted by 2035 (Zheng, 2019). While reforms, such as raising the retirement age and introducing a private pension scheme, have been implemented, their effectiveness remains limited and face significant public backlash. As a result, economic security in old age remains uncertain.

The decline in physiological ability makes it increasingly difficult for older adults to perform instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs), such as preparing meals, further exacerbating food insecurity.

It is estimated that 32% of the elderly in China require assistance with IADLs (Asian Development Bank, 2024). This issue is compounded by the growing “empty nest” phenomenon, in which many elderly find themselves living alone or only with a spouse, as their children reside elsewhere, and they lack other relatives at home. These “empty nesters” often do not have informal support from family members, particularly their children, to help them navigate these challenges, leading to a high prevalence of food insecurity (Cheng et al., 2015).

Therefore, food insecurity among the elderly in the Chinese context is not merely a social issue; rather, it is a wicked problem that will continue to intensify, exacerbated by the huge demographic shift, the instability of the national pension system, and the “empty nest” phenomenon. Recognizing the urgent need, the Chinese government has nudged the officials to develop an integrated national elderly care services system. Meal services, as part of the system, are dedicated to supporting the elderly's access to food. However, the results have had limited impact, raising concerns about the sustainability of these services, with the underlying causes discussed in Section 1.2.

1.2 Structural Barriers to Elderly Meal Services: Market Failures and Equity Concerns

Market Failure: A Merit Good Under-Supplied and Under-Consumed

Elderly meal services are typically merit goods with significant positive externalities in their consumption (Dassiou et al., 2015). This type of service exhibits a degree of excludability, as elderly meal services are typically restricted to certified elderly people. It also demonstrates rivalrous characteristics in practice—since most service points operate under quota-based or needs-based allocation systems, an individual's consumption of the service may limit access for others in a context of constrained resources. While meal services could have been provided privately, the marginal social benefits produced by the consumption far exceed the marginal private benefits. This is because ensuring that the meal needs of the elderly are met not only improves their individual well-being, but also generates a wide range of positive externalities, such as alleviating the burden of family caregiving, fostering social cohesion (Wolf, 1999). Though the meal services for the elderly are socially desirable, they are often under-supplied and under-consumed through the market mechanism, thus creating market failure as there is inefficient allocation of resources.

Further examining the supply-demand dynamics involving three key actors: the government and the private sector providers on the supply side, and elderly consumers on the demand side. The government's dual role as purchaser and regulator interacts with private sector operators' capacity constraints, while elderly consumers face multiple barriers to effective demand formation. These imbalances create persistent gaps between service availability and actual social needs.

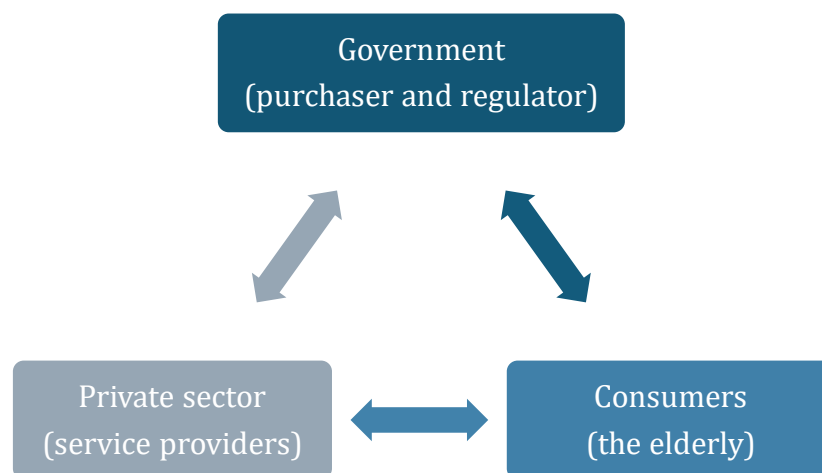


Figure 1 Elderly meal service triangle: interplay among government, private sector, and elderly consumers

The Supply-Side Struggle: Quasi-Market Structure with Government Limitations and Private Sector Immaturity

The provision of elderly meal service in Guangdong operates within a quasi-market structure. Following the New Public Management (NPM) reform trends of the 1980s (Lane, 2002), the government has gradually shifted from direct provider to purchaser and regulator, while delegating service delivery to private sector entities including both non-profit organizations and commercial for-profit operators. When the government purchases goods, it uses public finance to buy goods from the private sector to provide for the community and residents. During this process, the separation between purchasers and providers is realized (Glinskaya & Feng, 2018). This transition aligns with the quasi-market theory, which represents a type of market imperfection and could provide explanations for the current challenges faced by the government and service providers.

As the government shifts from provider to purchaser, elderly meal services rely on a fragile balance of public funding, private participation, and local fiscal capacity.

The government takes the role of a service “purchaser.” In practice, the extent of government funds and resources available for these services varies greatly. A more prominent role of the government is that of a fund provider, utilizing fiscal budgets to pay for the services provided and overseeing service quality. Meanwhile, a more implicit role involves the government leading the initiatives but providing limited resources directly while designing policies to promote more market-based participation and fund contribution (Lin & Liang, 2016). As will be further illustrated in Section 3, the model implemented in Guangdong sees the government in the process of delegating fundraising to the private sector while designing mechanisms. This leads to challenges where the scale and effectiveness of service supply become highly dependent on local government capacity, both in terms of financial capacity and administrative capacity to design effective mechanisms for other actors to participate. Consequently, in capacity-constrained cities, especially in rural areas, the out-of-pocket expenses remain substantial for the elderly.¹

Private sectors are not mature enough to independently undertake the role of provider. These entities, in this case, the elderly canteen operators, generally possess limited operational capabilities and barely manage to balance their income and expenses. They are unable to provide professional and specialized services for vulnerable subgroups.

¹ For instance, in Boluo, Huizhou, costs are around 7 RMB; in Shixing, Shaoguan, they range from 6 to 8 RMB; and in Longchuan, Heyuan, they vary between 5 and 10 RMB.

Furthermore, their operations are still heavily reliant on government financial support, and limited funding would restrict their ability to expand service coverage. Consequently, the private sector's willingness to participate is limited, and their capability to fully undertake robust supplier duties is restricted. This results in an under-provision of elderly meal services. Significant government efforts are still needed to foster an environment where operators can survive and, over the long term, support professional, localized organizations that can provide tailored and customized services to those with specific nutritional needs — for instance, the elderly facing special difficulties. As the government shifts from provider to purchaser, elderly meal services rely on a fragile balance of public funding, private participation, and local fiscal capacity.

Demand-Side Constraints on Effective Demand: Economic, Physical, and Behavioural Barriers to Access

Under the current market mechanism, services are targeted at elderly individuals who can afford to pay for their meals. However, merely meeting these revealed demands alone is insufficient for substantial market development. Individuals place varying values on the benefits derived from these services, influencing their willingness to pay (Weimer & Vining, 2017). This contributes to a wedge between effective private demands and actual social needs. This challenge is particularly pronounced in China, where “the broader middle class, in the absence of government intervention, will not have access to the services they need” (Glinskaya & Feng, 2018). Under market-based pricing, elderly meals may exceed the budgetary thresholds of these groups. Additionally, the frugal consumption habits of the Chinese elderly further reduce their willingness to pay to be lower than the socially optimal level. A survey conducted in Hubei showed that 53.47% of the elderly respondents can only accept a price of less than 10 yuan per meal (Yu & Lu, 2023). A poll conducted in Guangzhou indicated that more than 70% of the public believed that the current prices of meals in elderly canteens are too high and should be further lowered (Li, 2020). It can be reasonably inferred that, for low-income groups, the elderly's willingness to pay would be even lower. As a result, the equilibrium quantity of the market will not be able to cover the number of elderly people in need of services, creating a wedge between the effective private demand and the actual need for elderly meal services that prevent the development of an elderly meals market.

In addition to economic and cultural factors, physical constraints hinder elderly access to meal services. Mobility limitations, common among the elderly, restrict their ability to

Market-based elderly meal services struggle to meet real needs. Affordability, mobility limitations, and habitual preferences prevent many older adults from accessing elderly canteen services.

physically access meal provision sites. These physical challenges are compounded by the behavioral biases of the elderly. The elderly are prone to a status quo bias that is rooted in habitual consumption patterns, i.e., they tend to maintain existing consumption patterns, such as preference for and reliance on home cooking. The bias reduces their motivation to actively explore better choices even when they are available. In addition, cognitive decline can lead the elderly to rely more on affect-based than deliberative decision-making, with increased focus on personally relevant information (Carpenter & Yoon, 2011). This not only reinforces their status quo bias but also limits their ability to consider the broader social benefits of eating out in elderly canteens.

Beyond Market Failure: The Unequal Reach of Elderly Meal Programs

Other concerns include both inter-regional and intra-demographic inequality. Differences in regional development and resources between urban and rural areas pose significant challenges to the accessibility of meal services. For instance, in Guangdong Province, in 2024, the per capita disposable income of urban residents was 61,629 RMB, while that of rural residents was 26,729 RMB (Guangdong Bureau of Statistics, 2025), resulting in a disparity of nearly 2.3 times. This income gap creates substantial challenges for achieving food security and well-being. In 2023, the GDP of Shenzhen and Guangzhou reached 3.46 trillion yuan and 3.04 trillion yuan respectively, which is nearly 20 times higher than that of Yunfu, Heyuan, Chaozhou, Meizhou, Shanwei, and Yangjiang (People's Government of Guangdong Province, 2024). This resource disparity limits the scalability of the elderly meal services market, making it difficult for the elderly to access sufficient and equally high-quality service options.

Moreover, there is an uneven distribution of services among the elderly population itself. Centralized meal service models often fail to effectively cover the needs of elderly individuals with limited mobility, thereby not addressing the needs of those who truly require assistance. These issues underscore the complexity of developing a comprehensive and equitable elderly meal service model.

Market Underdevelopment

The Missing Links in Scaling Elderly Meal Services

The challenges faced by the elderly meal service market in Guangdong are multifaceted and deeply rooted in both demand and supply dynamics. The lack of effective demand, compounded by the absence of expanded meal delivery and tailored meal accommodations, severely hampers the ability to achieve economies of scale in service provision and consumption. Consequently, profits remain meager, and the market remains underdeveloped. Operations thus still depend largely on the existing demographic and socioeconomic development within the region, which are far from being sustainable, replicable, and accessible.

2 Research Design and Methods

2.1 Research Objectives and Questions

This section outlines the research objectives and key questions guiding the policy analysis on the operations of meal services for the elderly in Guangdong Province. Understanding the current landscape and development of these services is essential for informing policy decisions that enhance their scalability and sustainability, ultimately improving the quality of life for the elderly.

The primary objective of this report is to develop replicable and sustainable solutions for elderly meal services in Guangdong Province. Specifically, it aims to:

- Assess the current landscape of elderly meal canteen operation models and identify the challenges.
- Identify best practices of elderly meal services from other regions and jurisdictions that can be adapted to Guangdong.
- Develop practical solutions from both macro and micro levels to address the challenges identified

Building on these objectives, this report seeks to address the following policy questions:

- What operational model can support the sustainable development of elderly meal services?
- What factors influence the development of meal services, and specifically, what challenges undermine their long-term sustainability?
- What policy solutions can be implemented to address these challenges and enhance the sustainability of meal services, ensuring a lasting impact?

2.2 Scope of Study

This report focuses on Guangdong Province, China, examining the sustainability of meal services for the elderly in the region. Guangdong was selected as the focus of this study due to the launch of the Yue Ban Elderly (粵伴長者) Meal Services Program by the Shenzhen Aging Development Foundation, which has established a strong presence in the province (see Box 2.1). The program covers a diverse range of counties, including both urban and rural areas, regions with relatively high aging populations, and communities

with a predominantly conservative Hakka culture. This diversity provides a comprehensive perspective on elderly meal services in Guangdong, enabling a well-rounded investigation aligned with the research objectives.

Building on this program, the PAE team conducts field studies to assess the operational models, funding mechanisms, and sustainability challenges of elderly meal services. The analysis does not extend to broader elderly welfare policies, such as healthcare, long-term care, or other non-food-related social services. Instead, the report focuses primarily on the perspectives of service providers, including both government agencies and non-governmental organizations that operate elderly canteens.

Box 1 Yue Ban Elderly Meal Services Program

In the early 2025, Shenzhen Aging Development Foundation launched the Yue Ban Elderly (粵伴長者) Meal Services Program, initiated by the Tencent Foundation and funded by the Guangdong Rural Revitalization Foundation (廣東省鄉村振興基金會), in responses to the government's initiatives. The program covers seven counties in Guangdong with different socio-economic development status, including Yingde, Shixing/Nanxiong, Conghua, Bao'an/Nanshan, Boluo, and Longchuan, in the figure below. The program aims to establish a sustainable elderly meal service operating model that is more accessible and affordable, particularly for the elderly with special difficulties. In general, it will provide technological and financial support to the operators of the selected elderly canteens.

2.3 Research Significance

This project aims to enhance the accessibility and sustainability of meal services for elderly individuals facing special difficulties, ensuring their basic nutritional needs are met while promoting overall health and well-being. By focusing on the provision of adequate and nutritious meals, the program serves as a crucial social safety net for the elderly, reducing food insecurity and improving their quality of life.

Beyond addressing immediate needs, the project also emphasizes the long-term sustainability and financial viability of elderly meal services. By analyzing operational models, funding mechanisms, and policy frameworks, this study seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations that can guide the development of scalable and replicable solutions. These insights can inform policymakers, service providers, and

stakeholders in strengthening the existing meal service infrastructure and fostering a more resilient support system for the aging population.

In the meantime, the project contributes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), namely SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). By ensuring reliable access to nutritious meals, the project advances SDG 2 through targeted reductions in food insecurity among vulnerable elderly populations. By addressing diet-related chronic diseases and providing social support, the project supports SDG 3 with the enhanced physical and mental well-being of the elderly. The project also emphasizes community-based solutions and equitable service delivery, which aligns with SDG 11, fostering age-inclusive social infrastructures. Finally, the project addressed SDG 17 by highlighting the need for cross-sector cooperation among governments, NGOs, and private stakeholders to ensure scalability and long-term viability. Together, these intersections position the project as a replicable blueprint for sustainable meal services for the elderly.



Figure 2 Relevance to the SDGs

2.4 Research Methodology

This report primarily employs qualitative research methods. The PAE team has undertaken site visits to service centers and other relevant venues, such as locations that facilitate the logistics of meal service. The team has visited seven sites across three regions within Guangdong province (Figure 4). During these visits, the team made observations regarding meal service operations and conducted interviews as needed.

Such interviews involve both semi-structured and unstructured interviews. A total of 19 interviewees have accepted the interview (Figure 5). The team has conducted semi-

structured interviews with practitioners, including social workers and volunteers at these centers, as well as street-level bureaucrats and experts with comprehensive knowledge of various service models. Additionally, unstructured interviews have been conducted with practitioners and other stakeholders at the sites, should the team find such interactions valuable.

These interviews predominantly took place on-site during the visits, although arrangements for remote meetings (e.g., via telephone or Tencent Meeting) have also been made. Based on the available cases, this report has conducted in-depth case studies on selected instances to gain a thorough understanding of the subject matter.



Figure 3 Structured interview and conference

Furthermore, the team has engaged in consultations, as the client has allocated budgetary resources for workshops aimed at gathering stakeholders to discuss meal services for the elderly. The team has leveraged the advisor's expertise and network in social work to enhance the academic rigor of the study.

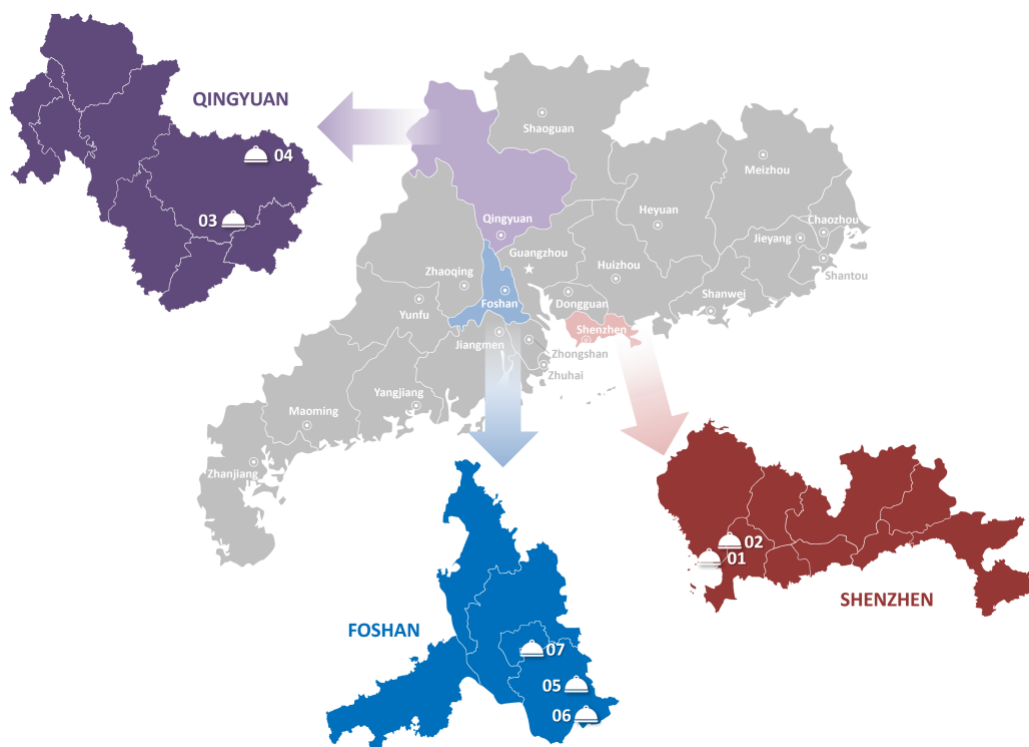


Figure 4 Seven site-visited canteens in three cities in Guangdong

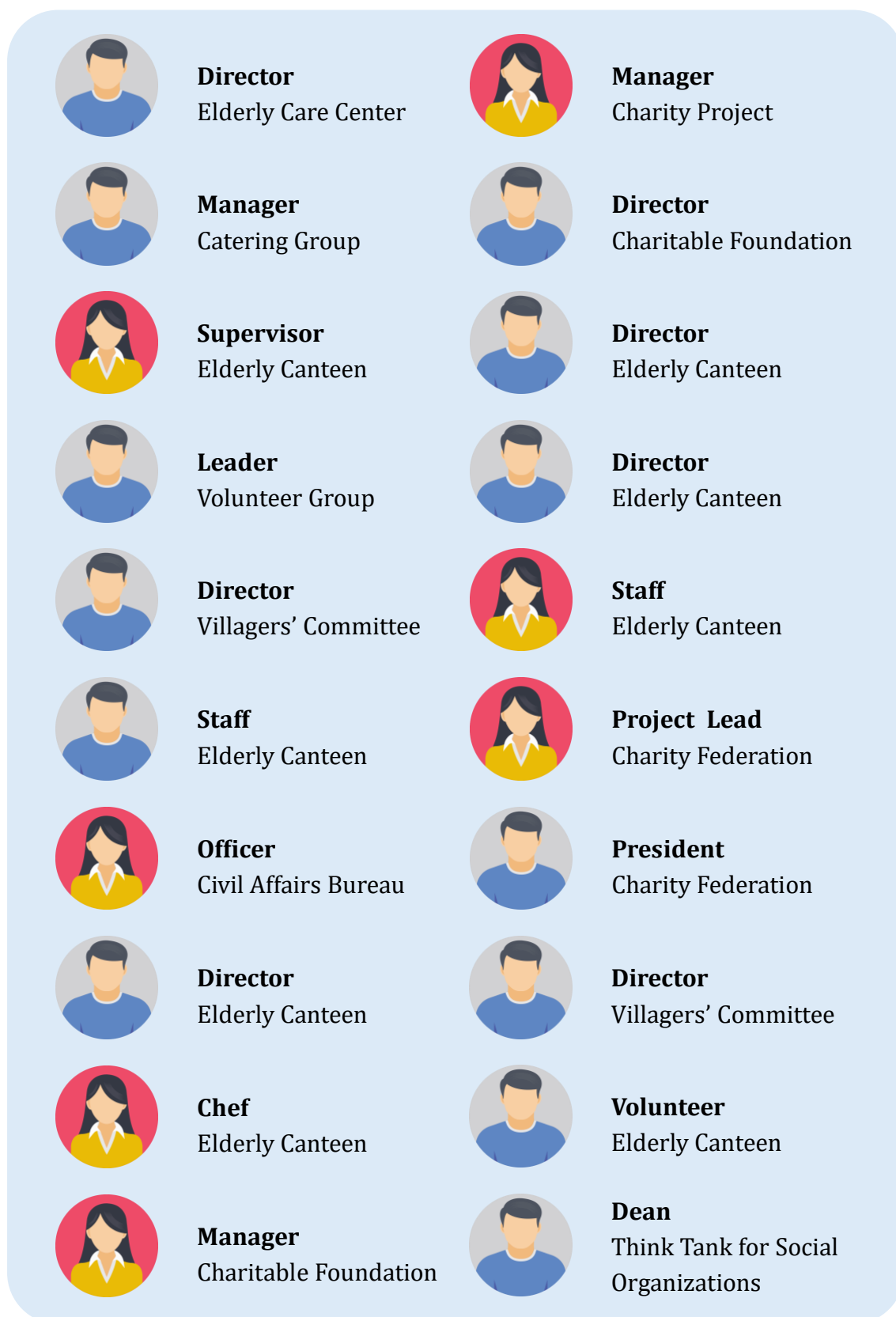


Figure 5 Interviewee profile (n=20)

3

Contextual Analysis of Elderly Meal Services in Guangdong

3.1 Population Aging Status in China and Guangdong

China is confronting a profound and accelerating population aging crisis, characterized by a rapidly expanding elderly population and a shrinking workforce. According to the 2020 census data (UN ESCAP, 2024), the population aged 60 and above (255.4 million) constituted 17.9% of the national population, while those aged 65+ (180.3 million) accounted for 12.6%. This demographic shift is driven by decades of low fertility and increased life expectancy. According to World Bank (2024), working-age population in China only accounted for 45% of the total population in 2023, exacerbating dependency ratios and straining pension and healthcare systems. Urban and rural disparities deepen the challenges of elderly care. Aging populations grow faster in rural areas, where dwindling family support follows youth migration. Meanwhile, a pronounced gender gap in life expectancy leaves women overrepresented in the oldest age groups, reflecting systemic vulnerabilities in elderly care systems.

Guangdong, recognized as China's economic powerhouse, also faces the aging crisis. Its aging rate 8.58%, denoted by the percentage of population aged 65+, slightly lags behind the national average of 12.65%. (Guangdong Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2020) This is largely due to the influx of young generations from the rural areas to the urban areas, which masks underlying vulnerabilities – rural counties like Yunfu and Meizhou suffer from accelerated aging as youth leave for cities, creating stark rural-urban divides. In the meantime, Guangdong's demographic dividend is fleeting. The working-age population (68.80% aged 15–59) will shrink as the massive 50–59 cohort (16 million, 12.66%) ages into retirement by 2035. Meanwhile, single-person households and delayed marriages signal weakening traditional family support.

Yet, Guangdong's economic vigor offers unique advantages. The province is piloting technology-driven elderly care solutions, leveraging its status as a tech innovation hub. Guangdong is uniquely positioned to pioneer scalable models, which involves elderly meal services, the focus of this project.

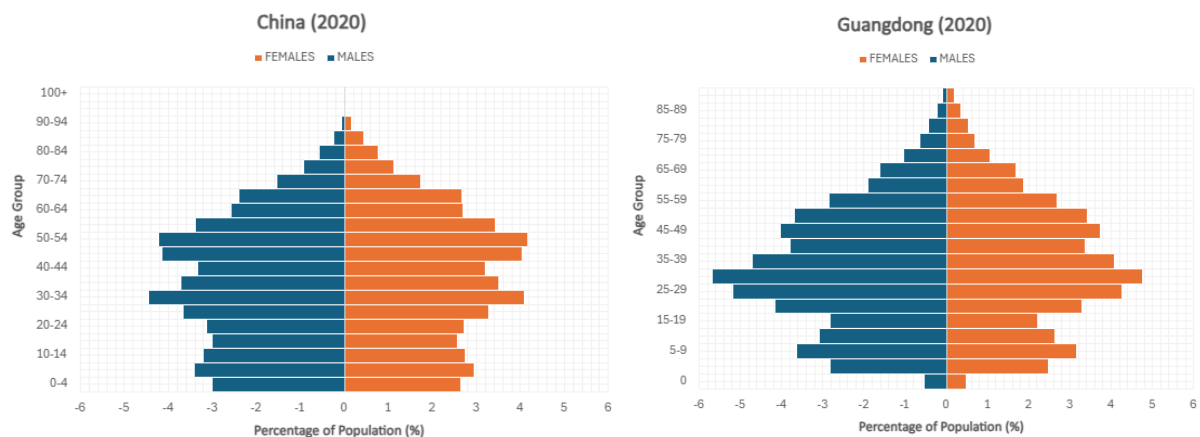


Figure 6 Population pyramid of China (left) and Guangdong (right)

3.2 Central Government Policy Landscape

To address food insecurity among the elderly, the Chinese government has been actively advancing the development of meal services for older adults. This initiative aligns with the broader objectives outlined in the 14th Five-Year Plan for the development of the elderly care services system. (The State Council, 2022) In October 2023, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, in collaboration with ten other departments, jointly formulated the Action Plan for Actively Developing Meal Services for the Elderly, which sets clear phased targets. (The Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2023) By 2025, the plan aims to extend services to more peripheral communities, enhance service quality in well-established regions, and expand coverage in less developed areas. Additionally, all regions are encouraged to prioritize elderly individuals facing special difficulties. By the end of 2026, the targets include achieving comprehensive service coverage, diversifying supply sources, ensuring sustainable development, and significantly improving the accessibility and satisfaction of elderly meal services.

In December 2024, the Communist Party Central Committee and the State Council of China jointly published China's first policy framework on the institutional design of elderly services (Xinhua News, 2025). The main objectives include: (1) By 2029, the elderly service network will be fully established, with a significant enhancement in service capacity and quality. Substantial progress will be achieved in expanding service capacity, improving service quality, and increasing operational efficiency, while the provision of basic elderly care services will be continuously optimized. (2) By 2035, the elderly service network will be further strengthened, with services more effectively coordinated and tailored to meet the diverse needs of the aging population. All elderly

individuals will have access to essential elderly care services, and a mature, well-structured elderly service system, aligned with China's unique conditions, will be fully established. With regard to elderly meal services, the policy highlighted leveraging the driving role of regional elderly care service centers in townships (subdistricts) and adopting models such as "center + service stations" (中心+站點) to vigorously develop embedded community elderly care service facilities and mutual assistance-based elderly care service stations. Meanwhile, this policy emphasizes a tripartite collaborative mechanism of "government leadership, market-driven resource allocation, and social participation (政府主導 + 市場配置資源 + 社會參與)". In terms of the market, it aims to fully stimulate market vitality by supporting various market entities to actively participate in elderly care services in accordance with market principles. It also seeks to improve the socialized operation mechanisms and evaluation systems for the implementation of supportive policies, thereby promoting the scaled, clustered, and branded development of the elderly care services industry.



Figure 7 Central government's policies on elderly care and meal services

3.3 Current Development of Elderly Meal Services in Guangdong

Overall Development Overview

Guangdong Province began implementing meal services for the elderly as early as 2016. These services are recognized as a key component of the "Hundred, Thousand, and Ten Thousand Project", a major public welfare initiative under close government supervision and monitoring. In December 2023, the Guangdong government issued the Guangdong Province's Implementation Plan for Actively Developing Elderly Meal Services (Draft for Comment). (Department of Civil Affairs of Guangdong Province, 2023) This plan mandates that all localities include meal services for elderly individuals with special difficulties in their checklist of basic elderly care services. It also emphasizes enhancing services in rural areas, encouraging the participation of social welfare charities, and exploring the digitalization of the entire service chain. This includes the implementation of big data management to streamline and optimize service delivery.

The eastern region is characterized by localized approaches and prominent local features. This region stands out in social fund-raising innovation, fully utilizing local charitable culture advantages. Shanwei City, as a representative, has raised over 5 million yuan through mobilizing caring individuals, local elites, and enterprise donations, innovatively developing the "Shanshan Action" (汕善行) mini-program for "flexible donations" (隨心捐). Similarly, Shantou has benefited from the region's philanthropic culture, securing 2.43 million yuan in charitable donations in 2024 (DCAG, 2024).

The western region features the central kitchen model as its main characteristic, emphasizing town and street coverage and highlighting government leadership. Through increased fiscal investment and establishing a scaled operation system, it ensures the sustainable development of elderly meal services. The northern region emphasizes urban-rural coordination, with Shaoguan as a representative, achieving full coverage of townships (streets) and exploring differentiated pricing mechanisms (Guangzhou Daily, 2024).

Operational Model

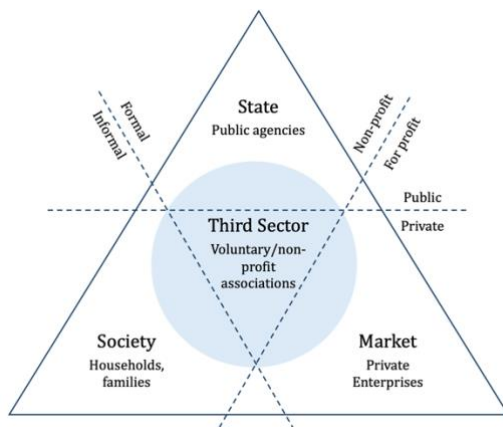
Guangdong's elderly meal services have formed a diversified and smart operational system. In terms of service models, a multi-level service structure has been established, primarily focusing on centralized dining, supplemented by delivery services, while integrating embedded services and comprehensive services. The centralized dining model not only meets elderly dining needs but also serves as an important platform for promoting community interaction and enriching senior life. Delivery services effectively solve dining difficulties for those with limited mobility and expand service coverage. Embedded services improve facility utilization efficiency by activating existing community resources. The comprehensive service model organically combines meal assistance with daycare and recreational activities, creating an all-round elderly care service system (DCAG, 2024).

Financial Mechanism

Guangdong's elderly meal services adopt a "Six-Point" (六個一點) financial model, forming a diversified and complementary sustainable operational mechanism. This specifically includes: government subsidies, enterprise concessions, charitable donations, individual payments, volunteer assistance, and collective supplements (政府補一點、企業讓一點、慈善捐一點、個人掏一點、志願助一點、集體添一點). Government provides differentiated subsidies for special groups, enterprises offer discounted services and equipment, charities establish special funds, individuals pay through tiered pricing, volunteers assist with services, and collective entities provide venue and facility support (Guangdong Provincial People's Congress, 2024).

4 Analytical Framework: Holistic Welfare-Capital Framework

The Welfare Pluralism Framework and the Community Capitals Framework are the frameworks that are used to illustrate the key actors and capital required to ensure the sustainability and resilience of social services.



Welfare Pluralism, or Mixed Economy of Welfare, is the idea that welfare provision is not solely the responsibility of the state but also includes market, voluntary, and informal. It emphasizes the involvement and interdependence of these actors concerning the provision, financing, and regulation of social services (Powell, 2019).



Community Capitals Framework identifies seven interconnected capitals that drive community resilience and development, including natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and built capital (Flora et al., 2015). This framework emphasizes strong social and economic interconnections.

The analytical framework of this study will build on these two frameworks, discussing the dynamic powers between key actors in mobilizing resources through the possessed capital. Figure 9 illustrates the analytical framework that was adapted to the context of elderly meal services and, hopefully, the broader context of social services. It emphasizes that public value (i.e., meal service delivery) is co-created by multiple stakeholders who utilize their capitals within interconnected dynamics to ensure the sustainability and resilience of elderly canteen operations.

The provision of elderly meal services in China involves three key actors: the state, the market, and the social sector, which includes the voluntary sector and informal networks. The state regulates, funds, and oversees services, the market fills gaps through CSR, philanthropy, and social enterprises, and the social sector mobilizes resources through fostering partnerships. These actors contribute to the system through political, social, and financial capital, each in different forms and degrees. The following section explores how these capitals sustain and strengthen elderly meal services, highlighting the interplay between actors in shaping capital dynamics.

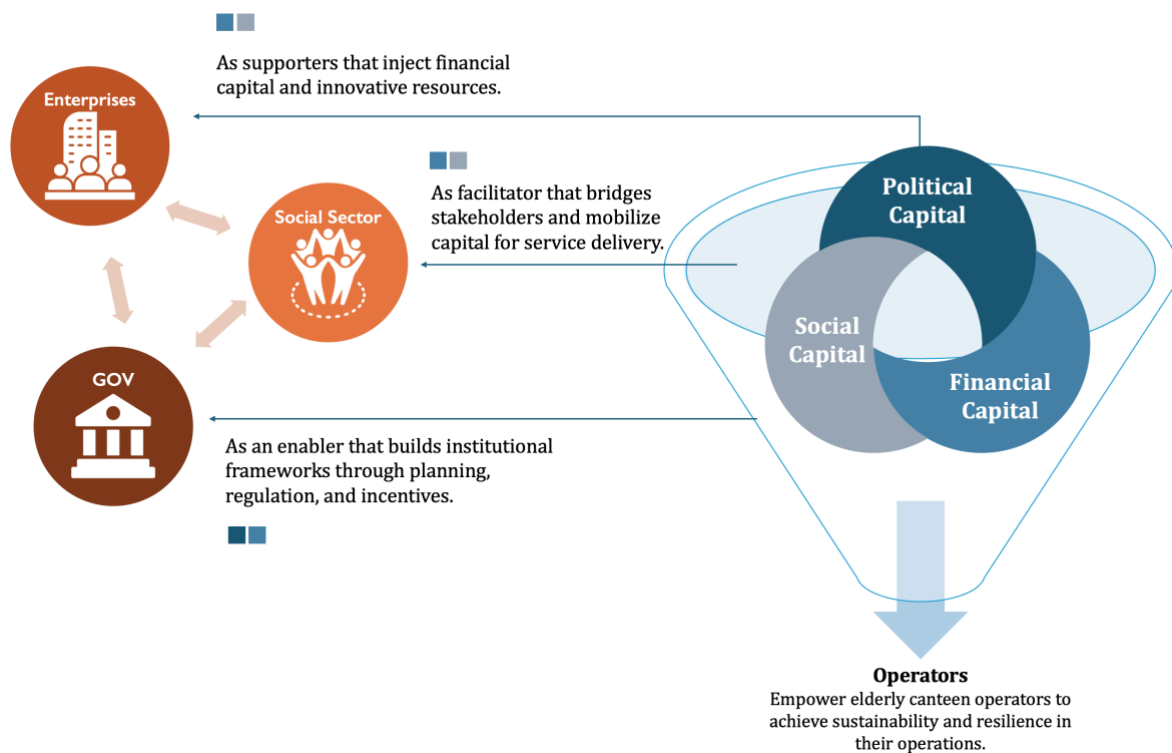


Figure 9 Holistic Welfare-Capital Framework

Political Capital

Shapes policies, provides legitimacy, and influences resource distribution.

Political capital encompasses the power and influence individuals have within a community, their connections to decision-makers, access to resources, and efforts to foster leadership and citizen engagement to achieve goals.

The state, by its nature, possessed significant political capital, i.e., the power of legal authorities. Its responsibility extends beyond purely direct provision, encompassing financing and regulation. Therefore, the state plays the role of a “visible hand” that enables rather than restricts market functions (New China Research, 2021), leveraging its oversight, regulatory, and funding capabilities to align services with public value.

While the market and social sector in China have relatively weak power, they can impose a significant impact on resource allocation and initiatives through access to decision-makers and community engagement. The enterprises strategically engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and philanthropy to enhance their political legitimacy (Yu, 2011). By participating in social initiatives, firms build connections with the government, gain access to state resources, and secure regulatory advantages (Zhao, 2012). Therefore, in Guangdong's elderly meal services, the market primarily participates voluntarily in providing services rather than through government contracts.

The social sector leverages *guanxi*, i.e., personal and professional connections, to navigate political landscapes. Many leaders of government-affiliated and civil society organizations are typically former government officials or social elites, allowing them preferential access to resources from both the state and market. These connections enhance their operational capacity and grant them a degree of autonomy while strengthening ties with local institutions, including clans, grassroots charities, volunteer groups, and community committees.

Financial Capital

Sustains service delivery through diversified funding sources.

Financial capital consists of resources necessary to sustain social initiatives, including money, charitable donations, grants, access to funding, and overall wealth. The sources can be public, private, and informal networks.

The state generally plays a central role by financing public services through fiscal transfers, subsidies, and regulatory frameworks that ensure the affordability and accessibility of services. In the case of elderly meal services, the government allocates significant resources to establish a baseline level of service provision. As the state seeks to offload some of its service provision responsibilities, it aims to reinvigorate private actors to supplement the funding.

The market injects financial capital through CSR funding, hybrid financing models, and direct investments in social enterprises. In addition to financial capital, the market actors also leverage their extensive networks to foster collaborations between businesses, government agencies, and social organizations, facilitating knowledge-sharing, resource mobilization, and cross-sector partnerships.

The social sector mobilizes financial capital through grassroots fundraising, philanthropic donations, and volunteer-driven efforts. Specifically, in the Chinese context, informal community support systems supplement gaps in formal services, particularly in home-based care. By leveraging both traditional networks and modern fundraising mechanisms, the social sector ensures financial sustainability for a range of social services.

Social Capital

Facilitates cooperation, trust, and resource mobilization across sectors.

Social capital refers to “features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 1993).” It serves as the essential “glue” that binds a community together, fostering connections that can lead to outcomes benefiting the entire community. This is achieved through three elements: bonding activities that strengthen close relationships, bridging activities that connect individuals with limited interactions, and vertical linkages that access external resources (Putnam, 2000; Teegen, 2003).

The state plays a significant in ensuring a robust regulatory framework that helps maintain service quality and equitable distribution. This is essential to echoing public demand (or pressure) and eventually promoting trust and accountability that support its legitimacy.

The market contributes through CSR initiatives and branding strategies that enhance public trust – fulfilling their social responsibilities and, at the same time, gaining reputational benefits.

The social sector, including voluntary organizations, community committees, and informal networks, plays the most direct role in mobilizing social capital. The social sector acts as a connector that builds trust and partnerships among stakeholders and eventually enhances service outreach. In China, traditional social institutions such as clans, local elites (鄉賢), and Confucian family values have historically played a crucial role in supporting elderly care. Local elites, for example, use their private wealth and influence to provide public goods, reinforcing their leadership status in the community.

	 State	 Market	 Social
Political Capital	Strong regulatory power, planning, legal authority, funding allocation, and policy oversight	Political legitimacy through CSR, state connections for business advantages, government partnerships	Guanxi networks, advocacy capacity, policy engagement through personal and professional ties
Financial Capital	Public funding, subsidies, fiscal transfers, and social welfare investments	Corporate philanthropy, CSR funding, private investment, hybrid financing models	Donations, volunteer-driven resources, grassroots fundraising, informal community contributions.
Social Capital	Trust-building through governance, regulations ensuring service standards	Market-driven networks, brand reputation, corporate philanthropy enhancing public trust	Bonding (community ties), bridging (connecting diverse groups), and linking (accessing external support)

Figure 10 Summary table of capital possessed by each actor

5 Results and Discussion

5.1 Typology of Elderly Canteens

Despite similar service scope and purposes, the elderly canteens in Guangdong can be categorized into three distinct operational models based on funding sources and stakeholder roles². The first model is the community-based elderly canteen (Type 1), where local communities operate more independently under government mandate, actively taking on a practitioner role. The second is the social organization-run elderly canteen (Type 2), where registered organizations integrate resources to operate the canteen business. The third model involves for-profit-run elderly canteens (Type 3), led by private enterprises in a market-oriented approach.

While all three models operate within a government regulatory framework, the degree of involvement varies. Financial instability also persists across the models due to reliance on volatile funding streams. Additionally, all recognize the need for meal delivery services for immobile seniors, though implementation differs based on resource availability.

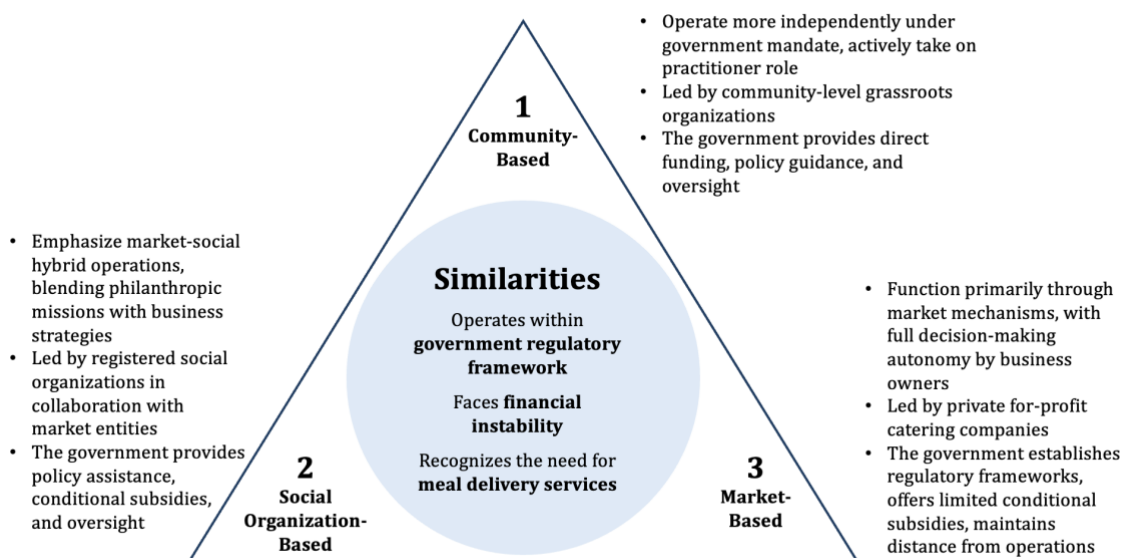


Figure 11 Similarities and differences between the three types of elderly canteens

² The three models are not rigidly mutually exclusive or collectively exhaustive. They are built on actual practices observed in Guangdong's elderly meal service landscape.

Type 1

Community-Based Elderly Canteens

The community-based elderly canteen model is primarily led by community-level grassroots organizations, i.e., Residents' Committees and Villagers' Committees, with financial support from local governments or through the community's collective assets. The operations rely heavily on local government fiscal capacity and committee management capabilities.

Actors & Roles

Local governments at the street/township level and civil affairs authorities play the roles of initiators, propellers, and major funders at the initial stage. In most cases, they provide the initial grants for construction and possibly ongoing operating grants for RCs and VCs. They also develop policy frameworks to integrate the community-based canteens into their wider elderly care system and oversee the canteens.

RCs and VCs function as the primary service providers, directly managing canteen operations or procuring external operators through government procurement processes. Typically, the Party Service Centers (黨群服務中心) in the community managed by the committee are used as canteen sites. In some cases, the committee members also take additional roles, participating as volunteers, to provide localized meal delivery services by themselves.

Capitals

POLITICAL CAPITAL is the dominant resource in community-based canteens. These canteens operate as extensions of state governance at the community level, deriving legitimacy and authority from their institutional position under the local government's governance structure. RCs

Box 2 Residents' Committees (RCs) and Villagers' Committees (VCs)

RCs in urban neighborhoods and VCs in rural villages are grassroots organizations responsible for managing local affairs, mediating disputes, delivering public services. They act as intermediaries between the state – represented by street offices (街道辦事處) or township governments (鄉鎮政府) – and residents, balancing policy implementation with local advocacy.

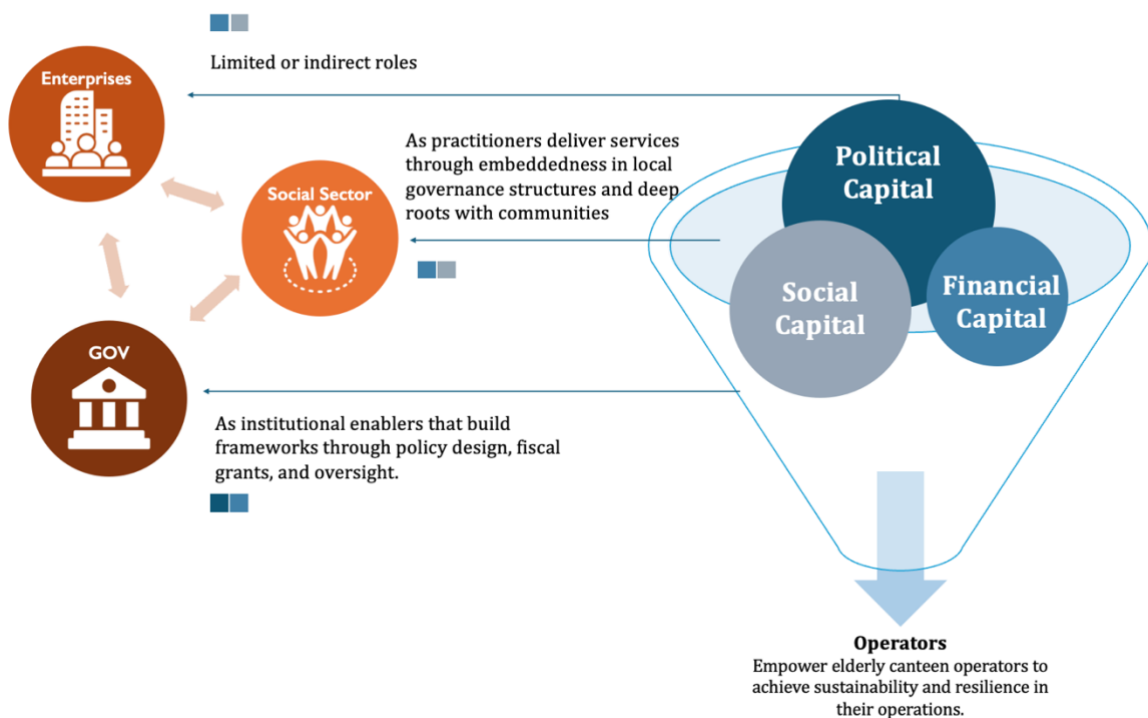
Although typically elected by residents or villagers, state influence in appointments exists. Likewise, while they maintain a degree of autonomy, they operate under the oversight and guidance of street offices or township governments.

and VCs leverage their official status to mobilize resources, coordinate stakeholders, and implement policies.

SOCIAL CAPITAL is mobilized through community networks, with RCs and VCs utilizing their deep connections within communities to identify elderly needs and recruit local volunteers. The community-based nature of these canteens facilitates trust and accessibility for elderly residents who are already familiar with committee members. Moreover, the Party Service Centers serve as multifunctional venues that consolidate various community services, creating synergies between meal services and other community activities.

FINANCIAL CAPITAL, in addition to canteen revenues, comes primarily through governmental channels, with local governments providing one-time initial grants for the establishment and potentially ongoing operational subsidies depending on local fiscal capacity. In urban areas, local and welfare foundations may supplement funding gaps, while rural villages often leverage collective assets (income from land leases and village-owned enterprises) to sustain operations. Rental costs are removed as the sites are provided directly by existing community Party Service Centers owned by RC and VC.

In this model, the embeddedness of the community in the local government system provides structural advantages for service delivery, but also creates a dependence on political priorities and administrative directives. Meanwhile, there are vulnerabilities in existing financing mechanisms: urban canteens face instability during periods of fiscal recession, while rural models rely heavily on the availability of local resources.



Case Study: Canteen F

Canteen F exemplifies the community-based canteen model, which is running by a Residential Committee in Shunde and operating at the Party Service Center owned by the committee. The RC directly manages the operation of the canteens while outsourcing the services to social worker organizations and a catering company.

The canteen features a buffet-style dining arrangement with meals prepared by a catering company and delivered to the canteen daily. To assist those with limited mobility, the RC organizes community volunteers to provide home delivery services, serving an average of 70-80 elderly individuals in-store daily, with more than 10 meals delivered to homes.

The discounted meal prices for the elderly offered by the canteen are subsidized by the "Shunde Good Food" project (run by Shunde Charity Federation) which covers 60 elderly people daily, with the RC providing supplementary subsidies when the number exceeds this limit. Originally serving only the elderly, the canteen has expanded its services to the general public to increase revenue and reduce operational pressure while maintaining its focus on elderly care.

However, the canteens still confront sustainability risks: in the context of the economic recession, the overall funds granted to the RCs have been gradually shrinking due to the fiscal stringency of the local government, resulting in the RCs struggling to support the operation of the canteens. As one committee member put it,

"Due to the economic tightness, government finances are strained. Our neighborhood committee's funds used to be sufficient and flexible, but now it's quite tight. More expenses that weren't originally borne by our committee now have to be covered by us. We can only hope that the number of elderly diners matches exactly the subsidy quota from Shunde Good Food, otherwise the accumulated costs become substantial over time."

Type 2

Social Organization-Based Elderly

Canteens

The social organization-based elderly canteen model is primarily led by registered social organizations in collaboration with market entities, under policy guidance and conditional financial support from local governments. These canteens emphasize market-social hybrid operations, blending philanthropic missions with regular business strategies.

Actors & Roles

Social organizations independently run elderly canteens by registering separately as a market entity or associating with other market entities. They function as service providers, directly managing canteen operations, and are responsible for major resource coordination and engagement. They leverage professional expertise in social services and elderly care to maintain service quality and responsiveness to user needs.

Local governments serve as an enabling hand, providing social organizations with policy assistance and may offer subsidies and/or funding based on local conditions, as well as overseeing the operation of these services.

Although the enterprise sector is not a large component involved here, it may take on some corporate social responsibilities by collaborating with social organizations. Together, these participants could form a collaborative network that mobilizes resources to sustain meal services for the elderly.

Capitals

POLITICAL CAPITAL is mobilized through social organizations' legitimacy as government-accredited service operators. The governmental endorsement enables them to access multiple resources more easily. By retaining oversight but withdrawing from direct management, the government indirectly uses its authority to guide the behavior of social organizations.

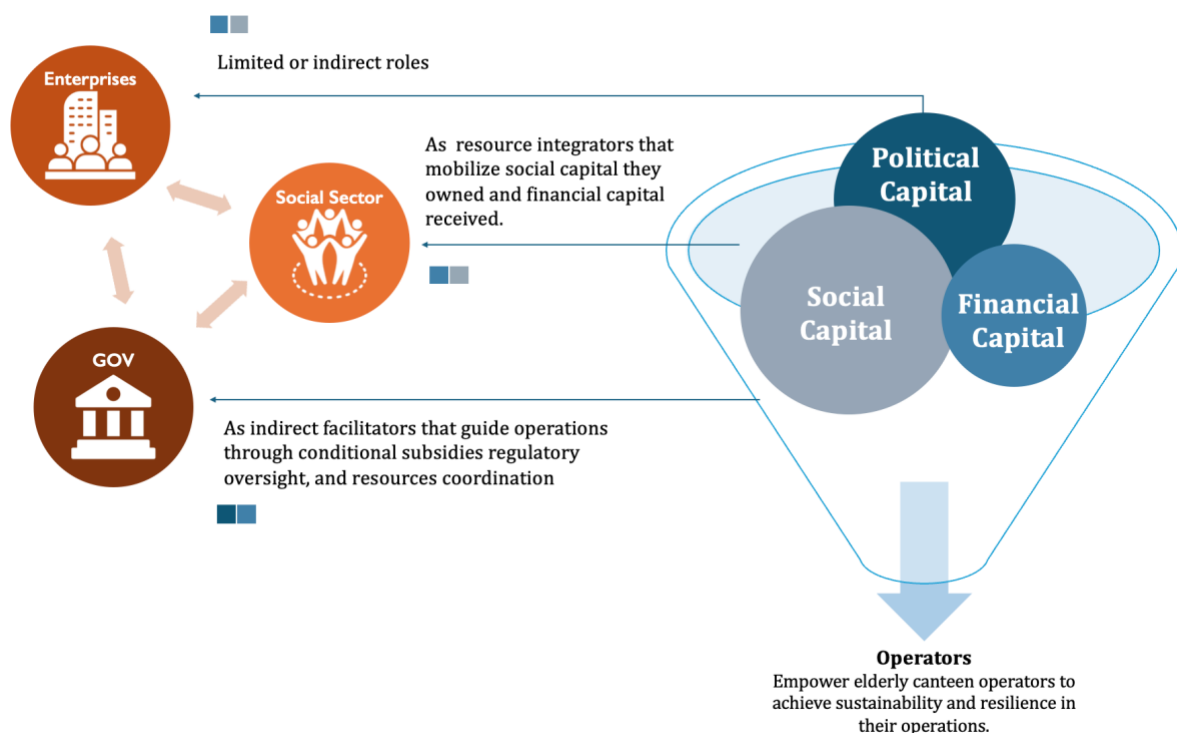
Box 3 Social Organizations in China

In China's institutional context, social organizations (社會組織) refer to non-governmental, non-profit entities registered with civil affairs departments. These include social groups (社會團體), social service organizations (社會服務機構), and foundations (基金會).

SOCIAL CAPITAL plays a major role in the social organization-based restaurant model. Impactful social organizations have and can leverage extensive networks within communities, connecting with potential beneficiaries, volunteers, and donors. For meal delivery, they can mobilize social capital and recruit volunteers in local communities. The government's social capital is reflected in its ability to coordinate concessions from various stakeholders, such as street offices coordinating the provision of free space by property owners, thereby reducing the fixed costs of social organizations.

FINANCIAL CAPITAL of social organizations comes from diverse funding streams: market-based revenue from serving the general public, philanthropic fundraising, and potential government subsidies. Blending philanthropic missions with sustainable business strategies are adopted, such as “business supplementing charity (以商補慈)”, which allows social organizations to cross-subsidize services, using profits from commercial operations to offset losses from discounted elderly meal. Some enterprise-canteen partnerships are in the form of group meal contracting or supply chain partnerships to further supplement revenues and reduce costs for canteens. Most social organization-based canteens receive subsidies from other foundations, and those with fundraising credentials also initiate their own fundraising campaigns. The potential government subsidies can provide relief to social organizations and incentives to align with policy goals.

Despite multiple sources of funding, they are still not enough for canteens based on social organizations. After opening their doors to the public, most canteens are just barely able



to break even. In addition, grants from other foundations or self-raised funds can be volatile, depending on the fundraising ability of these foundations.

Case Study: Canteen G

Canteen G is a representative example of social organization-based canteen. Originally operated by the government, Canteen G was officially taken over by a local charity foundation in November 2022 and the foundation registered as a catering enterprise, becoming a social enterprise responsible for managing and operating the canteen.

The canteen features a central kitchen that prepares meals on-site daily, offering a selection of dishes for the elderly. To assist those with limited mobility, the canteen recruits part-time delivery staff to provide a dual service of "in-store pickup + home delivery," serving an average of 50-60 elderly individuals per day, with about 30% of meals delivered.

The discounted meals prices for the elderly offered by the canteen are subsidized by its charity foundation and other local foundations. Additionally, the canteen adopts a "business supplementing charity" philosophy, opening its services to the public and accepting corporate group meals contracts (such as orders from nearby factories) to offset its losses from providing low-price meals to the elderly to achieve financial balance.

However, this model still faces technical shortcomings and sustainability risks: due to insufficient funding for social organizations, the manual paper-based registration process leads to inefficiencies in subsidy accounting, and the fundraising pressure on the charity foundation intensifies in the context of economic decline.

Type 3

Market-Based Elderly Canteens

The market-based elderly canteen model is run almost entirely by market forces. These elderly canteens are new services based on the original business of the for-profit catering companies. These canteens function primarily through market mechanisms, with

decision-making autonomy resting with the business owners. Unlike other models, these canteens typically focus exclusively on meal provision without integrating broader elderly-oriented services or community activities.

In this type, private enterprises function as primary service providers, making decisions about service scope, pricing strategies, and operational models. Their motivations vary from enhancing corporate social responsibility (CSR) and entrepreneurial altruism to echoing government policy signals while seeking sustainable business returns.

Local governments play a minimal oversight role, establishing regulatory frameworks rather than providing direct guidance. They may offer conditional subsidies to incentivize elderly-focused services but generally maintain distance from operational decisions and resource allocation.

Capitals

POLITICAL CAPITAL of market enterprises, despite limited, primarily through regulatory compliance and alignment with government policy priorities for elderly care. Government endorsement for elderly-focused services may provide legitimacy advantages and potential access to conditional subsidies, but these enterprises generally operate with less political embeddedness than the community-based or social organization-based models.

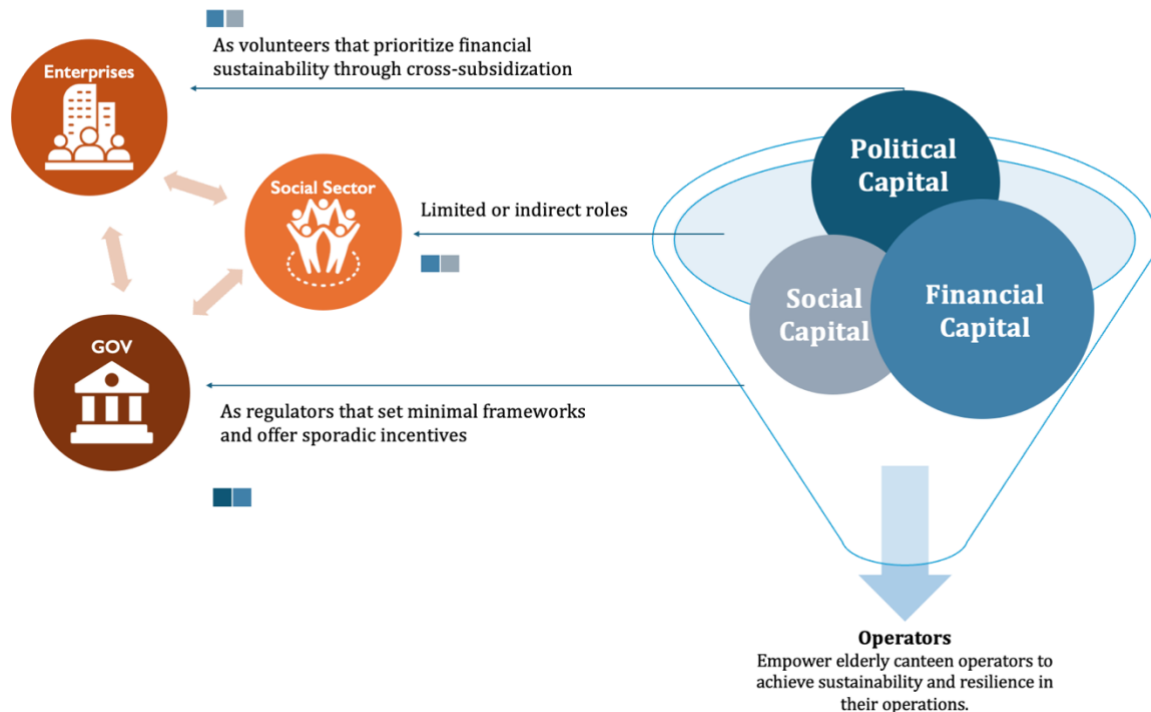
SOCIAL CAPITAL plays an insignificant role in market-based canteens, primarily leveraged through business networks and customer relationships rather than community embeddedness. Market enterprises may cultivate relationships with elderly communities as part of customer development strategies, but these connections typically remain transactional rather than integrated into broader social support systems.

FINANCIAL CAPITAL is the dominant resource in market-based elderly canteens. These operations rely primarily on self-generated revenue, with some offering discounted meals for elderly customers cross-subsidized by full-price sales to general customers. Business owners invest their own capital for startup costs and operational expenses, seeking sustainable return on investment while accommodating social objectives.

Two distinct financial approaches emerge within this model: 1) government-encouraged canteens may receive conditional subsidies similar to social organization models on the condition that they meet certain eligibility criteria. 2) purely voluntary canteens maintain complete financial independence but offer elderly discounts as part of their business strategy.

Unlike other models, market-based canteens face significant pressure for financial self-sufficiency, which shapes their service offerings, pricing strategies, and target markets.

This creates both constraints (e.g. limiting services to profitable activities) and opportunities (e.g. greater operational sustainability without reliance on unstable government funding).



Case Study: Canteen B

Canteen B is a market-based canteen model. Functioning as the staff canteen for the company's group headquarter and the Municipal Federation of Labor Unions, the company's catering business also focuses on providing prepared meals to schools across the city, with elderly meal services added as supplementary operations in response to the government's encouragement.

The canteen leverages its existing kitchen facilities to serve all elderly residents in the district, operating in a relatively affluent neighborhood and serving approximately 40-50 elderly individuals daily with discounted prices. Currently, the government only provides meal subsidies directly to the elderly.

However, the canteen faces significant sustainability challenges as the senior meal service alone struggles to achieve financial viability. As the canteen manager explains, *"Government funding only come at the beginning for promotional purposes. We manage to survive due to our inherent advantages, but passion alone can't solve survival issues."* Additionally, elderly customers' frugal mindset limits

their spending, as many seniors are reluctant to purchase anything beyond the subsidized meal, further constraining revenue potential.

Although the manager acknowledged that home delivery service is a real demand of the elderly population, without additional subsidies, the enterprises can't do it even if they want to do it:

"Who pays for it? The government or the public? Business operations can be unprofitable, but they cannot sustain losses."

5.2 Key Challenges Faced by Elderly Canteen Operators

The typology analysis above highlights the similarities and distinctions between the three elderly canteen models. Despite their contextual differences, these canteen operators face a shared set of critical challenges that hinder the sustainability and scalability of their meal services. This section examines the key barriers encountered by elderly canteen operators that can be generalized across the different typologies.

Challenge 1: Financial instability persists across the models due to reliance on volatile funding streams



1 Rely heavily on government subsidies and donor contributions, which are often inconsistent and unpredictable.



2 Depend on funding from philanthropic sources and grants, which can be volatile and short-term in nature.



3 Face uncertainties around revenue generation from meal services.

Across all three canteen models, operators grapple with reliance on volatile funding streams. The instability in funding sources creates significant financial uncertainty for canteen operators, making it difficult to plan effectively, invest in infrastructure improvements, or expand their reach to serve more elderly individuals in need. Therefore, **securing stable and reliable funding is arguably requisite for the long-term viability of these meal services.**

Grassroots communities often lack the sufficient capacity to sustain canteen operations without dedicated funding streams, such as government grants targeting

elderly meal services or charitable foundation support. For example, in the village of Canteen D, the township-level civil affairs bureau only subsidizes seniors over 70, leaving the village committee to cover the remaining costs for those under 70. However, the village committee lacks the financial resources to subsidize all eligible seniors. This underscores the challenges faced by low-income communities in maintaining elderly canteens at a certain scale using limited civil affairs budgets or village collective funds.



Figure 12 Canteen D site visit observations

In China's current philanthropic landscape, 'community' should be understood as a localized unit capable of mobilizing regional resources. Only district- or county-level entities possess the capacity to sustain robust charitable efforts. Villages and resident committee level, even township and street office level, cannot yet support sustainable foundations on their own.

Dean from one think tank for social organization

”

Another major source of this instability stems from sudden government fund cuts, which can severely destabilize service continuity, especially in low-income regions facing more constrained financial capacity. Elderly canteens typically receive financial capital through government special funds dedicated to elderly meal initiatives or general budget allocations channeled via the civil affairs sector. However, recent fiscal constraints faced by governments have led to “sudden, cliff-like” declines in these subsidies in some places. While urban areas can partially offset these gaps through donations from localized charities (contingent on mature philanthropic ecosystems), rural villages have to compensate by tapping into self-managed funds (e.g., land lease revenues) – yet face constraints tied to localized resource availability. Social organizations must now demonstrate exceptional self-sufficiency and diversify funding sources, while market-driven operators can only survive through large consumer bases or strong CSR-driven political capital.

“

Starting these past two years, procurement services have seen cliff-like declines. Shenzhen might be better off, but in Shunde, there was no gradual slope — it just dropped sharply.

President from one Charity Federation

Our local social organizations, or social work service centers which also operate elderly canteens, have been affected by the large-scale reduction in government procurement services, forcing closure for a period until charitable funding support was secured to reopen. We've found that social organizations' survival currently needs diversified support because their self-sustainability capacity is relatively weak.

Project Lead from one Charity Federation

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Challenge 2: Operational inefficiencies in elderly canteen registration processes

In addition to the operational challenges stemming from the heavy reliance on local government resources and management capabilities, elderly canteens also face technical shortcomings that undermine their operational efficiency. A key issue is the inefficient registration processes for tracking and accounting for elderly meal subsidies.

Across the different canteen models, the registration of eligible seniors and distribution of



Limited technological capacities

Constrained resources and expertise to invest in advanced digital systems



Lack of digital integration

Disconnected, analog processes between canteen operators and government agencies administering the subsidy



Funding challenges

Significant upfront and ongoing investments to develop and maintain robust digital registration platforms



Organizational inertia

Manual processes have been the established practice since the inception of these canteen programs

subsidies is often done through manual, paper-based systems rather than digitized solutions. This is due to the combination of limited capacities, lack of digital integration, funding constraints, and organizational inertia.

The manual, paper-based registration processes lead to several operational inefficiencies. They make it difficult to accurately track, verify, and account for the subsidies provided to individual elderly beneficiaries. This increased administrative burden diverts resources away from core service delivery and strategic priorities. The manual approach also poses challenges in scaling up the subsidy distribution as the number of elderly diners grows and reduces the financial transparency and accountability of the canteen operations.



We need to use paper forms for meal delivery statistics every day and then do a monthly summary. I think when there are many diners, the reconciliation and checkout can indeed be quite troublesome.

Manager, Canteen G

Challenge 3: Inadequate reach to the most vulnerable elderly

The elderly canteens often struggle to adequately reach the most vulnerable elderly, particularly those with mobility restrictions. Delivering meals to immobile seniors remains a significant challenge for the canteens. While some immobile elderly can rely on their family members to collect the meals, elderly individuals living independently but with severe mobility issues are left behind.

Some canteens have attempted to address this by providing food delivery through volunteers, however, the impact is limited due to resource constraints. In most regions, the government does not provide subsidies specifically for meal delivery services, leaving the canteens unable to extend their reach to this highly vulnerable population.

The lack of subsidized and accessible meal delivery options creates a critical gap in service coverage for the most isolated and immobile elderly. The canteens, operating within their existing resource constraints, are unable to independently develop and sustain comprehensive meal delivery programs to meet the needs of this marginalized group.

Meal options that accommodate elderly preferences and medical requirements are also another challenge. Some elderly individuals with chewing difficulties require special meals, such as soft-textured foods. However, providing these customized meal options adds further complexity and costs to the canteens' operations. The meals need to be processed and prepared to accommodate the special requirements of the elderly, requiring additional staff assistance and specialized equipment like blenders.

The most frequently raised issue is establishing elderly meals and soft texture meals. These need to be well-cooked, boneless, and are difficult to satisfy with socialized menu items. If elderly-specific meals were available, more seniors would likely come to eat. Currently, we cannot serve seniors with genuine needs.

Manager, Canteen B

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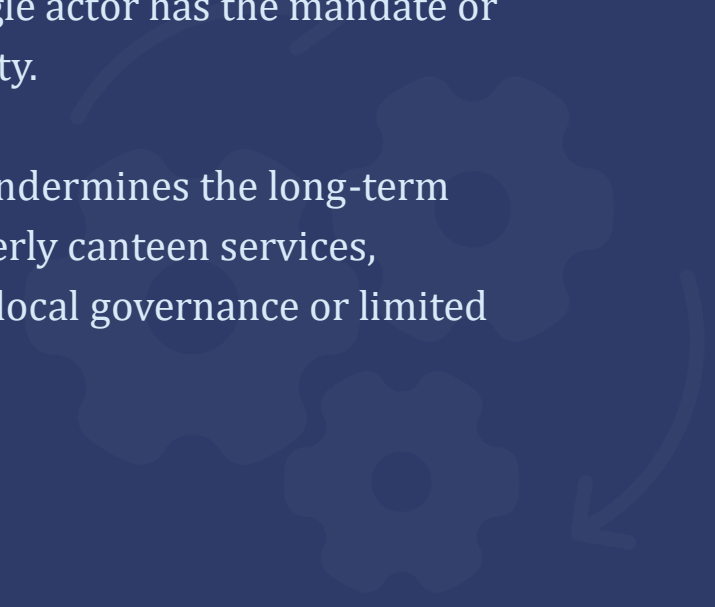
Missed Synergies

Misalignment Between Stakeholders and Capital Flows

Despite the involvement of multiple actors – namely the state, market, and social sector – and the presence of various forms of capital – political, financial, and social – elderly meal services in Guangdong remain constrained by *a persistent “triple bind”: unstable funding, inefficient operations, and limited outreach to the most vulnerable.*

This is not due to the absence of resources or stakeholders, but rather the lack of integration and coordination among them. *Each actor brings different capacities and interests to the table, but without a coherent framework or strong mechanisms for convergence, these assets fail to align toward a common goal.* Instead of forming a synergistic system, fragmented roles and disjointed capital flows create gaps in service provision, where no single actor has the mandate or capacity to take full responsibility.

This fragmentation ultimately undermines the long-term sustainability and impact of elderly canteen services, especially in areas with weaker local governance or limited financial capacity.



6 Policy Recommendations

This report identifies the misalignment between stakeholders and capital flows as a root cause of the inefficiencies, instability, and limited access in elderly meal services. To address this, we propose a two-tier strategy that focuses on building a synergistic system at the macro level while enhancing the operational performance of elderly canteens at the micro level.

6.1 Criteria and Policy Goals

The macro-level recommendations aim to strengthen the integration of government, market, and social sector actors, aligning their contributions and resources toward a common goal. Once this integrated system is established, the micro-level recommendations focus on leveraging that capital to improve service accessibility and operational feasibility. Ultimately, this two-tier strategy seeks to ensure that elderly canteens are not only sustainable in the long term but also scalable and replicable across diverse contexts.

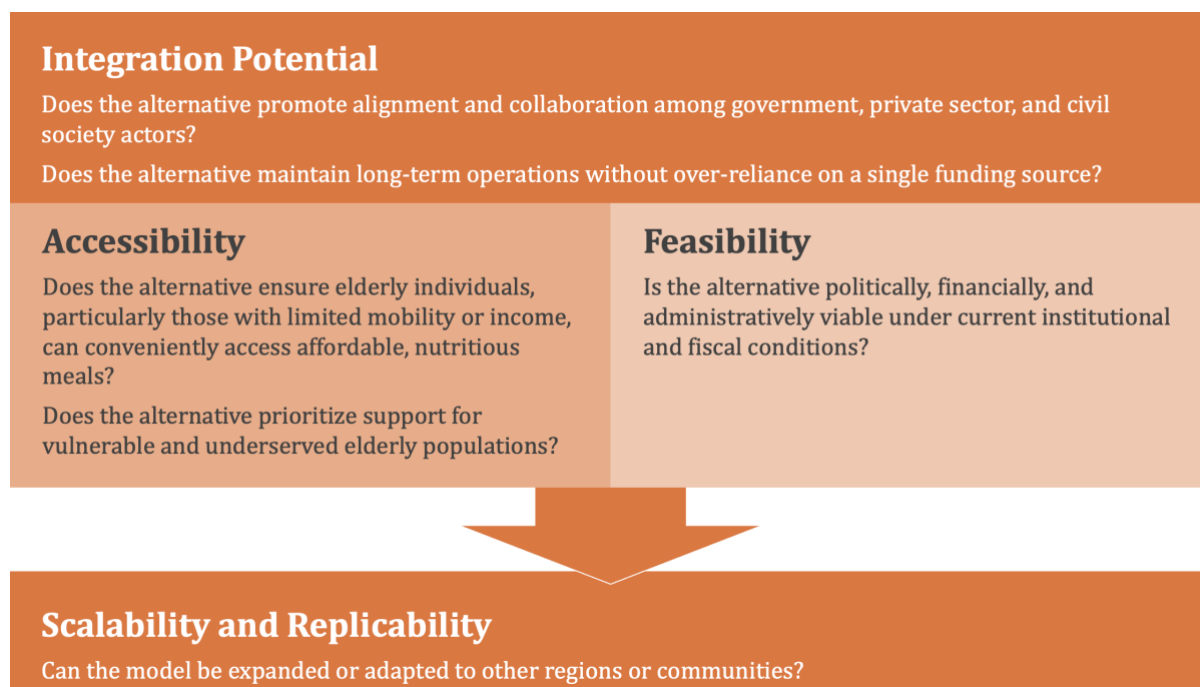


Figure 13 Criteria and policy goals of proposed two-tiered strategy

6.2 Two-Tier Strategy

The proposed two-tier strategy consists of macro-level and micro-level recommendations that work in tandem to address systemic fragmentation and frontline delivery challenges. The macro level focuses on structural reforms to improve integration and coordination among the government, private sector, and civil society. The micro level emphasizes practical interventions that enhance the delivery, coordination, and scalability of services on the ground.

Macro-Level

Structural and Strategic Interventions for Enhancing Integration and Coordination

At the macro level, this report recommends establishing a coordinating body to align stakeholder efforts and mobilize cross-sector capital more effectively. At the same time, it calls for unlocking the potential of private and social actors to reduce long-term dependence on government funding and build a more diversified, sustainable support system.

Recommendation 1: Establishing A Coordinating Body Under Government Oversight

The first recommendation proposes transitioning elderly meal services from a program-based model to a sustainable, institutionalized mechanism. At its core is the establishment and leveraging of a localized social organization at the district or county level as the central coordinating body, operating under municipal government oversight. Such organizations, often rooted in community foundations or charitable associations established by local entrepreneurs, would shift from their traditional role as passive funders to active coordinators, aligning stakeholders across government, the social sector, and market actors. Drawing on findings from field studies in Shunde District, these bodies excel at leveraging localized networks and integrating financial, social, and political capital. Shunde's Charity Federation and Community Foundation now act as hubs, taking over the role of government funding, convening the market and community groups to co-design funding standards, and leveraging clan networks to support the volunteer team building. By formalizing partnerships and standardizing practices, these district-level coordinators can achieve deeper integration of the three streams of capital. Furthermore, this institutionalization fosters a recognizable "elderly canteen" local brand, enhancing legitimacy and recognition while amplifying outreach to enable efficient resource (financial and human capital) matching.

This report considers the district/county level to be the most suitable coordination body, as illustrated above, due to its localized knowledge and capacity to integrate resources at an optimal scale. Municipal governments provide critical oversight and bridging functions. They act as connectors—linking district-level bodies to large-scale resources (e.g., nationwide corporate charitable funds) while offering policy support through subsidies and regulatory guidance. This structure ensures that local coordination and higher-level resource mobilization coexist effectively.

Recommendation 2: Unlocking Market Capabilities through Incentives and Strategic Alignment

2.1. Incentivizing Private Contributions through Financial and CSR Levers

Some existing examples (e.g., Canteen B) have shown the potential role of market entities in elderly meal services. However, as concluded by our field studies, enterprises are largely unmotivated because of the lack of subsidies and other incentives. In order to harness the private sector's resources and capacities effectively, it is important to incentivize enterprises to contribute through monetarily donated or in-kind contributions.

For instance, a two-tier incentive approach can be attempted to increase the current level of participation by the private sector: 1) enterprises can be incentivized to contribute through financial incentives such as tax deductions or increased government subsidies, and 2) recognition programs that highlight enterprises' corporate social responsibility (CSR). These incentives can apply beyond the monetary contributions of enterprises, and in-kind contributions can be recognized similarly. For example, several tiers of certificates can be awarded to enterprises, depending on their participation level. For more significant contributions, a recognition ceremony can be held. These recognition programs can effectively highlight such contributions to members of the public with minimal costs, creating an incentive by improving corporate image.

2.2. Aligning Corporate Engagement with Core Business Functions

Similar to in-kind contributions, actors from the private sector can also collaborate in aspects that fall in line with their business specialty. For example, meal delivery platforms can provide logistic support on the delivery of meals and other items; food and beverage franchises can partner with meal centres to provide meals; fund-raising campaigns can be launched on online fundraising platforms; and technical support can be provided by technology companies to enhance the efficiency of the registration process. For example, field studies revealed that some elderly canteens have already installed palm recognition machines for more efficient identity verification of the elderly; this is one example that

private technological companies can engage in such meal services. Just as to financial and in-kind contributions, participation via such kind of engagement should be recognized as much through any potential recognition programs.

Recommendation 3: Activating the Social Sector through Community Networks and Local Governance

3.1. Mobilizing Community-Based Networks for Donations and Volunteerism

This recommendation proposes mobilizing and formalizing community-based social capital through professional social organizations as key operational agents. At its core is the transformation of informal community networks into structured platforms that leverage social bonds.

Formalizing informal networks can empower sustainable elderly meal services. Community or clan associations and localized social organizations can be formalized to serve as effective platforms for channelling funds and labour resources. Case studies from a remote rural area in Conghua and Hong Kong's Food Angel support this approach. Both activated multiple community networks, with professional social organizations serving as the central organizing platform, creating sustainable resource integration through systematic operations and strong community connections.

Implementation requires three key steps. First, professional social organizations should conduct comprehensive mapping of existing community networks at the district/county level, identifying potential activation points and resource streams. Second, they should develop structured platforms that formalize these networks. Third, organizations must maintain regular community engagement activities and transparent operations to sustain trust and participation. This systematic approach ensures the effective mobilization of community-based resources while preserving the essential character of local networks.

3.2. Empowering Community Committees as Grassroots Integrators

This recommendation proposes leveraging and strengthening community committees as key operational agents for elderly meal services. At its core is the activation of committees' unique position and capabilities in integrating diverse resources while maintaining strong community bonds, shifting from passive service delivery to proactive resource coordination.

The experience of the Canteen E demonstrates how community committees can effectively mobilize and integrate multiple resources to sustain elderly meal services. The case shows how committees can leverage their embedded networks to secure critical

operational resources - from accessing rent-free facilities to mobilizing financial support from enterprises and individuals, while fostering sustained community engagement through volunteer teams.

To implement this model, local governments should establish policy frameworks granting committees enhanced authority in resource management. Structured platforms should be developed to connect committees with potential donors through regular networking events. Systematic volunteer management processes should be established, with clear roles and training programs to enhance the committees' resource integration capabilities. This approach transforms committees from basic service providers to dynamic resource integrators while maintaining strong community bonds.

Micro-Level

Operational and Community-Based Interventions for Addressing Triple-Bind Challenges

The micro-level recommendations demonstrate how integrated capital can be activated to expand service coverage, improve operational efficiency, and ensure equitable access, particularly for the most vulnerable elderly populations.

Recommendation 4: Enhancing Subsidy Structures for Promoting Efficiency and Equity

4.1. Providing Demand-Based Basic Subsidies by Allocating Funds per Person Per Meal

Building on insights from China's elderly care subsidy policies (Song et al., 2020), a shift from the existing uniform, one-time subsidies to a **demand-based model** is recommended. Subsidies should be allocated according to the actual number of meals served (e.g., "X RMB per person per meal"), ensuring that funding matches real needs and avoids misallocation. This approach reduces moral hazard, such as inflated reporting, by tying disbursement directly to service delivery. To further address regional imbalances, **differentiated subsidy coefficients** should be applied. For example, regions with weaker fiscal support would receive a higher per capita subsidy rate, ensuring equitable access across financially diverse regions in Guangdong.

4.2. Introducing Performance-Based Incentives by Tailoring Metrics to Canteen Models

To encourage efficiency and service quality, a **performance-based incentive system** should complement the basic subsidy. **Metrics should be adapted to each canteen type**, given the distinct operational characteristics and capacity. For social-organization-based canteens, performance indicators might include the share of self-raised funds and outreach to new users, highlighting growth and sustainability. For community-based canteens, metrics should prioritize service quality, such as targeting disadvantaged elderly and the provision of value-added services like meal delivery or health education. This differentiated system supports tailored growth, encouraging canteens to improve in ways aligned with their unique roles and capabilities.

Recommendation 5: Promoting Self-Sufficiency to Reduce Reliance on External Funding

5.1. Establishing Matching Fund Mechanisms to Reward Self-Raised Contributions

To encourage financial independence among elderly canteens with fundraising capacity, especially those operated by social organizations, a special matching fund mechanism is recommended. **Government or philanthropic funders can match verified self-raised funds at a 1:0.3–0.5 ratio, with a reasonable cap set to ensure budget control.** This incentive enhances canteens' capacity to generate their own resources, known as the **“blood-generating” capability**. They will become less dependent on the “blood transfusion” provided by external funders, which will decrease their long-term reliance on public subsidies and promote sustainable operations.

5.2. Empowering Canteens by Strengthening Fundraising Capacity and Networks

Social sector coordinating bodies (e.g., charitable organizations and foundations) should integrate “self-funding enhancement” into **seminars and workshops**, sharing best practices and inviting experienced canteens to present successful models. Additionally, these bodies can leverage their networks **to connect canteens with corporate philanthropic resources**, enabling innovative fundraising strategies such as matching grants, sponsorships, or cause-related marketing. By expanding capacity and fostering partnerships, canteens across regions can improve operational resilience and gradually lessen reliance on government funding.

Recommendation 6: Promoting Digital One-Stop Registration and Service Management to Enhance Daily Operations Efficiency

To address operational inefficiencies in elderly canteen registration and subsidy tracking, this recommendation proposes replacing fragmented, paper-based processes with a **simple, centralized digital system**, such as a WeChat mini-program or tablet kiosks installed at service points. The platform would **integrate registration, meal tracking,**

and subsidy reconciliation, significantly reducing administrative burdens and improving accuracy, transparency, and scalability. **Integration with district-level government systems** would ensure contextual responsiveness while supporting policy alignment and oversight. To promote adoption, especially among **seniors with low digital literacy**, assisted registration by staff or volunteers, voice-guided interfaces, and simplified user flows should be embedded. Initial development and training costs could be supported by local governments or philanthropic foundations, while partnerships with local tech providers or vocational schools offer ongoing maintenance. Over time, this digital upgrade would free up frontline capacity for better service delivery, enhance financial accountability, and lay the groundwork for more efficient, data-driven management and policy evaluation.

Recommendation 7: Introducing A Community-Driven Model for Inclusive and Scalable Delivery to Reach the Most Vulnerable Elderly

This integrated, community-rooted model combines centralized meal preparation with decentralized delivery. At the foundation are **dedicated meal preparation sites tailored for delivery**, complementing traditional canteens. These sites produce nutritionally appropriate meals suited for aging populations, supported by state actors who provide regulatory oversight, funding, and access to public facilities. Market actors contribute technical expertise and equipment, while social organizations raise funds and ensure alignment with community needs. These sites become stable hubs that integrate capital from all sectors.

To bridge the distance between kitchens and elderly households, the model partners with established logistics platforms using a **“one-point pickup, multiple-point delivery”** strategy. With route optimization and delivery infrastructure already in place, these platforms ensure efficient coverage, including the remote or homebound elderly. The state reduces regulatory barriers and offers targeted subsidies, while private platforms participate through CSR or co-funding schemes. Coordinating bodies manage community-level logistics, ensuring elderly-friendly practices and service consistency.

Last-mile delivery is carried out by trained local volunteers, retired residents, youth groups, or neighborhood committee members, who provide not only meals but also companionship and emotional support. Community committees and grassroots groups leverage local trust and relationships, while social sector organizations recruit, train, and match volunteers. Market actors may provide uniforms, transport subsidies, or health kits to support volunteer efforts. Through this three-part structure, meal delivery becomes more than a service; it fosters social connection, dignity, and well-being. Together, the model enhances operational efficiency, promotes inclusive access, and builds a resilient, long-term platform for elderly care that transcends temporary project-based solutions.

7 Conclusion

Public value creation, legitimacy and support, and operational capacity must be aligned and mutually reinforcing to ensure the success, sustainability, and resilience of public services. However, in the case of elderly meal services in Guangdong, these components remain misaligned, resulting in persistent undersupply and underconsumption, and ultimately undermining the long-term sustainability of the service.

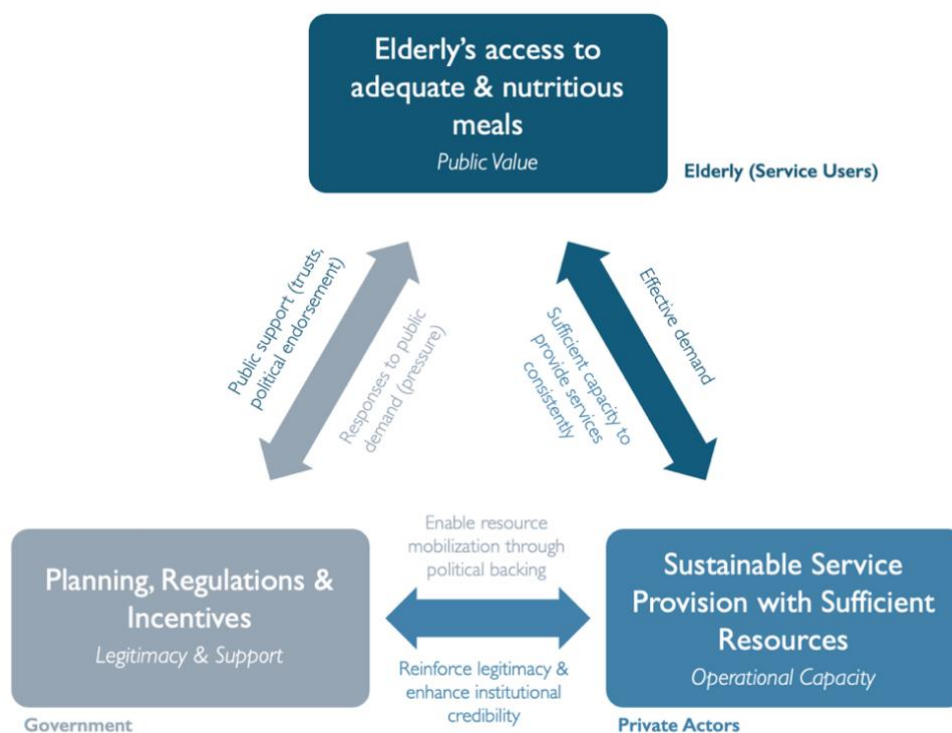


Figure 14 Moore's Strategic Triangle in the context of elderly meal services

Despite the presence of a wide range of actors and capital, from government funding and policy direction to private sector capabilities and social sector goodwill, the system suffers from fragmentation. The lack of coordination and integration among these actors and resources prevents them from converging into a cohesive and stable model. As a result, the sector faces a triple bind of challenges: unstable funding, due to over-reliance on limited government budgets and insufficient external contributions; inefficient operations, as service providers lack the professionalism and innovation to employ

digitalization in the registration process; and limited reach to the most vulnerable, who are often excluded due to physical accessibility barriers.

While the government has acknowledged the need to build a functioning market for elderly meal services, institutional efforts have been inadequate in creating enabling conditions for cross-sector collaboration and resource mobilization. Meanwhile, service providers struggle with limited capacity, further constraining affordability and accessibility for end-users. **This reinforces a vicious cycle: without effective supply, latent demand remains untapped; without demand, market development stagnates.**

Importantly, the underlying issue is not the lack of available resources, but the absence of strategic integration across actors and capital flows. Until this fragmentation is addressed and the three components of the Strategic Triangle are aligned through more deliberate coordination mechanisms, the potential of Guangdong's elderly meal services will remain unfulfilled, restricting both its reach and impact.

To address the fragmentation, this report proposes a two-tier strategy comprising seven integrated recommendations, focusing on building a synergistic system at the macro level (recommendations 1-3) while enhancing the operational performance of elderly canteens at the micro level (recommendations 4-7). The macro-level recommendations establish structural foundations by creating coordinating bodies that formalize partnerships and standardize practices under government oversight, unlocking market capabilities through strategic incentives, and activating social capital by mobilizing community networks and empowering community committees as grassroots integrators. These create the enabling environment for micro-level recommendations that enhance operational efficiency and service accessibility through improved subsidy structures, self-sufficiency mechanisms, digital service management to streamline operations, and community-driven delivery models.

The key contribution of this report is to provide a replicable strategy and framework for addressing key challenges, by transforming elderly meal services into comprehensive platforms for care and connection, thus creating lasting public value in Guangdong's aging society and ultimately ensuring elderly citizens' access to adequate and nutritious meals. It should be noted that the proposed recommendations are meant to be implemented by all stakeholders collaboratively. Some recommendations can be implemented at the charitable foundation level, while others require government supervision and support. Further detailed planning and actionable measures are needed, with careful consideration for balancing short and long-term priorities for implementation.

Developing the institutional framework for coordinating bodies, market incentives, and formalizing community networks requires long-term effort. These structural changes

take time to take root, but the foundational mindset should be established from the very beginning. Short-term actions could be initiated by charitable foundations to demonstrate immediate operational improvements, such as implementing incentive subsidy structures or matching mechanisms. When all components are in place, long-term sustainability can eventually be achieved, with coordinating mechanisms fully institutionalized, diversified funding streams beyond government budgets cultivated, and a cultural shift toward shared responsibility across all sectors of society fostered.

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Appendix A. Overview of Elderly Canteens in Guangdong Province

Table 1 Overview of Elderly Canteens in 21 Prefecture-level Cities of Guangdong Province (As of 2024)

Rank	City	Number	Coverage	Service Scale	Features	Investment/Subsidy
1	Guangzhou	1,274	100% coverage of urban-rural communities	9.1 million served in 2023, 50.6% coverage rate	"1+5+6+N" service system	Break-even operation model
2	Shanwei	343	100% towns, over 41% villages	5,000 daily serves	"Shanshan Action" mini-program fundraising	Total investment of ¥72.74 million
3	Zhongshan	341	Coverage of 288 villages (communities)	900,000 meals served by Nov 2023	"Xiangshan Culture + Canteen" brand	-
4	Shenzhen	246	Smart elderly canteens	3.35 million meals by Nov 2023	Multi-level subsidy; Integrated services	¥47 million subsidy over 4 years
5	Shantou	166	166 Covering six districts and one county	-	Integrated with home care services	Government invest ¥5.26M; Social donation ¥2.43M
6	Zhuhai	154	Full coverage of towns and villages	2.29 million served in total	Smart cooking robots; Smart elderly care platform	¥21.328 million in dining subsidies
7	Zhanjiang	138	Full coverage of towns	-	Centralized kitchen model	-
8	Zhaoqing	133	-	-	-	-
9	Shaoguan	122	Coverage of 105 towns	193,000 served in total	Socialized operation model	Fiscal input of ¥6.2 million
10	Huizhou	120	120 Full coverage of towns	856,000 served in total	-	¥9 million invested in 2023
11	Foshan	118	Continuous expansion	4,000 daily; 6.35 million total	"Public-private partnership"; Integrated daycare	Subsidies reached ¥14.4 million
12	Jiangmen	114	100% streets, 80% towns	-	Charitable elderly care model	-
13	Yunfu	72	-	140,000 served in 2023	-	-
14	Dongguan	56	100% town coverage	5,000+ daily	"Large-scale meal	¥32.5748 million

					distribution"; Socialized delivery	subsidies since 2020
15	Qingyuan	50	-	-	-	-
16	Chaozhou	43	-	70,000 served in total	Chaozhou-style nutritional meals; Public canteen + elderly area	¥2.6M funds, ¥1.49M public welfare funds in 2024
17	Jieyang	40	-	-	Home-based, community- supported	-
18	Maoming	36	-	3,000+ daily	-	¥7.592 million invested in 2023
19	Meizhou	31	Coverage in 8 counties	330,000 served in total	"Elderly canteen + neighborhood dining" model	Subsidy of ¥2.1104 million
20	Heyuan	16	6 urban, 10 rural	23,000+ served in total	-	Over ¥5 million invested
21	Yangjiang	15	18 more under construction	-	-	-

Notes:

1. "-" indicates missing data
2. Data sourced from latest government public information
3. Some cities' data may not be up-to-date
4. Statistical criteria may vary among regions

Appendix B. List of Interviewees and Visited Canteens

Table 2 List of interviewees (n=20)

Name	Position	Name	Position
Mr. L	Head of an elderly care center	Ms. P	Manager of a charity project
Mr. W	Manager of a catering group	Mr. Y	Director of a charitable foundation
Ms. M	Supervisor of an elderly canteen	Mr. W	Director of an elderly canteen
Mr. J	Leader of a volunteer group	Mr. X	Director of an elderly canteen
Mr. C	Director of a village committee	Ms. Q	Staff of an elderly canteen
Mr. D	Staff of a meal delivery service	Ms. B	President of a charity federation
Ms. G	Officer of a civil affairs bureau	Mr. L	Project lead of a charity federation
Mr. H	Director of an elderly canteen	Mr. P	Director of a village committee
Mr. S	Chef of an elderly canteen	Mr. Z	Volunteer of an elderly canteen
Ms. L	Manager of a foundation for elderly	Mr. H	Dean of a think tank for social organizations

Table 3 List of visited canteens (n=7)

No.	City		Date
01	Shenzhen	A	08/11/2024
02	Shenzhen	B	08/11/2024
03	Qingyuan, Yingde	C	15/01/2025
04	Qingyuan, Yingde	D	15/01/2025
05	Foshan, Shunde	E	19/02/2025
06	Foshan, Shunde	F	19/02/2025
07	Foshan, Shunde	G	19/02/2025

Appendix C. Case Studies: Elderly Meal Services in Other Jurisdictions

1. Government-Enterprise Partnerships: Chinese Government & Alibaba & Ele.me

In China, the government has led numerous innovations in elderly meal services, with many practices involving deep collaboration with enterprises. For example, the Ministry of Civil Affairs partnered with Alibaba to launch the "AI Dou Senior Care Program" (愛豆銀齡關懷), investing 50 million RMB across 9 provinces to establish 100 innovative community elderly care service stations. This program utilizes Alibaba's digital platform to monitor elderly residents' daily activities, connect them with social workers, and coordinate meal deliveries. Another notable case is the "E-Meal Elderly Care" (助老 e 餐) program in collaboration with Ele.me, which operates in six major cities including Beijing and Shanghai. This program implements a "Familiar Delivery" model where designated delivery personnel regularly serve the same elderly residents, building trust and familiarity while providing customized meal services that accommodate dietary restrictions and preferences.

As the initiator of these innovative projects, the government has effectively mobilized both social and market resources. By establishing the "Five Communities Linkage" (五社聯動) mechanism and the "government + charity + enterprise" model, the government has built a multi-stakeholder policy framework that provides institutional support for enterprise participation. Meanwhile, the government has coordinated various resources through dedicated project coordination institutions, while maintaining oversight of service quality while promoting technological innovation. This approach has successfully channeled corporate capabilities and social sector expertise toward public welfare objectives, while ensuring sustainable resource mobilization and service accessibility in elderly care services.





2. Social Enterprise Solutions: Silver Gate (Taiwan)

Silver Gate (銀色大門) operates as an integrated elderly meal delivery platform in Taiwan. Operating an extensive meal delivery platform serving 30,000+ elderly monthly across 137+ administrative regions, it maintains financial sustainability through diverse revenue streams including service fees, SaaS licensing (長照送餐管理系統), and agricultural sales. The organization's core operations integrate digital management systems that save 45,000 administrative minutes annually, while partnering with 200+ local producers in farm-to-table initiatives to ensure service quality and community engagement.

As a social enterprise, Silver Gate's success lies in its sophisticated resource mobilization strategy through both PPP and CSR initiatives. As a PPP participant, it accesses government resources through long-term care subsidies and administrative support while providing automated reporting systems for public welfare services. Through CSR initiatives, it attracts corporate resources via ESG collaborations and implements a "buy one, donate one" model, effectively channeling business success into expanded social impact. This creates a sustainable cycle where profit-making activities directly support social welfare delivery by converting commercial success into resources for disadvantaged elderly, building valuable community relationships, leveraging technology for enhanced service efficiency, and combining public, private, and community resources for maximum social impact.



3. Community Service Networks: Food Angel (Hong Kong)

Food Angel, initiated by Bo Charity Foundation in 2011, operates under the mission "Waste Not, Hunger Not, With Love." The organization rescues 45 tonnes of edible surplus food weekly, providing over 20,000 nutritious meals and 11,000 food packs daily. Its service network encompasses multiple channels: food recycling and reuse, community canteen services, school collaboration projects, and 24-hour self-service meal collection systems.

Food Angel's resource integration operates through a dual-network system: formally partnering with 205 corporate donors and 150+ charitable organizations, while informally engaging communities through local service points and volunteer programs. Its success is built on professional credibility, maintained through standardized food safety management and transparent reporting. The organization implements innovative participation models, like the "young-old volunteer" program, which both meets service needs and creates social value. Through deep community embedding and localized services, Food Angel has established extensive grassroots networks that align with community needs. This model demonstrates how social organizations can effectively balance professional operations with community engagement, creating sustainable resource integration through systematic operations and strong community connections.



4. Community Service Networks: The Warm Elderly Canteen Service (Chiayi, Taiwan)

The Warm Elderly Canteen Service (暖暖老人食堂服務), operated by the Catholic St. Mary's Social Welfare Foundation (天主教中華聖母基金會), provides community-based meal services targeting elderly living alone, elderly couples, disabled individuals, and disadvantaged families. Its operational model combines communal dining with meal delivery services, fostering community dining culture through fixed-point meal provision while utilizing volunteers to deliver meals to those with limited mobility.

Leveraging the Catholic Church's credibility and networks, this religious-based organization rapidly gains community trust and participation. Through deep integration with local resources, it has built a tightly-knit service network that combines professional staff with volunteers. While smaller in scale, this approach, grounded in religious networks and community engagement, has created an intimate and sustainable support system. It exemplifies how effective community embedding and social capital operation at the micro-level can generate lasting social impact despite limited organizational scale.

