

Article

Volunteering, Social Trust and Life Satisfaction of the Young-Old in China: Based on Urban-Rural Differences

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Abstract: With the increasingly severe situation of population aging in China, how to improve the well-being of older adults is an important topic of social discussion. However, the situation of older adults in urban and rural China greatly differs. Current research has focused on older people in urban areas, with insufficient attention paid to the urban-rural differences in older groups. At the same time, volunteering is considered to be a significant strategy to improve the lives of older adults, and the young-old are the main participants in volunteer activities, but the impact and influence mechanism of volunteering on life satisfaction among urban and rural young-old have yet to be clarified. Therefore, the goal of this study is to analyze the influence of volunteering on the lives of the young-old in a more comprehensive way, mainly exploring three questions: (1) The impact of volunteering on life satisfaction of the young-old. (2) The influence mechanism of volunteering on their life satisfaction. (3) The urban-rural differences in the impact and influence mechanism. To answer the above questions, this study was conducted from the perspective of urban-rural differences, based on Activity Theory and Social Capital Theory, and adopted quantitative research methods, including multiple linear regression and structural equation models. Secondary data, which comes from the Chinese Social Survey in 2021, was used in this study, and we chose the Chinese older adults aged 55–70 years old as the object of study. The results show that volunteering positively correlates with life satisfaction, while social trust is a significant positive mediating mechanism. Furthermore, the rural young-old benefit more from volunteering. The findings imply that it is of great significance to appropriately encourage the young-old to participate in volunteer activities, formulate targeted policies for different older people based on urban-rural differences, and gradually break the obstacles of the urban-rural dual system comprehensively.

Keywords: volunteering; life satisfaction; social trust; the young-old



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1. Introduction

Rapid aging is a significant feature of the demographic profile in China (Lu and Lin 2023). According to the population data released by China's National Bureau of Statistics in 2024 (data from China's National Bureau of Statistics, https://www.gov.cn/lianbo/bumen/202410/content_6979487.htm, accessed on 15 January 2025), there were 297 million people aged 60 or above in China by the end of 2023, accounting for 21.1% of the Chinese total population, making it the country with the largest number of older people in the world. Due to the urban-rural dual structure, the phenomenon of urban-rural reversal of aging has emerged. When China entered the aging society in 2000, the proportion of older people was 10.9% in rural areas and 9.7% in urban areas, with a difference of only 1.2%. In 2020, it rose to 23.8% in rural areas and 15.8% in urban areas, and the gap widened to

8.0%. Furthermore, the urban-rural reversal of aging will continue to expand (Yuan and Fan 2024). The aging situation in rural areas is more severe than that in urban areas, while the level of older people's care services and social security is lagging behind that in urban areas (Lu et al. 2021). The influence of traditional Chinese filial piety is declining, and there are also other factors, such as rural hollowing, which highlights the current living difficulties faced by older adults. Consequently, it is essential to prioritize the quality of life for the older people based on urban-rural differences in China.

As one of the most significant strategies for facilitating productive aging (Morrow-Howell 2010), volunteering improves the health of the older adults, enhances their sense of self-efficacy, and strengthens their sense of self-identity (Morrow-Howell et al. 2009; Haski-Leventhal 2009; Tang et al. 2010). Furthermore, engaging in volunteer activities can effectively utilize human capital among the older adults, particularly those who are relatively healthy and well-experienced at a younger age and are valuable assets to society.

Previous studies have shown a positive correlation between volunteering and life satisfaction among the older people in urban areas (Miao and Zhang 2017; Zhang et al. 2021); however, it has not been tested specifically for the young-old, and few have provided relevant evidence for the rural older adults. Even less information is available on the mechanisms of the positive link between volunteering and life satisfaction among the older adults. Therefore, it is necessary to have a more comprehensive understanding of the connection between volunteering and the well-being of the older people.

Accordingly, the primary objective of this study is to analyze the influence of volunteering on life satisfaction among the Chinese young-old. More specially, the 3 main problems are: (1) Investigate how volunteering impacts life satisfaction among the young-old in China. (2) Test whether social trust plays a mediating role. (3) Explore the differences between urban and rural areas. Does volunteering yield similar or different effects in urban and rural areas, and what specific areas are these differences concerned with? In order to better answer the 3 main problems, we further comb the relevant literature.

1.1. Factors Affecting Life Satisfaction Among the Older Adults

Life satisfaction is an individual's subjective evaluation of their well-being (Zhu 2016), which refers to a personal overall assessment and judgment of their life in which they compare reality with subjective criteria (Diener and Diener 1995). Previous studies have suggested that life satisfaction is related to well-being (Feng 2007), an important indicator for measuring the quality of life and actively coping with population aging (Gao et al. 2015). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the influential factors of life satisfaction.

Current literature indicates that sociodemographic characteristics, physical and psychological health, and social support are the main factors influencing the life satisfaction of the older adults. Among the sociodemographic characteristics, age was reported to be negatively associated with life satisfaction (Kim and Sok 2012). It was found that income was positively related to older people's life satisfaction, and life satisfaction in rural areas was significantly predicted by financial support from children (Jin 2011; Lu and Zhang 2013; Yu 2017). The educational expectation and educational attainment positively affect the life satisfaction of older people (Wadsworth 1981; Li 2004). Married older adults tended to make better life evaluations (Lee and Lee 2013). However, the increase in the number of children and the life satisfaction of older adults were negatively correlated (Shi 2015).

Health status, including physical and psychological functioning abilities, is also decisive. Physical and psychological health is the foundation of various social activities for the older people (Wu and Peng 2018). Self-rated health (Wang et al. 2004; Ng et al. 2017), Physiological functions, and self-care ability (Hellström et al. 2004) were all significant predictors.

Older people's life satisfaction can also be positively explained by their psychological health (Reyes et al. 2020).

Some studies have suggested that social support may strongly influence life satisfaction among the older people. Social support and life satisfaction were statistically significantly positively correlated (Jiang et al. 2007), especially the emotional support from family and peer groups (Pinquart and Sörensen 2000) was closely related to the older adults' life satisfaction, and support from social organization was, therefore, necessary (Cui and Li 1997).

Based on the above studies, objective factors, such as sociodemographic characteristics, health status, and social support, are strongly connected to life satisfaction among the older people. In contrast, discussions on the impact of initiative factors are rare. However, older adults are the primary persons responsible for their own lives, and fully utilizing the subjective initiative of older people is of great significance in improving their quality of life. Therefore, further discussion of the role of volunteering in older adults' life satisfaction is necessary.

1.2. Volunteering and Life Satisfaction Among the Older Adults

Volunteering embodies the principles of voluntariness, long-term commitment, planning, organization, non-profit, and reciprocal altruism (Snyder and Omoto 2008). Older volunteers have become the mainstay of volunteer activities in developed countries (e.g., Germany and the UK) (Erlinghagen 2010; Eibich et al. 2022). However, the volunteer service career started relatively late in China, with a high proportion of informal activities (Ni et al. 2023). Influenced by beliefs and customs, volunteering in rural areas takes root in clans' traditional mutual assistance culture, exhibiting the scattered and life-oriented feature (Wei and Xu 2023).

Extensive research overwhelmingly supports the positive influence of volunteering on the life satisfaction of older adults. For instance, engagement in volunteer activities has been linked to improving physical functioning (Morrow-Howell et al. 2003) and a significant increase in both quality of life and life satisfaction among the older people (Tang et al. 2010; Erlinghagen 2010; Connolly and O'Shea 2015), particularly with higher levels of involvement (Van Willigen 2000). Other studies, however, have raised concerns regarding the potential adverse effects of volunteering. Several studies found that volunteer activities may impose burdens on older adults (Musick et al. 1999; Windsor et al. 2008), and frequent engagement can easily lead to adverse effects on older adults' lives (Gao et al. 2010; Wang 2016).

Few researchers have paid attention to the potential mechanism of how volunteering affects older adults' lives. At the same time, most previous studies had focused on the mediating effects of social networks and self-efficacy. Morrow-Howell et al. (2003) proposed that older people can enhance their social networks by participating in volunteer activities, improving their life satisfaction. Pilkington et al. (2012) stated that volunteering can enable older adults to acquire skills and achieve self-fulfillment, thus establishing positive associations with well-being among older people.

According to the literature review, volunteering is closely related to life satisfaction in older adults, but it is unclear whether volunteering is connected to better life satisfaction among older people. At the same time, studies that combine Eastern culture are relatively insufficient. Even less is known about rural areas, which probably results in the limited exploration of the possible mechanisms. Providing corresponding evidence from China's urban and rural areas is of great importance for promoting older adults' well-being and actively addressing population aging.

1.3. The Mediating Effect of Social Trust

Trust refers to people's expectations of someone (Luhmann 1979). Modern social trust, also known as "generalized trust" or "universal trust" (Yamagishi and Yamagishi 1994; Newton and Zmerli 2011), denotes trust beyond the boundaries of interest groups, which means one trust in most people in society, believing that "most people are well-intentioned."

The existing studies on social trust's influence on life satisfaction have yet to reach a consistent conclusion. Most studies have affirmed the positive effect of social trust, including improving individual health status (Giordano and Lindström 2016; Hu and Xiao 2016) and being a positive indicator of subjective well-being (Yip et al. 2007). However, other studies have contradicted the above-mentioned opinions. It was discovered that there was no strong relationship between social trust and life satisfaction (Liu 2016; Kim 2018). Guo and He (2015) even have deemed that social trust hurts life satisfaction.

There is a divergence of opinion on the relationship between volunteering and social trust among previous studies. Volunteering has been considered to have no important impact on social trust. Delhey and Newton (2005) pointed out that voluntary organizations are the foundation of social trust, and the fragility of voluntary organizations can lead to the collapse of social trust. Therefore, it cannot be proved that volunteering will strengthen social trust (Musick and Wilson 2008). In the volunteer service process, a culture of reciprocity is more likely to enable participants to form social trust (Sztompka 2001), but the essential prerequisite is that volunteers have self-efficacy (Zhang 2016).

Numerous studies support that volunteering and social trust influence older adults' life satisfaction, and volunteering may significantly correlate with social trust among the young-old. Above all, engaging in volunteer activities can accumulate social trust, a significant facet of social capital (Gomez et al. 2002). In addition, social trust may positively affect the life satisfaction of the young-old, as many empirical studies have confirmed the positive influence of social trust on the quality of life (Kuroki 2011; Meng and Chen 2014; Carl and Billari 2017). Furthermore, multiple studies have confirmed the positive impact of volunteering on older adults' well-being. In brief, volunteering may influence the life satisfaction of the young-old by affecting social trust, which means social trust may be one of the mediating mechanisms of volunteering and life satisfaction among the young-old.

The literature review indicates that volunteering is related to improving older people's life satisfaction. Volunteering and enhancement of social trust are associated, and social trust is also positively linked to life satisfaction. However, the relationship's specific direction needs to be clarified, and more evidence from Eastern urban and rural areas needs to be provided. Also, the mediating mechanism needs to be further tested, and the internal differences between urban and rural areas should be considered. Therefore, this study, based on nationally representative survey data, set up a series of regression models and structural equation models to investigate the specific roles of volunteering in life satisfaction among the young-old, which has great practical and theoretical significance for improving older people's lives and laying a foundation for targeted policy interventions.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1. Activity Theory

Activity Theory highlights the continuity between middle age and old age and affirms the positive role of social participation in old age (Havighurst and Albrecht 1953). Activity theory was often used as the theoretical basis for the social participation of older adults. However, there was a lack of relevant analysis based on the urban and rural differences.

As an important part of social participation, volunteering is supposed to play a similar role. Therefore, we believe that volunteering can help older people integrate into society, fill the life gap, and improve life satisfaction.

2.2. Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory is an important theory in sociological research and has received more attention from multiple disciplines, such as political science, economics, and management. The concept of social capital was first proposed in 1916 to describe the rural school community (Hanifan 1916). Scholars had different opinions on the concept of social capital, with some scholars emphasizing the resource attributes of social capital (Bourdieu 1983; Coleman 1990; Lin 1990; Baker 2001), some attaching the importance of network structure (Putnam 1993; Woolcock 2010), and others defining social capital from the perspective of functions (Portes 1998) and cultural norms (Adler and Kwon 2002). However, most scholars agreed that social networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust are the three main elements of social capital.

This study was mainly based on Putnam's (1993) relevant elaboration of social capital theory, which divided social capital into cognitive social capital and structural social capital. Cognitive social capital refers to subjective judgments, such as trust and values (Harpham et al. 2002), while structural social capital refers to the structure of an individual's social network (Uphoff et al. 2013). The social trust in this study belongs to cognitive and social capital.

Currently, social capital theory has a strong explanatory power in sociological research. It was mainly applied to social network analyses (Zhou 2012) and community governance studies (Yan 2010; Gao and Yang 2018). In the field of older people's volunteer service, social capital theory was mostly applied to analyze the influencing factors of older people's volunteering, and older people with richer social capital were more likely to participate in volunteer activities (Brown and Ferris 2007; Hu and Chen 2019).

Overall, when using social capital theory, existing literature fell short in two areas. First, most studies measured social capital as a whole or explored social networks in depth, with fewer studies focusing on social trust. Second, the theory has mainly been applied to analyze the influencing factors of volunteering, and its utilization in understanding the impact of volunteering on older people remains limited. In this study, we will use this theory to guide the mechanism analysis of the impact of volunteering on the lives of older people, so as to fill this gap.

According to Putnam (1993), social networks and reciprocal norms can strengthen social trust. Volunteer activities contain the core of public spirit, including the spirit of equality and reciprocity. Therefore, we suggest that participation in volunteer activities is conducive to enhancing individual social trust and improving the lives of older people.

2.3. Research Hypotheses

Combined with the above theories, the main hypotheses of this study are as follows: (1) Volunteering has a significant positive impact on the life satisfaction of the young-old. (2) Social trust plays a positive mediating role. (3) The impact of volunteering on the young-old is different in urban and rural areas.

3. Methods

3.1. Conceptualization

The Young-Old: This study defines the research object as older adults aged 55–70. The young-old refers to older adults who are in a relatively young stage of life, usually with fewer responsibilities than in previous stages. The young-old, combined with good health and adequate finances, can pursue leisure and self-fulfillment opportunities (Martha and Valentine-French 2019). However, the definition of the young-old will be adjusted according to different situations. At the Symposium on "Mortality Rate and its Impact on the Older Population" held by the United Nations Population Division at the end of

1996, the young-old was defined as the older adults aged 60–80 (Zhang 2008). Ortman et al. (2014) considered that older people between the ages of 65 and 84 constitute the young-old. In China, retirement typically signifies a social role transition towards old age, with 60 commonly used as the dividing line. Unlike most urban people who retire at the age of 60, the changes in age and social role of Chinese farmers are reflected in the process of labor force migration between rural and urban areas. The age of 55 marks the turning point from “outflow” to “return” for rural people (Zhou 2023; Meng and Jiang 2018), and people aged 55–70 in rural areas have dual identities as both older workers and the young-old. Faced with the dilemma of intergenerational separation and lack of care in old age, rural older adults in their late 50s and early 60s can only achieve self-support through continuous agricultural labor as their primary occupation (Lu et al. 2021; Wang and Cheng 2023). This group of older adults generally exhibits characteristics of excessive labor (Nie et al. 2021), which has a negative impact on their physical health (Hu 2013) and subjective well-being (Xu and Zhou 2014). Considering the age of 55 means a lot to rural older adults and the limitations of the secondary data used (CSS targeted Chinese citizens aged 18–70), we define the young-old as the older people aged 55–70.

Urban-rural Areas: This study takes the current living place as the classification standard of urban and rural older adults. As the reality of human-house separation in China, the current academic classification standard for urban-rural areas includes the methods of household registration (Tao et al. 2021) and living place (Jiang and Sun 2021). Considering that volunteering is intimately linked to the environment in which the older adults live, we choose “living place” as the standard for classifying urban-rural areas.

3.2. Data

Secondary data for the analyses were obtained from the Chinese continuous sampling survey CSS (Chinese Social Survey), which was first conducted in 2005 and carried out every 2 years by the Institute of Sociology Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and we used the data for 2021. The 2021 data we used is based on country-level aggregation, and our analyses were also based on China as a whole.

CSS used a multi-stage mixed probability sampling method combined with a Computer-Assisted Personal Interview System (CAPI) to conduct household visits. CSS used a random questionnaire (A or B) survey method, with the “volunteer activities” section just in the B questionnaire, and we only selected the samples that answered the “volunteer activities” section in the B questionnaire.

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 data covered all 30 provinces, municipalities, autonomous regions, and directly administered municipalities in China, including 592 village and community units, with a total of 10136 effective samples collected. The data from CSS was nationally representative. In terms of data processing, 6521 samples younger than 55 years old were excluded, leaving a target sample of 3615. Secondly, 1838 samples with missing data on volunteer participation status were excluded, leaving a target sample of 1777. Finally, 88 samples with missing data on other key variables were excluded, and a total of 1689 effective analysis samples were chosen, with the leading 1114 subsamples of rural areas and 575 subsamples of urban areas.

3.3. Measures

We used the questions from the B questionnaire in CSS 2021 to operationalize the variables in this study.

3.3.1. Life Satisfaction

We used the following question, ‘Overall, how satisfied are you with your life?’ to measure the dependent variable. Participants could choose ten answers from 1 (not at all

satisfied) to 10 (totally satisfied). For easy subsequent analysis, we converted this variable into a 5-point scale ranging from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating greater satisfaction among older adults with their overall lives.

3.3.2. Volunteering

The interviewees were asked in CSS, ‘Have you participated in any volunteer activities in the past year?’ In this study, the meaning of volunteer activities is any helpful work that doesn’t provide monetary payment, such as childcare, older adults care, assistance for people with disabilities, and so on. If the interviewees had participated in at least one of the volunteer activities, they were coded as 1, while no engagement at all was coded as 0.

3.3.3. Social Trust

Based on the previous research, we defined social trust as the trust of the public (Hu and Zhou 2013; Wang and Wang 2021). The interviewees were asked in CSS, ‘How do you evaluate the current level of trust between people?’ they could choose answers from 1 (not at all trust others) to 10 (totally trust others). Similar to the measurement of satisfaction above, this ordinal variable was also converted to a 5-point scale for coding, with 1 indicating a low level of trust and 5 indicating a high one.

3.3.4. Covariates

Gender (0 = female, 1 = male). Age is a continuous numerical variable, calculated by subtracting the year of birth from 2021, ranging from 55–70 years. Considering that the older adults in rural areas have relatively lower education levels, education attainment was measured on a 3-point scale (1 = elementary school and below, 2 = junior high school, 3 = high school and above). Marital status (0 = no spouse, 1 = with spouse) and religious belief (0 = no religious belief, 1 = have religious belief) are binary variables. The subjective economic evaluation was reverse measured on a 5-point scale from ‘low’ to ‘high’, with higher scores indicating that older adults perceive their economic level to be better. In addition, this study treated urban-rural areas (0 = rural areas, 1 = urban areas) as covariates in the total sample analysis and also as the standard in the group analysis.

3.4. Analytical Approach

We first conducted descriptive analysis, including sociodemographic characteristics, volunteering, social trust, and life satisfaction in the total sample, as well as the rural and urban subsamples. We then established a multiple regression model for benchmark regression analysis to examine the overall relationship between volunteering and life satisfaction among the young-old. Additionally, we used a standard stepwise regression analysis to examine the mediating mechanism of social trust in the rural and urban subsamples. Finally, based on the understanding of urban-rural disparities, we focused on the rural subsample, conducted structural equation models, replaced the independent variable, and mutually corroborated with the results of the stepwise regression model to provide more rigorous evidence for this research. All analyses were implemented using the Stata 17.0.

4. Results

4.1. Lives of the Chinese Young-Old

Table 1 shows the results of the descriptive analysis of the lives of the young-old. Regarding volunteering, the participation rates in the total sample remained relatively low, with the rural subsample (18.94%) being lower than that of the urban subsample (21.91%), and the rural young-old had great potential values in volunteer activities. With regard to life satisfaction, 71.48% of the urban subsample gave a high evaluation of their own

life (the level of life satisfaction was in the middle and upper), which was 8.52% higher than that of the rural subsample (63.46%). Concerning social trust, there was no significant difference generally, and rural and urban subsamples both were at the middle to a high level (High level of social trust: rural subsample 25.58% vs. urban subsample 15.30%; Middle-high level of social trust: rural subsample 25.22% vs. urban subsample 34.26%). As for sociodemographic characteristics, the male proportion in the rural subsample (52.06%) was higher than that in the urban (43.83%). The educational attainment was mainly elementary school and below in the rural subsample (53.32%), while the urban subsample was mainly high school and above (39.13%), presenting a significant gap.

Table 1. Description of analytic variables of the sample.

Variables	Total Samples	Rural Subsample	Urban Subsample
Volunteering			
Participation	337 (19.95%)	211 (18.94%)	126 (21.91%)
No participation	1352 (80.05%)	903 (81.06%)	449 (78.09%)
Life satisfaction			
Low	84 (4.97%)	64 (5.75%)	20 (3.48%)
Lower-Middle	70 (4.14%)	50 (4.49%)	20 (3.48%)
Middle	417 (24.69%)	293 (26.30%)	124 (21.57%)
Middle-High	535 (31.68%)	331 (29.71%)	204 (35.48%)
High	583 (34.52%)	376 (33.75%)	207 (36.00%)
Social Trust			
Low	93 (5.51%)	64 (5.75%)	29 (5.04%)
Lower-Middle	116 (6.87%)	67 (6.01%)	49 (8.52%)
Middle	629 (37.24%)	417 (37.43%)	212 (36.87%)
Middle-High	478 (28.30%)	281 (25.22%)	197 (34.26%)
High	373 (22.08%)	285 (25.58%)	88 (15.30%)
Gender			
Male	832 (49.26%)	580 (52.06%)	252 (43.83%)
Female	857 (50.74%)	534 (47.94%)	323 (56.17%)
Age			
55–59	667 (39.49%)	467 (41.92%)	200 (34.78%)
60–64	441 (26.11%)	289 (25.94%)	152 (26.43%)
65–69	571 (33.81%)	353 (31.69%)	218 (37.91%)
70	10 (0.59%)	5 (0.45%)	5 (0.87%)
Educational attainment			
Elementary school and below	758 (44.88%)	594 (53.32%)	164 (28.52%)
Junior high school	557 (32.98%)	371 (33.30%)	186 (32.35%)
High school and above	374 (22.14%)	149 (13.38%)	225 (39.13%)
Marital status			
No spouse	234 (13.85%)	140 (12.57%)	94 (16.35%)
With spouse	1455 (86.15%)	974 (87.43%)	481 (83.65%)
Religious belief			
No religious belief	1474 (87.27%)	970 (87.07%)	504 (87.65%)
Have religious belief	215 (12.73%)	144 (12.93%)	71 (12.35%)
Subjective economic evaluation			
Low	379 (22.44%)	253 (22.71%)	126 (21.91%)
Lower-Middle	388 (22.97%)	238 (21.36%)	150 (26.09%)
Middle	764 (45.23%)	529 (47.49%)	235 (40.87%)
Middle-High	136 (8.05%)	78 (7.00%)	58 (10.09%)
High	22 (1.30%)	16 (1.44%)	6 (1.04%)

Data collected among N = 1689 older adults in China, 2021.

4.2. Volunteering and Life Satisfaction

This study used cross-sectional data. Since the data were collected from different individuals or regions in a certain period, there were inherent differences between individuals or regions. Therefore, there is a phenomenon that the error in the observations will change with the change of the independent variable or other factors, also known as the heteroskedasticity problem. Table 2 presents the results of the linear regression analysis of volunteering and life satisfaction in the total sample, where the heteroskedasticity problem in the models was corrected using the robust standard error. Model 1, which only includes the covariates, can explain 13.5% of the total variance. After including volunteering in Model 2, an adjustment rose to 0.143, indicating that volunteering did explain part of the variance in the dependent variable. Meanwhile, a significant positive correlation ($\beta = 0.266$, $p < 0.01$) between volunteering and life satisfaction among the young-old was confirmed; that is, the young-old can improve their own life by participating in volunteer activities.

Table 2. Significant relationship between volunteering and life satisfaction.

	Model 1	Model 2
	Life Satisfaction	Life Satisfaction
Volunteering		0.2659 *** (4.7602)
Gender	−0.0075 (−0.1466)	−0.0441 (−0.8536)
Age	0.0183 *** (3.3339)	0.0204 *** (3.7130)
Educational attainment	0.0504 (1.5434)	0.0418 (1.2906)
Urban-rural areas	0.1341 ** (2.4779)	0.1262 ** (2.3389)
Marital status	0.2254 *** (3.0264)	0.2290 *** (3.0900)
Subjective economic evaluation	0.3793 *** (13.8587)	0.3651 *** (13.2779)
Religious belief	0.1310 * (1.6921)	0.0978 (1.2662)
_cons	1.4748 *** (4.0230)	1.3615 *** (3.7139)
N	1689	1689
F	35.1813	33.7152
Adj.R ²	0.1346	0.1429

Data collected among N = 1689 older adults in China, 2021. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

4.3. Mediating Mechanism Test and Urban-Rural Differences

The results of linear regression based on the total sample provided a basis for the analysis of the rural subsample. The stepwise regression analysis (Wen et al. 2005) was used in this section. On the one hand, the stepwise regression analysis can help understand the rural-urban differences in the impact of volunteering. On the other hand, it can also test the potential mechanisms of influence. Tables 3 and 4 show the stepwise regression analysis results for the rural and urban subsamples. Model 3 ($\beta = 0.294$, $p < 0.01$) and Model 6 ($\beta = 0.205$, $p < 0.05$) respectively reflect the total effect of volunteering on life satisfaction for rural and urban subsamples, and it was significantly higher in the rural

subsample. Model 4 ($\beta = 0.248$, $p < 0.01$) and Model 7 ($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.05$) respectively show the impact of volunteering on social trust for the rural and urban subsamples, and volunteering has a more positive effect on social trust in rural areas. Similarly, Model 5 and Model 8 illustrate the results of the mediating effect test for social trust in the rural and urban subsamples. After adding the mediator variable, there was a significant connection between the independent variable, mediator variable, and dependent variable in rural and urban subsamples, and it belonged to a partial mediating effect in each subsample. In general, compared with the urban subsample, the total effect and mediating effect are more significant in rural areas; in other words, the young-old in rural areas benefit more from voluntary behavior.

Table 3. The mediating effect of social trust in the rural subsample.

	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	Life Satisfaction	Social Trust	Life Satisfaction
Volunteering	0.2943 *** (3.9773)	0.2477 *** (2.9898)	0.2443 *** (3.3398)
Social trust			0.2018 *** (6.0282)
Gender	−0.0576 (−0.8567)	0.0144 (0.2124)	−0.0605 (−0.9216)
Age	0.0236 *** (3.3214)	0.0071 (0.9413)	0.0222 *** (3.1613)
Educational attainment	0.0560 (1.2725)	−0.1688 *** (−3.8018)	0.0901 ** (2.0491)
Marital status	0.1730 * (1.7766)	0.1084 (1.0466)	0.1511 (1.6264)
Subjective economic evaluation	0.3628 *** (10.1965)	0.2037 *** (5.7031)	0.3217 *** (8.8756)
Religious belief	0.1954 ** (2.0899)	0.0278 (0.2684)	0.1898 ** (2.0539)
_cons	1.1843 ** (2.5291)	2.7760 *** (5.6095)	0.6241 (1.3375)
N	1114	1114	1114
F	24.2086	8.7153	27.8933
Adj. R^2	0.1308	0.0467	0.1675

Data collected among N = 1114 older adults in rural China, 2021. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

4.4. Robustness Test in the Rural Subsample

The results of the previous analyses confirmed the significant positive impact of volunteering on life satisfaction among the young-old, especially in rural areas. To further ensure the robustness of the results, we tried to test robustness in the rural subsample. We first constructed a structural equation model. Table 5 shows the results, which were consistent with the previous stepwise regression analysis results. The total, direct, and indirect effects of volunteering, social trust, and life satisfaction were significantly positive in the rural subsample. The overall fit of the model was good (RMSEA = 0.000, CFI = 1.000, SRMR = 0.000, Chi2 = 272.607), with a firm explanation, which means the rural young-old can reinforce their social trust by participating in volunteering and also can improve their life satisfaction subsequently.

Additionally, to expand the research dimension while testing robustness, we replaced the independent variable with the type of volunteering. Table 6 reveals that the diversity of volunteer activities and life satisfaction of the rural young-old were positively linked, and the mediating effect of social trust remained significant. This proved the meaningful bridge role of social trust. The results of the analyses also highlight the importance of the type of volunteering.

Table 4. The mediating effect of social trust in the urban subsample.

	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	Life Satisfaction	Social Trust	Life Satisfaction
Volunteering	0.2054 ** (2.4659)	0.2192 ** (2.2564)	0.1525 * (1.9179)
Social trust			0.2410 *** (5.1166)
Gender	−0.0250 (−0.3108)	0.0327 (0.3918)	−0.0328 (−0.4251)
Age	0.0131 (1.5368)	0.0017 (0.1970)	0.0127 (1.5642)
Educational attainment	0.0181 (0.3765)	−0.0944 * (−1.7365)	0.0408 (0.8708)
Marital status	0.3271 *** (2.8798)	0.2177 * (1.8754)	0.2746 ** (2.5623)
Subjective economic evaluation	0.3700 *** (8.7782)	0.2481 *** (5.6877)	0.3102 *** (7.3138)
Religious belief	−0.1125 (−0.8272)	−0.0525 (−0.4188)	−0.0998 (−0.7400)
_cons	1.9285 *** (3.2538)	2.7151 *** (4.5854)	1.2740 ** (2.1106)
N	575	575	575
F	14.9743	6.9085	16.1508
Adj.R ²	0.1598	0.0706	0.2124

Data collected among N = 575 older adults in urban China, 2021. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 5. The structural equation model in the rural subsample.

Mediating Mechanism	Rural (n = 1114)	z Value
Volunteering → Life satisfaction	0.2443 ***	3.0000
Social trust → Life satisfaction	0.2018 ***	7.0900
Volunteering → Social trust	0.2477 ***	2.9000
Volunteering → Social trust → Life satisfaction	0.1070 ***	3.1500
RMSEA	0.000	
CFI	1.000	
SRMR	0.000	
Chi2	272.607	

Data collected among n = 1114 older adults in rural China, 2021. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 6. Replacement of the independent variable in the rural subsample.

	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11
	Life Satisfaction	Social Trust	Life Satisfaction
Type of volunteering	0.0805 *** (3.8215)	0.0673 *** (2.7714)	0.0668 *** (3.3743)
Social trust			0.2038 *** (6.1011)
_cons	1.2407 *** (2.6507)	2.8240 *** (5.7296)	0.6651 (1.4259)
N	1114	1114	1114
F	23.3940	8.4415	27.3054
Adj. R^2	0.1282	0.0447	0.1657
Direct effect based on the SEM		0.067 *** [0.010]	
Indirect effect based on the SEM		0.014 ** [0.020]	
Proportion of mediating effect		17.0%	

Data collected among N = 1114 older adults in rural China, 2021. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

5. Discussion

This study used national data from the CSS 2021 to explore the impact of volunteering on life satisfaction and test the influence mechanism of social trust among the young-old in China. These findings supported positive associations between volunteering and life satisfaction among the young-old, and the significant mediating effect of social trust. Furthermore, compared to the urban population, the young-old benefited more from volunteer activities in rural areas.

Consistent with previous studies, this study found that the young-old could improve their lives through volunteering (Morrow-Howell et al. 2003; Connolly and O'Shea 2015). As individuals grow older, they may experience negative emotions such as loneliness due to the interruption of social roles (Havighurst and Albrecht 1953). Volunteering can provide opportunities to rediscover one's value and the meaning of life (Piercy et al. 2011). Although the formal volunteer service construction started relatively late in China, the traditional Chinese culture, represented by Confucianism, has logical consistency with the volunteer spirit. Informal mutual assistance activities are rooted in our daily lives, laying a foundation for the development of volunteering among older people. An interesting finding was found in the comparison of rural and urban subsamples: although the volunteer opportunities and development in urban areas were better than those in rural areas, the total effect of volunteering and the mediating effect of social trust in the rural subsample were more significant, meaning that the rural young-old were more likely to enhance their social trust and promote life satisfaction through volunteering.

The total effect of volunteering was more significant in the rural subsample; one possible explanation is that, influenced by occupational forms and economic development, the older adults in urban areas have more choices and can enrich their leisure life through cultural consumption and participation in lifelong learning (Blace 2012). However, the rural older people are in an integrated mode of production and life, with relatively limited capacity to spend. Low-cost social interaction is the main way to meet their spiritual needs (Mao 2021), so volunteering occupies a more important position among the rural older people. Another potential factor is that the average life expectancy and the years of education in China have increased. In contrast, the number of years of labor has decreased,

and most urban older adults have low-intensity, high-paid work with social status before retirement (Guo 2018). In this case, more urban older people hope to work longer. However, there is no mandatory retirement system in rural areas, and the employment of older people is concentrated in the primary industry, which has low skill requirements and economic returns (Song et al. 2024). Participating in agricultural production is often an unavoidable choice for rural older adults to make a living; these older adults generally have low levels of subjective social status and self-efficacy, and agricultural production may deprive them of the time and opportunities to enjoy life. Therefore, participating in volunteer activities may help them enhance their sense of fulfillment, feel the warmth of mutual assistance, and receive a breather in a supportive environment.

Furthermore, the conclusion that social trust had a more significant mediating effect in the rural subsample may be explained by the fact that the acquaintance society is an important feature of rural China. Compared to the increasingly distant social relationships in urban areas, acquaintance provides more possibilities for developing volunteering and forming social trust. Older adults in rural areas are more willing to participate in volunteer activities in familiar spaces, and they continuously increase social interactions through daily mutual assistance and reciprocity, which is conducive to maintaining and developing social trust (Putnam 1993). The older adults' interactive space transitions from family to the rural public space, and the interactive objects gradually expand from the most familiar family members and neighbors to unfamiliar individuals. The spirit of volunteerism, as a part of public spirit, is constantly reshaping the moral values of the older adults, giving them a propensity to greater trust towards society, enhancing a sense of belonging, and thus improving their life satisfaction.

Moreover, these findings can be further discussed based on urban-rural differences. In China, the development of volunteer service primarily relies on institutional promotion. Due to the government's long-term focus on urban areas, volunteer activities in urban areas tend to be more organized and professional. Older volunteers usually join formal volunteer organizations in urban areas, which regularly organize volunteer activities on specific themes, such as holding public performances and visiting nursing homes. The operation and activities of the volunteer organizations rely on explicit rules, which also have higher requirements for older volunteers. In contrast, volunteer activities carry a strong tinge of individual elitism in rural areas (Wei and Xu 2023), and the types of volunteering mainly are daily physical activities, such as weddings and funerals, house restoration, agricultural production, and environmental protection (Perry and Scott 1976). Older volunteers in rural areas do not participate in formal organizations, and volunteer activities are mostly initiated by rural elites and capable people. Volunteer activities that do not rely on rational rules are more like a kind of human relations and mutual assistance in life, such as helping neighbors to repair their houses or exchanging products. Volunteering is unorganized and non-professional in rural areas. The urban-rural disparities in the development of volunteer careers may lead to variations in the process and benefits of individual participation in volunteer activities. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct in-depth discussions based on sociodemographic characteristics during the analysis of urban-rural differences; we attempt to draw inferences from the gender perspective.

Gender plays a crucial role in the quality of life for older adults, especially in China. Traditional gender concepts are deeply rooted, with women bearing more household caregiving responsibilities and men dominating affairs outside the home, which extends to the field of volunteering. In rural areas, men occupy a dominant position among elites (Jin 2019), which may give them more significant influence in volunteer activities and broader participation in public affairs, enabling them to expand their scope of social interactions, derive a stronger sense of self-identity and improve their life satisfaction from volunteering.

In urban areas, the influence of gender may not be obvious ([Morrow-Howell et al. 2003](#); [Ni et al. 2023](#)), and volunteer activities are subject to rational institutional constraints, with individual factors not playing a strong role. However, due to men's high propensity to trust ([Chaudhuri and Gangadharan 2002](#)), they are more willing to form higher social expectations from their own experiences ([Van Den Akker et al. 2020](#)), enhancing their life satisfaction. Future research can explore more deeply from the perspective of gender.

There are several limitations in this study. First, although volunteering and life satisfaction were positively associated, the cross-sectional data used in this study makes it difficult to verify the causality between volunteering and life satisfaction. Moreover, the study lacked longitudinal data to examine the dynamic changes in life satisfaction, but the results of this study can lay a foundation for causality analysis in the future. Second, the concept of social trust used in this study is the trust given to the public by individuals, also known as "generalized trust" ([Newton and Zmerli 2011](#)). Special trust (trust in familiar individuals) also plays an important role in an emotional environment, especially in China. However, due to the limitations of the questionnaire design, it took much work for this study to clearly present the impact of special trust and social trust separately. Finally, this study did not conduct an in-depth analysis of volunteer activities, such as the different forms and their impact on volunteering. Due to the limitations of CSS, more detailed analysis is difficult to be supported by sufficient samples, and analysis of the forms of volunteering needs to respond to the 3 main problems of this study; however, the length of this article limits the research content. Future studies may consider enriching the discussion dimensions of trust, such as interpersonal trust, system trust, and sense of being trusted. Also, the forms of volunteering will be a significant future research direction.

6. Implications and Conclusions

The overall explanatory powers of this research models are not strong. This is due to the fact that Chinese volunteer service development among older adults is still in the initial stage, and the available data for analysis is relatively limited, with even fewer resources in rural areas. Further research findings and practical experience are needed to complement each other, and policies should provide more powerful support for the rural young-old. The findings of this research have significant implications for actively coping with the challenges of population aging and improving the lives of the young-old.

Our findings support that volunteering positively correlates with the life satisfaction of the young-old, and social trust plays a significant positive mediating role. The Actively Addressing the National Strategy of Aging Population, released in 2020, has created a favorable policy environment for developing volunteer careers for older adults in China. Thus, we indicate that the strategy has multiple values; the value of older volunteers should also be emphasized in the future, as volunteer activities not only benefit the spiritual comfort and self-actualization of the young-old, but also enable them to participate in public affairs and promote public spirit through volunteer activities. Furthermore, mutual assistance among older people stems from volunteering, which can also be an effective way to respond to the problem of aging ([Xie and Han 2024](#)).

However, we found that the impact and influence mechanism of volunteering differs between urban and rural areas; that is, the rural young-old benefit more from volunteering. On the one hand, the urban older people have more leisure time and options, and volunteer service is more important for the rural older people. On the other hand, although based on managerialism, the current development of rural volunteer service is lagging behind, and spontaneous rural volunteer activities have a strong role in volunteer service. Therefore, it is necessary to raise the social security level of older adults in rural areas, let their labor participation become an active desire rather than a forced choice, and pay attention to the

subjectivity of older people. At the same time, strengthening volunteerism in rural areas is also significant.

Additionally, based on previous studies and our findings, we supposed that older females benefit less from volunteering, and older females lacking a voice in social interaction and public affairs should be addressed. Restricted by traditional concepts and imperfections in the social system, older females still fail to realize their potential in volunteer activities. In the future, we need to pay attention to the lack of education for older females and to foster their willingness to participate. More importantly, we should gradually formulate and improve relevant social security policies, such as the socialization of family services, and reduce the burden of family care so as to give older females more opportunities and abilities to volunteering. Gender equality in volunteering should be promoted.

In summary, encouraging older adults in their early years to become active forces in volunteer activities not only provides a feasible solution for improving their lives but also contributes to the sustainable development of aged care services. Under the background of urban-rural division, the impact of volunteering and its influence mechanism in rural areas may differ from that in urban. This study promotes the effectiveness of volunteering by distinguishing the urban-rural differences that affect volunteering so as to help the young-old benefit more from volunteering.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Our study did not involve animal or human clinical trials and was not unethical. As all the data used in our study comes from the “China Social Survey 2021” (CSS 2021), which was conducted by the Institute of Sociology Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, with Guangjin Chen and Wei Li as the project leaders. We would like to thank the above-mentioned institution and personnel for providing data assistance. The content of this study is the responsibility of us. CSS is conducted under the name of the Institute of Sociology Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, issuing survey introduction letters to county (city, district, banner), township (town, street), and village (residential) committees. At the same time, universities or research institutions in various regions generally issue official letters in the name of schools or colleges for preliminary administrative liaison. All participants provided informed consent before participating in the survey. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were guaranteed, and participation was completely voluntary. Relevant information can be found on the first page of the questionnaire. CSS project has made survey data available to the public, and we obtained the data from the website <http://csqr.cass.cn>, accessed on 15 January 2025.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are publicly available from the CSS project website: http://css.cass.cn/css_sy/ (accessed on 3 February 2023).

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