

Compassionate caregivers! More than a beacon of hope for Shanghai's elderly

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As I walked along the corridor on the second floor of an elderly home in Shanghai's suburban Songjiang District, along with my wife and her sister, a few days ago, an old woman, who appeared to be in her late 70s or early 80s, slowly moved her wheelchair toward us. Before we came closer, she stopped and began to fumble through a bunch of winter clothes placed in a big basket tucked against a wall.

Her hands, slim but strong, dexterously dived into the thick clothes as if trying to find something. She picked one piece of clothing after another before putting them back in order.

"Hey, granny, these are not your clothes," a middle-aged caregiver called in a low voice from a distance, but she was not in a hurry to interfere with the old woman's handling of the clothes. Slowly, the old woman turned her wheelchair backward to join a group of elderly people, sitting and chatting in a public lounge.

"She is 102 years old," a senior manager of the nursing home told me. "We encourage the elderly to come out and play, so that they can keep fit. If they stay in bed for too long, it will do no good to their health, mentally or physically."

On hearing of her age, I darted toward her in small, quick steps. Cupping my hands before my chest to show my respect, I said to her: "Hey granny, you look so healthy and young!"

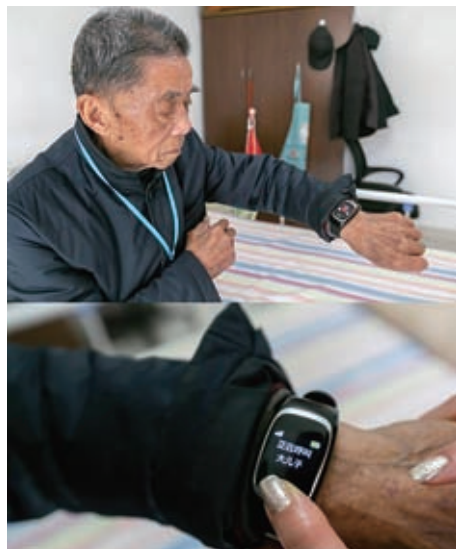
She waved a hand at me with a big smile, her eyes shining with delight and demureness. She didn't say a word, but kept nodding at me, apparently appreciating my comment.

As I chatted with the 102-year-old granny, whose hair was still mostly thick and black, an old man sitting across the table silently looked on, wearing a small smile. Suddenly, the senior manager came forward, raising his right hand above his ear to give the old man a military-style salute. The old man returned the salute with an understanding smile.

"It's our way of saying hello to each other, a tacit understanding between a



A caregiver assists an elderly woman with her meal at a senior home in Shanghai. — Xinhua



An elderly man shows the wearable gadget on his wrist, indicating that his son is calling. — Xinhua

caregiver and an elder," the senior manager explained. "Sometimes, an old man would mistake me for his nephew, and I try my best to cooperate to make him happy."

The senior manager is in his 30s, an able and understanding caregiver who leads a group of *ayis* (domestic helpers) to provide what he calls "a compassionate

service" to the elderly residents.

It was around 3pm when the three of us arrived at the senior home. We went to discuss with the senior manager about the possibility of placing my mother-in-law, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, in the home. As we walked around, we saw *ayis* serving afternoon tea and desserts to the elders, helping them prune their finger nails, or simply chatting with them.

On the ceiling of a public lounge on the first floor, many paper clippings in red color were hung in neat lines and rows. The senior manager said they were made by the elders to celebrate the Chinese New Year.

"We encourage them to exercise their hands by working together on paper clippings and other crafts," he said.

A spirit of compassion

Without compassion or empathy, one can hardly come up with these services aimed at bringing health and happiness to the elderly people who tend to place their lives in old age in the hands of others — caregivers who are not family members.

Shanghai's official figures show that there will be more than 6 million local

residents aged at or above 60 by 2025, of whom 860,000 will be aged at or above 80.

Here "local residents" refers only to those classified as registered household population. In 2020, there were 5.33 million local residents aged 60 or above, of whom about 810,000 were aged 80 or above.

Oriental Outlook, a weekly magazine under the aegis of Xinhua news agency, reported on February 7 that Shanghai had 5.53 million local residents aged at least 60 by 2022, accounting for 36.8 percent of the city's total registered household population.

By 2025, the magazine said, about 40 percent of Shanghai's registered household population will be at least 60 years old, far above the national average of around 20 percent.

Oriental Outlook's latest report focused on how Shanghai uses artificial intelligence services to help elderly people live better.

For example, the city has created smart phone pavilions where elders can call for a taxi without typing their addresses — such a pavilion will automatically send a caller's address to a taxi driver. In another instance, seniors in downtown Huangpu District can talk to a big digital screen — a virtual medical clinic aided by a large language model — and seek immediate advice on a wide range of health issues, like whether one's blood pressure is too high.

What the stories and my experience at the Songjiang senior home have in common is a spirit of compassion and empathy demonstrated in the daily services by Shanghai's professional caregivers. Without such a spirit, the caregivers, whether supported by AI technologies or not, could hardly put themselves in the shoes of the elderly in need.

Although we're not ready yet to transfer my mother-in-law from her abode in neighboring Jiangsu Province to Shanghai's Songjiang District, we're confident she will have a happy time in the elderly home after we go through necessary procedures like filing standard application forms. In compassionate caregivers we trust.