

Refereed article

## Learning from Japan: The Case of China's 2009 New Rural Pension Scheme

Tong Tian

### Summary

In 2009, the Chinese government established the New Rural Pension Scheme (NRPS). The NRPS was widely regarded as a significant institutional innovation, as it combined an already existing component, individual accounts, with a new one: non-contributory social pensions subsidized by the central government. This article asks how this synthesization of rather disparate components came about. With the aim of gaining insights into how Chinese policymakers learn from foreign policy ideas, the article focuses on one key international actor influencing this institutional innovation: the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which led the only international cooperation project implemented at bureau level. Through its technical and intellectual assistance, JICA influenced the design of the NRPS, contributing to an ongoing domestic learning process, particularly regarding the establishment of a non-contributory social pension component and the central government taking fiscal responsibility. The article hereby contributes to a more nuanced understanding of a form of learning among Chinese policymakers, which takes a “synthesizing” approach. Based on explaining-outcome process-tracing and the triangulation of policy documents, archive materials, newspaper articles, secondary literature, and expert interviews, it also contributes to recent debates on transnational policy learning in China and adds to a barely researched sub-field of this larger debate: intra-Asian knowledge diffusion.

**Keywords:** People's Republic of China, Japan, pension reform, policy learning, knowledge diffusion

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## Introduction

In September 2009, the Chinese government established the world's largest social pension program, the New Rural Pension Scheme (*Xinxing Nongcun Shehui Yanglao Baoxian* 新型农村社会养老保险, hereafter NRPS; see: MOHRSS 2012) for agricultural Hukou (household registration system) holders.<sup>1</sup> While a rudimentary system of rural pensions had already been implemented in 1992, this “old rural pension” system (*Lao Nong Bao* 老农保) ultimately failed, which sparked a search for alternative schemes in the early 2000s. Notably, the final design of the 2009 NRPS came as something of a surprise, since it introduced a new component: a non-contributory social pension (*Jichu Yanglaojin* 基础养老金) for those over the age of 60, subsidized by the central government. This complemented the remaining component of the old system, a personal savings plan based on individual accounts (*Geran Zhanghu* 个人账户). With the social pension component, the first of its kind in China (Shen et al. 2020), the NRPS was widely regarded as a “remarkable institutional innovation” (Huang 2020: 353, Deng 2015, Zheng 2015). So, how did this come about?

With the aim of gaining insights into how Chinese policymakers learn from foreign policy ideas, this article analyzes one key international actor influencing this institutional innovation: the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA). By examining the role of JICA and its interaction with Chinese officials, the article aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of a form of policy learning among Chinese policymakers which takes a “synthesizing” approach (on the concept of “synthesizing learning,” see Leisering et al. 2017). Based on explaining-outcome process-tracing and the triangulation of policy documents, archive material, newspaper articles, secondary literature, and expert interviews, this study also contributes to recent debates on transnational policy learning in China (see Hu 2012, Liu and Sun 2016, Leisering et al. 2017, Duckett 2018, ten Brink et al. 2020). Moreover, it adds to a barely researched sub-field of this larger debate: intra-Asian knowledge diffusion (but see: Mok et al. 2017).

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1 In this article, NRPS refers to its 2009 design. In this design, the central government covered the social pension component in full in the central and western provinces, while in the eastern provinces they subsidized 50% (State Council 2009; for more detailed information see: [http://www.gov.cn/zwqk/2009-09/04/content\\_1409216.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zwqk/2009-09/04/content_1409216.htm)). At the end of 2010, the number of NRPS participants was 102.77 million, by the end of 2011, the number had increased to cover about 49.7% of the peasants. Note that in 2011, the Chinese authorities also established and extended the Urban Residents Pension Scheme (URPS) for urban residents. The structure of the URPS was identical to the NRPS (State Council 2011). In September 2012, the URPS and the NRPS had achieved full coverage. In 2014, the NRPS and the URPS were merged into the Urban-Rural Residents Social Pension Scheme (URRPS), a unified non-contributory basic pension insurance scheme for both urban and rural residents aged 18–60 (State Council 2014), which is still in place to this day (2021). At the end of 2017, the number of urban and rural residents participating in this basic endowment insurance was 512 million (Shen et al. 2020).

The existing literature on rural pensions has mostly focused on *domestic* motivations and mechanisms that contributed to the establishment of the NRPS. Among these are, of course, poverty among the rural elderly, demographic pressures, growth of state revenues and stronger state capacity, and the role of local policy experimentation and thus domestic policy learning (Zhang 2009, Liu and Han 2010, Dorfman et al. 2013, Ngok and Huang 2014, Huang 2020). Huang (2020), for instance, rightly stresses how hands-on experimentation on the ground between local officials and rural residents led to social learning and a re-orientation with respect to the inclusion of a social pension component into the NRPS design. Regarding rural pension reform, so far only Stepan and Lu (2016) have addressed *international* influences, which “played a decisive role in overcoming the legacies of one-sided protection in the Chinese pension system” (121). Indeed, next to JICA, ideas and policy suggestions were provided by the International Labor Organization (ILO), the International Social Security Association (ISSA), the European Union<sup>2</sup> and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), while the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) ran programs on capacity building. However, through its intensive interaction with Chinese officials on the ground from 2005 until 2009, JICA was arguably the most important international player. The focus of this article and its main contribution is thus on this interaction and how this fostered learning on behalf of the Chinese counterparts, particularly regarding the need to establish a social pension component and for the central government to take fiscal responsibility.

As shown in this article, in a situation where the old rural pension scheme, based on individual accounts and the voluntary participation of peasants, was in deep crisis at the end of the 1990s (Zheng 2015), the central government called on the authority in charge, the Bureau of Rural Social Security (*Nongcun Shehui Baoxian Si* 农村社会保险司, hereafter the bureau),<sup>3</sup> to reform the system. Thus, from the late 1990s onwards, the bureau supervised a decade of policy research, scanning the international environment, and local policy experimentation. Distinct alternatives were discussed and experimented with, including keeping a revised individual account model, letting private insurance companies take the lead, emulating the urban employee pension scheme based on social pooling, supporting

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2 During the reform of the rural pension system, the MOHRSS worked with the EU in a 5-year project called EUCSS (EU-China Social Security Reform Co-operation Project), but mostly at ministry level. The EUCSS project has, however, provided the bureau with information on how the EU pays subsidies to farmers and how some European countries operate special pension schemes for agricultural workers. At the same time, the EUCSS project also organized tours for Chinese officials and scholars to a few European countries, and informed on social policies, including rural old age pensions for farmers who lost their land.

3 The bureau first worked under the supervision of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA), later it was transferred to the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MOLSS; from 2008 onwards renamed as Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, MOHRSS).

individual accounts via (small) local government<sup>4</sup> subsidies, and introducing a basic pension on top of the individual account. As this article illustrates, besides the aforementioned domestic factors, another key factor determining why the last of these alternatives was ultimately chosen for the NRPS was international policy learning from Japan.

From early 2005 onwards, equipped with experiences from China-related activities going back to 1979, JICA was closely involved in and exerted influence over the design of the NRPS. It collaborated with the bureau in implementing the large-scale project “Innovation and Management Standardization of China’s Rural Social Pension Insurance System” (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Nongcun Shehui Yanglao Baoxian Zhidu Chuangxin yu Guanli Guifan Diaoyan Hezuo Xiangmu* 中华人民共和国农村社会养老保险制度创新与管理规范调研合作项目, hereafter JICA project) in order to “survey pilot areas and provide suggestions for improving the current rural pension scheme” (JICA final report 2009: 1). In fact, the JICA project was the only international cooperation project collaboratively implemented at bureau level to aid in the design of the NRPS structure. Against this background, the JICA project provided technical and intellectual assistance, including concrete policy suggestions, spreading ideas based on the Japanese National Pension System (*Kokumin Nenkin*), and calculations proving that the provision of basic pensions is fiscally affordable for the central government.

Following the introduction, this article presents its conceptual framework, including the concept of synthesizing learning, and research design. Afterwards, the history of rural pensions in reform China, and the roles of the bureau and earlier international influencing factors are reconstructed. The following section then analyses in detail the interaction between JICA and Chinese officials as well as key elements of policy learning. The last section concludes.

## Conceptual Framework and Research Design

Policy learning through knowledge diffusion from abroad has recently burgeoned in studies on Chinese social policy (e.g. Hu 2012, Liu and Sun 2016, Leisering et al. 2017, Duckett 2018, ten Brink et al. 2020, Shi 2012). These studies especially draw on the policy diffusion, policy transfer and lesson-drawing literature (e.g. Dobbin et al. 2007, Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, Kuhlmann et al. 2019, Rose 1991, 2005). The focus of this literature lies on how and why governments adopt ideas and policies from other governments or organizations across time and space in formulating domestic policies. Accordingly, the term policy learning refers to the process during which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, and

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4 Local government in the NRPS policy documents, though not officially defined, refers in most cases to county/district level government, so in this article, local government also refers to county/district level government. However, it should be noted that the Daxing district government is a prefectural level government in Chinese administrative division because Beijing is a directly administered municipality of China.

ideas in one political setting are used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, and ideas in another political setting (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996).

In particular, this article adopts the concept of “synthesizing learning” to investigate a knowledge diffusion pattern in which two or more disparate ideas are synthesized (Leisering et al. 2017: 310). Synthesizing was first formulated together with other concepts to describe different modes of processing newly acquired knowledge such as copying, emulation or inspiration (Rose 1991, 1993). Leisering et al. (2017) have, for instance, applied the concept to understand the construction of the Chinese social assistance model (*Dibao* 低保), with its distinct mixture of international and domestic components. The synthesizing of disparate ideas in the design of the NRPS — an individual account component, originating from East Asian productivism and domestic ideas on individual self-responsibility *and* social pensions, stemming from ideas on state responsibility in welfare — thus exemplifies “a policy learning process characterized by combining elements [...] into a whole that is distinctive” (Rose 1991: 22).

Moreover, in the case of rural pension reform, transnational policy learning was autonomous and voluntary, and not driven by coercion, for instance (on different transnational diffusion mechanisms, see Dobbin et al. 2007). In such a setting, as defined in the literature, actors are likely to engage in a proactive “rational learning process” (Dolowitz 2009). Indeed, voluntary learning in the process of formulating a new rural pension scheme was based on the power of the Chinese party-state to autonomously adopt foreign social policy practices and then adapt them to cater to the domestic context (Leisering et al. 2017; also see Hall 1993). The Chinese officials analyzed here were interested in evidence-based knowledge from abroad to design a refined rural pension scheme. As the proactive learners in the bureau largely remained in office from the late 1980s until the establishment of the NRPS, this also made for a very good research base. The stability of bureau staff made it possible to better identify patterns of policy learning. In a nutshell, then, we find that, for instance, despite a strong commitment to preserving individual accounts, which constrained policy learning for some time, the responsible officials were able to rationally learn from their interaction with JICA in the 2000s and added a social pension component (on the domestic factors stimulating this process, see Huang 2020).

Regarding the spatial origins of knowledge diffusion, in order to grasp the comparatively strong role of a Japanese organization in China's rural pension reform of the 2000s, we refer to the notion of “neighboring effects” (see e.g. Rose 1991) to study intra-Asian knowledge diffusion. Notably, existing diffusion and transfer studies mostly focus on how social policy ideas from Western states and Western-led international organizations travelled southward and eastward (e.g. Dobbin et al. 2007). In China studies, this applies to the role of the ILO, the World Bank, and German/Bismarckian models of social pooling in urban pension reform (e.g. Hu 2012). While these influences are important — they also play a role in

rural pensions, as shown in the next section — studies on the role of China’s Asian neighbors in pension reform are few and far between (but, for a Chinese official’s view, see Hu 2018, Lv 2010, Wang and Huang 2010, and, for the role of Singaporean individual accounts in Chinese urban pension reform, see ten Brink et al. 2020). Regarding rural pensions, only Stepan and Lu (2016) have touched on this issue. The in-depth study of neighboring effects from Japan — and indeed also from Singapore with its individual account system, the Central Provident Fund (CPF), as shown in the next section — thus represents a gap in the existing literature.

In terms of research design, this study applies “explaining-outcome process-tracing” (Beach and Pedersen 2019: 281–288, also see George and Bennett 2005). In contrast to theory-testing and theory-building process-tracing, the analytical focus of explaining-outcome process-tracing is on the specific case, with the aim of understanding the processes that caused a particular historical outcome, here the introduction and design of the 2009 NRPS. In this variety of process-tracing, mechanisms such as learning from abroad are “treated more pragmatically as heuristic devices to understand important events” (Beach and Pedersen 2019: 12). Moreover, with this variety, findings can only be generalized to a limited extent, e.g. when elements of the explanation “appear to have a more ‘general’ character” (Beach and Pedersen 2019: 285).

With the aim of tracing the process between the causes, i.e. the demise of the old pension system, and the outcome (the 2009 NRPS), and with a particular focus on international influences, we engaged in data triangulation (George and Bennett 2005). The article draws on policy documents, official reports, online archives, online articles in key Chinese newspapers, secondary literature, and, most importantly, 27 expert interviews conducted during 8 months of fieldwork in China between 2018 and 2020. These semi-structured interviews were carried out with key Chinese academics and civil servants who were directly involved in the policy process, as well as with international experts (each interview had a duration of between one and three hours; see Appendix for further information). One of the interviews was with the official in charge at the Bureau of Rural Security of the MOHRSS, who was heavily involved in the design of the NRPS. The majority of the interviews were held in Beijing. The author also visited Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Guangzhou, and Changchun to collect documents from provincial libraries and to conduct additional interviews.

Alongside primary Chinese data, the JICA online archive was used to access and then study the project memorandum, preliminary investigation report, and final report on the activity of the JICA project in China (in Japanese and Chinese). Secondary literature on the NRPS, in both Chinese and English, was also consulted, using the CNKI database (<http://www.cnki.net>) to access Chinese academic journal articles.

## Historical Background: The Demise of the Old Rural Pension and the Search for Alternatives

Officially launched in 1992 for agricultural Hukou holders, the old rural pension scheme was a state-run individual saving accounts model based on voluntary participation. It was supervised and administrated by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA), which started local experiments with rural pension schemes in 1986. In 1991, MOCA then organized a rural social pension insurance office under the Bureau of Social Welfare, launching local experiments in Shandong Province, and designing a basic plan for the pension scheme at county level (Zhao 2007). In 1993, it was expanded into the aforementioned Bureau of Rural Social Security (*Nongcun Shehui Baoxian Si* 农村社会保险司).

The old rural pension was eventually scrapped in 1999 by the State Council because of its insufficient coverage and problems experienced during its implementation, such as MOCA's failure to keep policy implementation on track, as well as the misappropriation of social pension funds (Interview #13, Zheng 2015). At the same time, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis led to a fall in interest rates and consequently the promised interest rate for individual accounts could not be realized, which led to a crisis in the old rural pension scheme (Shi 2006, Zou 2019a).<sup>5</sup> As a result, the State Council argued for the necessity to revamp (direct translation: rectify and clarify) (*Qingli Zhengdun* 清理整顿 or *Zhengdun Guifan* 整顿规范) the old rural pension (Zou 2008a). Later in 1999, the State Council therefore assigned this new mission to the bureau.

The 1999 crisis of the old rural pension scheme and the related requests for revamping it represented a big challenge for the bureau. Additional difficulties emerged from large ongoing administrative reforms at the national level since 1998. During these reforms, the bureau, in charge of the old rural pension, was transferred from MOCA to a newly established ministry — the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MOLSS) (Zhao, 2002). Initially, the transplanted bureau was in danger of being rendered redundant, as the then minister of MOLSS Zhang Zuoji recalled (in: Zou 2019b: 104): “In 1998, when the MOLSS was just established, authority over rural pensions was transferred to MOLSS. I insisted against the disbandment of the bureau, thus keeping the spark of the rural pension policy alive.”

Notably, the links to the *old* rural pension scheme were retained despite changes in the bureaucratic structure, mainly by inheriting the same staff and its emphasis on a system based on individual accounts and individual self-responsibility. Long-serving officials and key leaders, for example Wang Yicai, Zhao Dianguo, and Liu Conglong, ensured that the bureau's core personnel was maintained throughout the pension rectification process in the 2000s (and even after 2009). Wang Yicai was

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5 By 1999, the old rural pension scheme had spread to 1800 counties, covering 50 million peasants. After 1999, coverage declined.

the director of the bureau from 1996 to 2004, while Zhao Dianguo, the then deputy director of the bureau, became the new director in 2004. According to Liu Conglong, “all of us who previously worked in MOCA’s bureau also went to its successor at the MOLSS” (Zou 2019a: 120). These personnel arrangements formed an important set of institutional conditions for future reforms in rural pensions and an ideational legacy that was only gradually changed, most notably with the help of JICA.

Consequently, despite being transplanted from one ministry to another, the bureau maintained its authority and served as the core institutional actor responsible for reforming the old pension scheme after 1999. Its bureaucratic interests were strongly dependent on the success of “rectifying” the old system. Indeed, the mission to rectify the old rural pension scheme defined the bureau’s perceptions and interests in the period until 2009 (Choi 2018).

In its continuous effort to reform the rural pension scheme, the bureau drafted and submitted two reform proposals to the State Council before the 2000s. However, these did not go through (Shi 2006). Both proposals focused on how the government should privatize the state-run individual accounts by incorporating lessons learned from Singapore (and Chile as well) where, as one expert remarked, “government sets the rules, individual accounts and savings are run by the market” (Zhao 2002: 25).

Already in the early 1990s, the bureau had conducted investigations on the Singaporean CPF, which served as a model for the old rural pension with its purely self-financed personal accounts (Liu and Han 2010). In July 1990, Bai Hua, then the director of the Poverty Alleviation Division of the Bureau of Disaster Relief at MOCA, participated in drafting an “Instruction on Establishing a Rural Social Pension Insurance Guarantee System,” which was submitted to the State Council. As he recalled, “this instruction drew on Singapore’s Central Provident Fund system” (Zou 2008a: 91). From the early 1990s to the 2000s, the bureau and key officials held the idea of the individual account dear. Not only was this belief in the individual account manifested prominently in the bureau’s proposals and reform documents, it also surfaced repeatedly in key officials’ articles, speeches and interviews (Interview #25, #26, also see Zhao 2002, 2004, 2007).

As mentioned before, the bureau officials regarded their model as an achievement, exemplified by the then director arguing: “during the development and reform of the Chinese social insurance system, the rural regions of China were the first to establish the individual account” (MOCA 1995: 145). During 1995, MOCA organized an evaluation of the basic plan for rural social pension insurance, formed a group of domestic experts and scholars, and printed an internal evaluation report financially sponsored by the ING Insurance Company. In this collection, MOCA and the invited academia spoke highly of the individual account system, and, next to the Singaporean experience, also underlined that many “countries [had] started to reform the social security system, emphasizing the role of individuals in the



social security system and even privatizing parts of the system. Chile [...] privatized its PAYG social security system and lowered the contribution rate, thus stimulating savings and facilitating its domestic capital market” (MOCA 1995: 3).

Abolishing the individual account and going beyond the idea of individual self-responsibility was not even an option when the old rural pension ended in failure (of course this was related with wider socio-economic trends at the time, particularly the growing importance of markets in the 1990s, see e.g. Naughton 2007). In December 1999, five months after the State Council asked the bureau to revamp the old rural pension, the bureau continued to insist on the old structure (Lu 2009: 48). In 2002, Zhao Dianguo, the incoming bureau director, advocated learning from the experiences of Singapore and Chile again, by setting up individual accounts for the rural population and peasants who had lost their land during urbanization (Zhao 2002). In 2004, he still insisted that “establishing individual accounts is a trend in global pension reform” (Zhao 2004: 12).

This strong belief in the individual account, learnt from Singapore, later reinforced by the Chilean pension reform experience, was collectively recognized by the bureau and its key leaders, and both predetermined the course of future reform and constituted the foundation for preserving this component (Zhao 2002). It affected the design of the NRPS substantively as belief in individual accounts and individual responsibility still informed local policy experimentations after 1999.

Notably, in economically advanced provinces like Jiangsu, Zhejiang or Shanghai, local governments had “continued to explore rural pension schemes” (“他们的探索的路子一直没有停止”) (Interview #26). In 2002, the 16th Party Congress supported this trend by arguing that in rural areas, “wherever conditions permit, we should try to establish old-age pensions” (“有条件的地方，探索建立农村养老保险”) (Jiang, 2002). From 2003, more local governments started various local experiments of “local *new* rural pensions” (“地方新农保”; on policy experimentation more generally, see Heilmann 2008). As simply keeping the old individual account model was not an option anymore, four alternative pension models resulted from those local experiments:

*Privatization of the old rural pension.* When the State Council scrapped the old rural pension in 1999, it allowed the old pensions to be gradually transformed into commercial insurance, if conditions permitted (“有条件的可以逐步将其过渡为商业保险”) (State Council 1999). For example, in Yantai (Shandong), the authority of the old rural pension and its administration officials were transferred to a private insurance company. However, this alternative was strongly opposed by the MOLSS and the bureau.

*Adding a social pooling component to the individual account.* Thereby the basic structure of the urban employees’ pension scheme was emulated (on this social pooling model, see ten Brink et al. 2020). Shanghai piloted this model, but it was

later stopped, not least because it was seen as unrealistic to cover all rural areas (including very poor ones) in the future.

*Local governments subsidize the individual account.* In Huoshan (Anhui), the local government decided to give an extra interest rate of 2% on top of the bank interest rate for the savings in individual accounts. In Baoji (Shaanxi), the local government subsidized 30-45 yuan per year if the peasants paid premiums (of circa 200 yuan per year) into their own individual account, so that the peasant would have minimum of about 230 yuan per year saved in the individual account.

*Local governments introduce a basic pension.* In the district of Daxing (Beijing), the local government decided in 2003 that, starting in 2004, every peasant over 60 was entitled to receive 200 yuan per month from the government, in addition to keeping the individual account. But those who were younger than 60 should contribute to the rural pension scheme in order to receive these 200 yuan after turning 60 years old. At this point, none of these experiments included any central government subsidies.

These models provided the bureau with practical experience and alternatives to consider. The question the bureau was now faced with was which alternative would be the most suitable and sustainable. As shown below, it was the Daxing experiment and ideas related to creating a non-contributory social pension component that were interpreted as most fitting for the larger reform. Rather than purely domestic policy experimentation, it is crucial to acknowledge that the Daxing model was heavily supported and influenced by JICA.

## **From Local Experiments to the Introduction of the NRPS**

In the early 2000s, local policy experimentation became a highly valued source of information for the bureau, since it was searching for a new model to reform the old rural pension scheme. The bureau conducted extensive research and communicated with local governments and officials to learn from their different experiences. In addition, it actively collaborated with international actors on the reform of the old rural pension scheme, including the ILO, ISSA, UNDP, ADB, EU, and JICA (Leisering et al. 2002, Stepan and Lu 2016). As the following section demonstrates, being the only international cooperation project implemented at bureau level, JICA was arguably the most important of these international actors. In particular, Chinese policymakers learned two lessons from their interaction with JICA in designing the NRPS: the importance of (1) establishing a non-contributory social pension component for those over the age of 60 and (2) the central government taking fiscal responsibility. In the next sections, therefore, we explore the JICA project and its impact on rural pension reform.

## The JICA Project and Pension Schemes for Japanese Peasants

By 1979, JICA had already started its Official Development Assistance (ODA) in China. As the first foreign ODA agency on the mainland, JICA started its efforts mostly by collaborating with the forerunners of the Ministry of Science and Technology. Since then, JICA has operated a well-functioning ODA in China (Interview #24, #27). In the wake of the pension reform in 2002, the MOLSS and the bureau then initiated a collaboration project with JICA, supported by the Ministry of Science and Technology. After initial negotiations, the aforementioned JICA project, worth 370 million yen, was approved by the Japanese National Congress in 2005.

In the same year, the bureau then chose eight collaboration locations for the JICA project among the ongoing local policy experiments.<sup>6</sup> These eight pilots tried out different models of rural pension, with different results regarding the aim to expand rural pension coverage. Two of these were considered “advanced areas” (*Xianjin Diqu* 先进地区): Daxing, a district in Beijing, and Zhaoyuan City. Here, participation rates and coverage were highest among the eight pilots; in December 2004, the participation rates in Daxing and Zhaoyuan were 20.9% and 52.6% respectively (see JICA preliminary research report 2005: 74).

From July to September 2005, JICA experts conducted a first investigation in the eight collaboration pilot areas. In mid-September, the two sides then exchanged their opinions in multiple discussions and prepared a memorandum which was signed by MOLSS and JICA in November. In the memorandum, the goal of the JICA project was declared to be “to determine a rural social pension system that includes the relatively poorer rural population, and can be expanded in rural areas nationwide and operate [stably] [...] to determine the design of rural pension policy [...] for the rural social pension system to be implemented nationwide” (project Memorandum 2004: 151). In particular, the aim to achieve 60% nationwide coverage by 2020 was stated (project Memorandum 2004: 146).

Through its visits to the collaborative pilot projects, JICA collected local experience and first-hand information. After its initial investigation in 2005, from 2006 to 2008, the JICA project organized another nine rounds of on-site visits to the pilot areas to survey and research the rural pension system. During these visits, JICA provided local governments with detailed policy suggestions (Lv 2006, JICA final report 2009: 65–82). Alongside these on-site visits, seminars and training

6 The eight pilot areas were: Huoqiu County, Lu'an City, Anhui Province (安徽省六安市霍邱县); Liulin County, Luliang City, Shanxi Province (山西省吕梁市柳林县); Mudan District, Heze City, Shandong Province (山东省菏泽市牡丹区); Yanping District, Nanping City, Fujian Province (福建省南平市延平区); Tongjiang County, Bazhong City, Sichuan Province (四川省巴中市通江县); Nanhua County, Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province (云南省楚雄彝族自治州南华县); Daxing District, Beijing (北京市大兴区); Zhaoyuan City, Yantai City, Shandong Province (山东省烟台市招远市).

sessions were important learning channels for this project. Notably, JICA organized six seminars with the bureau and two training sessions for local officials and personnel; in 2006 alone, JICA trained approximately 300 policymakers. Last but not least, Chinese officials went to Japan for training purposes (interview #1, #3, #26). Each year, 20 officials from the bureau and elsewhere were invited to visit Japan for about ten days to learn about the Japanese national pension system, for instance (interview #26, Lu 2009: 53).

During these training sessions and visits to Japan, Chinese officials and experts acquired detailed information about the pension schemes for Japanese peasants. In Japan, starting as early as 1961, peasants who had no previous access to social insurance became eligible for a national pension thanks to the establishment of a National Pension Law (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2009).<sup>7</sup> From then on, it was mandatory for Japanese peasants aged 20-60 to join the national pension scheme and receive a basic annuity from the age of 65 (World Bank 2005). In addition to the national pension scheme, peasants could also choose to join a “Farmers’ Pension Scheme” (Shen 2006), which was a funded and contribution-based pension plan that the Japanese government subsidized insurance premiums.<sup>8</sup> Once they discovered that Japan had established pension schemes for its peasants soon after recovering from World War II, despite the fact that it was still not a rich country, Chinese officials and experts concluded that China was also ready to establish a basic pension scheme for peasants (interview #26).

## Social Pensions as a Novel Component

As mentioned before, different rural pension models were tested in the eight collaboration areas. Notably, it was only the Daxing pilot that introduced a social or “basic pension” component starting in 2004. Other pilots, namely Zhaoyuan, Huoqiu, and Tongjiang, instead introduced local subsidies to support the individual account from 2005 onwards.

Among the two “flagship” pilots in Daxing and Zhaoyuan, Daxing achieved the best results in terms of coverage and generosity. Indeed, while Zhaoyuan had a higher participation rate (52.6%) than Daxing (20.9%) when the JICA project started, over time it was overtaken by Daxing. In September 2008, Daxing had achieved a participation rate of 86.0%, while Zhaoyuan had reached 70.3% (JICA Final report 2009: 80, 82). It should be remembered that these two pilots had different forms of subsidies. Daxing introduced a basic pension, non-contributory for those over 60. In opposition to introducing a basic pension, the local government of Zhaoyuan started to subsidize the rural pension by adding money to the individual accounts. Accordingly, the JICA experts, who had visited both

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7 Alongside Japan’s national pension (1st tier) available to all citizens, some groups of citizens have additional pensions (2nd tier), e.g. employee pensions (Kosei Nenkin) and mutual aid pensions (Kyosai Nenkin) for civil servants (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2009).

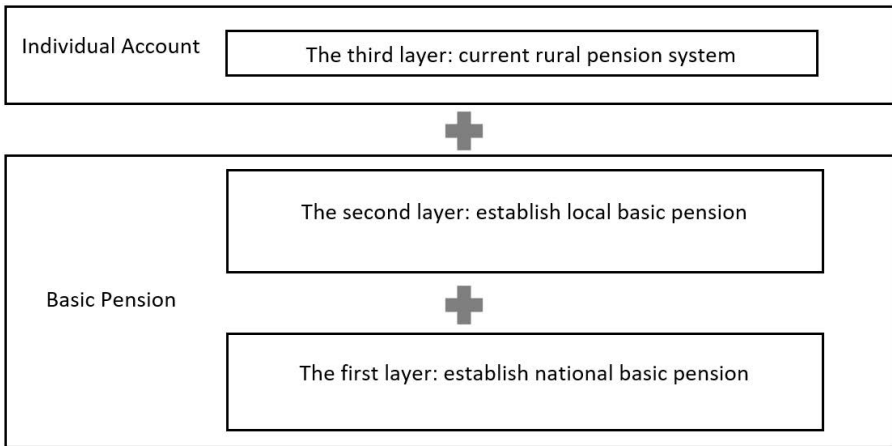
8 For more details, see: <https://www.nounen.go.jp/nounen/seido/tokucho.html>.

Daxing and Zhaoyuan extensively, strongly emphasized the superiority of the Daxing pilot (Lv 2006: 9, JICA final report 2009: 92).

Based on the Daxing experience, the Japanese side put forward a social pension reform proposal to the bureau. Key to this was the idea that if the Chinese government aimed at increasing the coverage rate to meet the 60% goal by 2020, then the bureau needed to learn from Daxing. JICA considered the Daxing model worthy of being promoted. This was seen as only a first step, however. While the Daxing basic pension component financed by the local government became the basis for all follow-up policy recommendations, JICA also highlighted a concern. With a view to the Japanese pension system, they highlighted the need for a “publicly financed social pension.” In other words, JICA was concerned that if the only premise of receiving the basic pension was participation in the rural pension system, which is based on an individual savings account, this might hurt the redistribution function of a public pension scheme in the long term. The system would exclude those who could not contribute (e.g. under 60 years old and too poor to contribute; JICA final report 2009: 100).

Since JICA had to consider the original demands made by the bureau — especially the premise of retaining individual accounts (JICA preliminary investigation report 2005: 10) — resulting from the many discussions with the bureau, from about the end of 2006 onwards JICA recommended a pension model consisting of a rather unusual mixture of basic pension and individual account (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: JICA Pension Model Proposal**



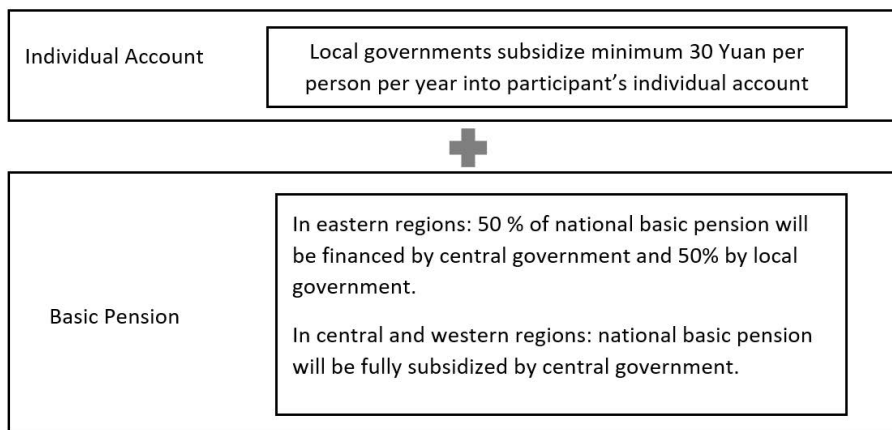
Source: JICA final report, 2009: 179, adapted for readability reasons.

The basic pension component would be established in rural areas at government expense. The first layer of this basic pension should be a unified national system

financed by the central government, and the payment standards should be determined by local economic and social conditions. The second layer should be paid for by the local government with payment standards depending on differing economic conditions in each province. The individual account (the third layer) resembled the old rural pension system in China.

The final NRPS design from 2009 (see Figure 2) comes very close to the JICA model proposal. It is a two-component pension scheme made of social pensions and individual accounts, in which the central government pays the basic pension (in full or 50%) to eligible participants. More concretely, the central government provided full subsidies to central and western provinces and 50% subsidies to the eastern provinces. Moreover, local governments had to subsidize every participant's individual account with a minimum of 30 yuan per person per year in case premiums were paid (State Council 2009, Dorfman et al. 2013).

**Figure 2: The 2009 NRPS design**



Source: Author compilation of the 2009 NRPS.

As evidenced especially in interviews with Chinese officials, the suggestions from JICA formed a basis from which the bureau could design the NRPS (Interview #25, #26). According to these interviews, introducing basic pensions on top of individual accounts was internally decided in 2007. In July 2007, at a meeting held by the MOLSS, the proposal to establish a new rural pension with basic pensions and personal accounts was adopted (Lu 2009: 53). Interviewees from governmental research institutes also noted that “the national pension in Japan had been extended to all citizens since the 1960s, including the farmers and fishermen. Chinese rural pension and urban residents’ pension schemes are very similar to Japan’s national pension: the central government pays some money to the peasants, though the level is relatively low. This Japanese characteristic is suitable for China” (Interview #7).

In a nutshell, the case of the NRPS illustrates a process of learning in which rather disparate components were synthesized. This process was influenced by international actors and ideas that helped stimulate a change of emphasis regarding individual accounts (and the idea of individual self-responsibility). In particular, this was driven by an understanding of the need to include a social pension component to make the system work more effectively. The following section illustrates how this synthesizing learning also included a reassessment of the importance of central government responsibility.

### **Central Government Responsibility**

Notably, none of the local experiments had any central government financial input (Huang 2009). In those pilots of which the JICA project was part, local fiscal revenues were utilized to finance subsidies (Interview #25). When Daxing started to introduce rural social pensions on top of the individual accounts, the district government took responsibility (JICA preliminary investigation report 2005: 100).

JICA noticed the active and “new” role of local government in Daxing and persuasively argued that “the district government learned from the failure [...] of the old rural pension that government [...] should take responsibility, in order to successfully launch the rural pension scheme” (JICA preliminary investigation report 2005: 99). Moreover, it argued that it was not adequate for local, e.g. city-level, governments to transfer revenues to the districts/counties that it manages. Instead, it should fall to “the central government together with the local government to financially support the rural pension scheme in order to achieve an equalized income redistribution system” (JICA final report 2009: 54). Indeed, the central government should take the essential responsibility of financing the basic pension, rather than local government, to achieve success in local rural pension expansion. In 2006, JICA used statistical data to calculate that a monthly basic pension of 50 yuan for the rural elderly over 60 years would be fiscally affordable for the central government. According to JICA, the total spending would take up 2.5% of the central government’s general public expenditures (JICA final report 2009: 183).

This argument was widely deemed highly plausible, convincing even long-term supporters of continuing with a revised individual account system. In November 2007, the then director of the bureau, Zhao Dianguo, concluded “the key to improving the rural pension is government subsidy. Without the government [Zhao means *central* government here], subsidies do not work. [...] It is time to pay attention to investment in improving people’s livelihoods [...] looking at international experience, it is time to establish a government subsidy. Japan started when their GNP was 560 USD per peasant, now in China we have reached 1,000 USD, so now it is the perfect time to introduce a government subsidy and establish the new pension scheme” (quoted in JICA final report 2009: 93). As one Chinese interviewee remarked, through the continuous interaction with JICA, “we learned

how the Japanese national government supports farmers through subsidies. This gives the Chinese central government new knowledge on the need to subsidize peasants” (Interview #26). The interviewee added: “Foreign experience for us is a benchmark. They have a unified system for everyone, but we realized that we could not establish a unified system because of our national conditions. But [...] foreign countries have never excluded peasants and farmers from their social protection. So, we should also treat peasants as equal citizens of society and establish a pension system for them, and ensure that people are protected in old age [...] This is a very big inspiration” (Interview #26).

Of course, it was not only interaction with JICA that led to successful knowledge diffusion and to synthesizing disparate ideas. In general, according to an official who was interviewed, the reasons the NRPS was implemented included the following: “The peasantry was demanding [the establishment of a functioning rural pension system]; society at large was calling [for a rural pension scheme]; at the grassroots level, we achieved progress by experimenting with different pilots; foreign countries had the necessary experience; and [central] government financial backing was possible” (Interview #26). While this argumentation is consistent with academic research findings (Huang 2020), more specifically, alongside the domestic factors that fostered learning, other international information sources helped to inform the bureau on the role of central government responsibility (also see Stepan and Lu 2016). Indeed, the bureau collected information on how governments around the world subsidize peasants’ pensions and summarized the experience of about 30 countries in the later phases of the experimentation process, identifying “that many countries support peasants’ pension schemes” (Interview #26). The results were reported to the State Council in an endeavor to secure support from the top leadership when the bureau came up against huge difficulties in convincing the Ministry of Finance to introduce social pensions. The bureau successfully solicited top leadership support from Zhang Dejiang, then deputy prime minister of the State Council in charge of MOHRSS. From 2008, Zhang became the most influential supporter of the bureau in negotiating with the Ministry of Finance. Zhang won over the then vice-minister of the Ministry of Finance, Wang Jun, and the Ministry of Finance agreed to support the basic pension. The bureau thus started working on the details of the NRPS with the Ministry of Finance, and around the end of 2008, the two ministries finally agreed on the policy details, including a central government subsidy of 55 yuan per peasant per month (Interview #25; for a detailed account of the bureaucratic conflicts, see Choi 2018). As evidenced by the introduction of the NRPS in 2009, the development of a detailed understanding on the role of central government subsidies was very important. As shown in Figure 3, in addition to central government subsidies, local governments also subsidized a minimum of 30 yuan per year, which went into the participant’s individual account as soon as they enrolled in the NRPS. This local government subsidy was defined as an “in-contribution” subsidy (*Rukou Bu* 入口补).



**Figure 3: Central and local government NRPS subsidies in 2009**

Subsidy	Target	Recipient	Central government	Local government
'In contribution' payment	Individual account component	Participants without economic hardship	No subsidies	Minimum 30 Yuan per person/year
		Participants with economic hardship	No subsidies	Full subsidy of premium (100 Yuan) and 30 Yuan per person/year
'In cash' payment (55 Yuan per person/month)	Social pension component	Central and Western provinces	100%	No subsidies
		Eastern provinces	50%	50%

Source: Adapted from Feng 2010.

### Conclusion

This article sought to contribute to a better understanding of the introduction and design of the NRPS. By tracing the role of one key international actor in particular, JICA, and its interaction with Chinese policymakers, the article has revealed that policy learning from abroad added to an ongoing domestic learning process, especially regarding the establishment of a non-contributory social pension component for those over the age of 60 and the central government taking fiscal responsibility. While the JICA project was not able to transfer all its preferences, e.g. its concept of a non-contributory pension system that is mandatory for all rural citizens, it nevertheless helped to stimulate a change of emphasis in the bureau regarding individual accounts and the idea of individual self-responsibility, as well as a reassessment of the importance of central government responsibility. Ultimately, then, Chinese policymakers did not just copy a ready-made policy model from another country, but rather synthesized disparate components and ideas into a new entity. The resulting NRPS was distinctive, comprising an individual account component, itself a blend of Singaporean productivist welfare and domestic ideas, *and* social pensions, stemming from ideas on state responsibility in welfare.

As already outlined, this form of policy learning among Chinese policymakers based on a synthesizing approach is not a new finding per se, but it complements findings in other policy areas such as social assistance and urban pensions (see Duckett 2018, Hu 2012, Leisering et al. 2017, Liu and Sun 2016, Stepan and Lu 2016, ten Brink et al. 2020). Although the research design of this article limits its generalizability, the identification of how rather disparate components were synthesized in the NRPS appears to have a more general character, thus resembling the findings of other research (Leisering et al. 2017, Liu and Sun 2016).

Moreover, complementing studies on transnational diffusion, mostly of Western origin, this article focuses on intra-Asian knowledge diffusion. In terms of intra-Asian neighboring effects, two driving forces are particularly relevant in the case studied here. First, while geographic proximity may have eased travel to Japan, a stronger driving force was interest in learning from the Japanese experience, i.e. of becoming the first Asian example of successful “modernization,” including in its welfare arrangements (Vogel 2019).<sup>9</sup> In China, after 1978, although it was initially often unacknowledged, Japan was seen as a *de facto* role model in social policy reform. Second, cultural similarities also played an important role. In line with findings on policy transfers from Singapore to China (Lim and Horesh 2016), Chinese policymakers and experts found it more palatable to draw on an “Asian” rather than a “Western” social policy model for inspiration, “especially when that Asian trajectory includes a positive record of incorporating Western best practices” (Lim and Horesh 2016: 1013; also see Vogel 2019: 332, and Mok et al. 2017). In other words, Chinese actors were interested in learning from the Japanese experience of adapting Western policies to non-Western contexts. This then also helps explain why the relationship with JICA remained relatively harmonious and stable over time, especially when it came to technical learning and mutual exchange of information and experience (this also holds for other fields, such as technological cooperation, infrastructure construction, and public health, see EMM 2019). In fact, as evidenced in the interviews for this article, the bureau was very pleased to have JICA as a long-term cooperation partner.

Further research is needed to disentangle the complex processes leading to rural pension reform before 2009 and its continued development after that, including the 2014 merger with the urban resident pension scheme to create the Urban-Rural Residents Social Pension Scheme (see footnote 1). For reasons of data accessibility and space, we were not able to reconstruct the detailed chain of developments with all its idiosyncrasies. More research is required, for instance, to be able to elaborate on the exact roles that intellectual exchange and technical assistance played in the aforementioned learning channels, which included on-site visits, seminars, training sessions, and visits to Japan. Such studies would benefit from including the perspective of transnational policy learning, and of synthesization in particular, as this may contribute to tracing the complex interaction of international influencing factors, including those of Asian origin, and domestic policymaking in China. While analyzing the domestic origins of policy change is of course essential, the aforementioned perspective may also help to enrich debates in China studies, such as the debate on the experimentation-based policy cycle (Heilmann 2008), in which international influencing factors have so far been under-researched. As this article shows, in the case being studied, international actors such as JICA have indeed influenced the policy cycle in a number of different ways, from providing local

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9 Vogel (2019) discusses several waves of learning between Japan and China, particularly from 600 to 838 BC, from 1895 to 1937, and since 1978.

advice during experimentation to stimulating a change of emphasis in national policymakers' views, which encouraged the latter to broaden their perspectives and ultimately informed their decisions.

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