

## Strategic Changes and Policy Choices in the Governance of China's Aging Society\*

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人口老龄化已成为中国社会的常态，而现有治理模式及制度安排仍缺乏结构化和系统性的反应与适应，相应治理研究亦遭遇困境。中国老龄社会的治理选择应基于“中国特征”并将其转化为“中国优势”，实现从碎片化管理向整体性治理、从聚焦于老年人口向强调全人口全生命周期的转变，并将政策调节逻辑从“以人口变动适应制度”转型为“以制度变革适应人口”。当前的老龄战略及政策布局应立足于我国人口态势和老龄化发展规律进行战略配置，在文化和制度传承的基础上更新理念和创新制度，在多元共治和可持续发展的基础上构建兼顾整体性和动态性的社会经济支持体系，加强对老年人群体演化和未来老龄社会发展的研判，并以此为基础选择政策调整乃至重构的切入点。

**关键词：**人口老龄化 整体性治理 公共政策 中国方案

Population aging has become normal in Chinese society, but the existing governance models and institutional arrangements still lack a structured and systematic response and adaptation, and the corresponding governance research has also encountered difficulties. Policy choices for the governance of China's aging society should be based on "Chinese characteristics," which should be developed into "Chinese advantages" in order to achieve a transformation from fragmented management to holistic governance and from a focus on the elderly population to an emphasis on the entire life cycle of the whole population, as well as the policy adjustment logic of changing from "making population change adapt to institutions" to "making institutional change adapt to population." The current strategy for an aging society and policy arrangements should conduct strategic allocation from the standpoint of China's demographic situation and the laws governing the development of aging. We need to recharge our ideas and innovate our systems on the basis of our cultural and institutional heritage and should set up a comprehensive and dynamic socioeconomic

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\* This study is part of both a key project (71490735) and a general project (71874031) of the National Natural Science Foundation of China. It is also a phased achievement of the Youth Fund project (18YJC840017) for Humanities and Social Sciences of the Ministry of Education, supported by the research and development fund of the School of Social Development and Public Policy, Fudan University.

support system based on pluralistic co-governance and sustainable development. We should also strengthen research on the evolution of the elderly population and the development of the aging society of the future, and on this basis select an entry point for policy readjustment and even reconstruction.

**Keywords:** aging population, holistic governance, public policy, Chinese solution

Population aging is a natural process in the development of modern society, and also an inevitable result of the transformation of the population reproduction model from “traditional” to “modern.” The “problems” or “challenges” it brings do not come entirely from the elderly or population aging itself, but from the contradiction caused by the mismatch between the changing demographic age structure and the current socioeconomic structure. It thus calls for adaptation in the form of the readjustment or even reconstruction of the governance mode and public policy. China entered an aging society in the traditional sense in 2000, but society as a whole harbors many misperceptions about it; it is habitually taken to be an abnormal demographic and social situation. A great number of studies also explore various ways to prevent or delay aging from a traditional logical framework, an approach that to a large extent uses the ideas and methods of the 20th century to deal with the challenges of the 21st, and which stretches governance space and policy effectiveness to the limit. We therefore urgently need to change the governance model and break free of the shackles of traditional theories and frameworks to produce a Chinese solution for the new era on the basis of updated concepts and institutional innovations.

## **I. Reflections on the Dilemma of Research on the Governance of an Aged Society**

China’s total population will continue to grow in the next decade, but the elderly population is growing faster than the total population. Recent population growth is mainly due to the peak in births during the 1950s and 1960s. At present, China’s elderly population (65+) is expected to peak (at over 400 million) between 2055 and 2060. Thereafter there will be a marked slowdown in the aging rate, which will enter what is known as the “high plateau period.” The share of the elderly population will remain high, at around 30 percent, until 2100. Between 2025 and 2030, aging within the elderly population itself will begin to become noticeable, with 2015 to 2035 being the period in which the rate of aging advances most rapidly and the aging population experiences the greatest fluctuation. It will also be the period when social dependency ratio is relatively low and the structure of the elderly population is relatively young. In particular, around 2020 a temporary weakening of “aging at the bottom” and

“aging at the top” will occur simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> Strategic and tactical reserves to address aging societies should be completed during this period. At present, the main obstacle to coping with the challenges of aging is not solely a matter of “getting old before getting rich,”<sup>2</sup> but rather one of “getting old while unprepared” or “getting old fast and getting ready slowly.” Existing governance models and institutional arrangements still do not have a structured and systematic response or adaptation to these demographic changes, and the corresponding governance research also has limitations.

First, a basic governance theory for China’s aging population has yet to be outlined. The deepening of China’s population aging process is basically in sync with the schedule of building a modern socialist power. The traditional social governance model and framework of institutional arrangements based on young people’s being an absolute majority need to be readjusted and reconstructed in line with the developmental trends of the aging society, and the governance of the aging society should be embedded in the public governance of the new era. The concept of “governance” itself features “issue-orientation” and “result-orientation,”<sup>3</sup> and specific governance systems will constantly evolve in line with changes in practical issues to adapt to the current state of social development. Although a preliminary macro-governance pattern ranging from the central government to local governments has taken shape for work on aging, the existing systems and policy arrangements related to the elderly are still not completely divorced from the “government-led” and “management and control”<sup>4</sup> mode of social management. Many problems have yet to be clarified. Given that a basic governance theory for dealing with China’s aging population has yet to be formulated and no specific governance system has been implemented, the overall governance pattern cannot be easily changed.

Second, the confused state of our present social cognition has led to a miscalculation of the risks of population and aging. Both in society and in research, there is still a market for “pessimistic” attitudes and the idea that the government has total power and total responsibility, and specious theoretical views bubble up from time to time. The majority of research tends to view aging as just being a problem of the elderly, that is, a matter

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1 The analysis and forecasting of different birth cohorts show that the population entering old age will significantly decrease between 2019 and 2021 (corresponding to the cohort born in 1959-1961). The proportion of children aged 0-14 born after the fertility policy was adjusted will still be on the rise during this period.

2 Many Western countries had established relatively sound basic social security systems before reaching the current level of China’s per capita GDP. For example, from 2009 to 2012, the level of China’s economic development was comparable to the 1965 level of twelve Western European countries (France, Germany, Britain, etc.), but all of these countries had established a basic universal social security system before 1960. See Chen Youhua, “Reflections on the Aging Population.”

3 Yan Jirong, “Social Change and Social Governance”; Li Qiang, “How to Understand ‘Innovative Social Governance Systems.’”

4 Dou Yupei, “From Social Management to Social Governance: Major Innovations in Theory and Practice.”

of providing financial support and public services to the present and the future elderly population. The resulting policy recommendations and related functional departments pay more attention to carrying out work on the elderly than to attending to the aging society as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Most of these phenomena are due to the increasing disconnection between the current social reality and traditional concepts, tools and frameworks, a mismatch that is especially reflected in the current standards of old age and aging. The definition of old age introduced by the United Nations in the mid-20th century relied on a single physiological age indicator<sup>6</sup> that formed the criterion for population aging, reflecting the limited life expectancy of the time and governments' old age pension considerations. Since this criterion was set up, human society has undergone tremendous changes in demography, health and the spectrum of disease,<sup>7</sup> as well as significant changes in economic and social relations. Therefore, the question of how to redefine old age/aging has been at the forefront of international academic concerns in the past decade. Once we free ourselves from the shackles of old concepts and old frameworks, we will gain a new understanding of trends in population aging.

Third, the existing research on the old age system and policy arrangements has not yet brought forth a Chinese solution. Other countries have no systematic experience from which China can learn how to deal with the challenges of a society that is aging before it becomes fully modern. In recent years, the Chinese government and Chinese academics have carried out a number of large-scale research projects on aging. Scholars in different fields and different disciplines have systematically explored the issue of aging in China and produced plentiful academic achievements. Specific countermeasures are relatively concentrated on demographic policies that focus on policy adjustments related to fertility, to the elderly or to a single sector.<sup>8</sup> There is still, to varying degrees, a tendency in these applied studies to regard aging as a “problem” or a “challenge.” They mostly focus on static single items or local policy issues and have yet to form a holistic framework based on Chinese thinking. Population aging has become the normal state of Chinese society, in a process that involves all stages of individual development and all levels of the population structure. It cannot be fundamentally reversed simply because the fertility policy has been adjusted, nor can its pressure be eliminated simply by optimizing aged welfare. Still less can it reverse the governance dilemma by relying on traditional “departmental policy” to carry on the fight on its own. Unlike developed Western countries, China entered the aging society in conditions of an underdeveloped economy, inadequate employment and imperfect social security. This requires that our response to aging seeks a more diversified overall governance model and policy

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5 Wu Yushao, “Some Perceptions on Active Coping with Population Aging.”

6 In 1956, the United Nations defined those aged 65 and above as the elderly population. Since then, on the basis of the situation in developing countries, it has put forward two criteria for the elderly population—60 and 65.

7 Sergi Scherbov and Warren C. Sanderson, “New Approaches to the Conceptualization and Measurement of Age and Aging.”

8 Peng Xizhe and Hu Zhan, “China’s Population Aging from the Perspective of Public Policy.”

system. China's unique political system, the size of its population and economy, its cultural traditions and family models are features that we must pay attention to in forming a holistic response plan. The concerted effect of changes in China's population reproduction mode, improvement in the state governance mode, changes in people's lifestyles and the progress of science and technology will also inevitably affect the design of the state governance mode and institutional policy related to aging.

In addition, existing studies and practices fail to fully grasp the uncertainty of the processes of demographic and social change. Governance is a dynamic process that constantly adapts to the current state of social development and institutional change. China's population aging is still developing and undergoing sharp changes, and its governance process still has a series of "uncertainties" to be studied and assessed. Specifically, the following four aspects deserve special attention:

*1. The total labor supply is beginning to decline, and the employment structure and model are facing structural changes*

According to traditional concepts, China's labor supply has already reached an inflection point of decline. The total potential labor force will show a continuous downward trend and its structure will be older,<sup>9</sup> but in the short to medium term, China will still have a sufficient labor supply. Given China's economic transformation and the optimization and the upgrading of the industrial structure, the demand for low-end labor in labor-intensive industries is falling, while the demand for high-end labor in capital- and technology-intensive industries is rising. The mismatch in the structure of labor supply and demand will be the main contradiction in the labor market for some time to come. At the same time, technological advances such as artificial intelligence and the Internet of things are attacking the traditional model of employment. This kind of technological destruction will eliminate some traditional occupations but also alleviate future labor shortages<sup>10</sup> and generate new employment modes and occupations. The diversification and layering of employment modes will become more and more common. In this context, it is certainly important to strengthen investment in traditional labor education and accelerate the transfer of rural labor, but the effect of a series of more complex issues, such as the development and utilization of elderly human resources, the relocation and re-education of employees in some industries and even the reconstruction of the labor market, will gain prominence.

*2. Regional differences in aging add complexity but also give policy room to move*

The regional differences in the aging of China's population are mainly evident in a marked

9 The working-age population, measured traditionally as being between the ages of 15 and 59, is expected to shrink by about 300 million this century, including a decline of 200 million over the next twenty years. The proportion of the working-age population aged 45 and over will show a steady increase.

10 See Carl B. Frey and Michael A. Osborne, "The Future of Employment: How Susceptible Are Jobs to Computerisation?"; Anton Korinek and Joseph E. Stiglitz, "Artificial Intelligence and Its Implications for Income Distribution and Unemployment."

“east-west echelon” and “urban-rural inversion.”<sup>11</sup> These are closely related to the differences in the level of economic and social development and the acceleration of urbanization. At present, the population transfer between urban and rural areas is the leading factor in the aging of China’s rural population;<sup>12</sup> at the same time, this transfer will effectively reduce the share of the elderly population of permanent residents in urban areas. These factors will continue to develop during the promotion of China’s new-type urbanization strategy, with aging pressure being transmitted to the central and western regions (mainly rural areas) through population mobility. This will not only add to the complexity of dealing with an aging population at the national level, but also effectively extend the demographic dividend window for cities and towns, especially in the south-east, giving policy room to move.

*3. The change in family configuration will increase the uncertainty of future institutional arrangements for provision for the aged: opportunities and risks will coexist*

Whether in China or abroad, home-based care is the most important form of aged care; to a greater or lesser extent, all elderly people can access aged care services through the family or the community. As family size diminishes, the continuous simplification of the family structure, the structural transformation of the way of life of the elderly and the emergence of a large number of non-traditional families mean that the traditional functions of providing for the aged and caring for the young have frayed in the modern family, that are “growing old with one or few children.” On the other hand, traditional Chinese family ethics and culture still have a strong cohesion. The influence of modern science and technology on daily life has greatly expanded the family’s spatial connections, and the traditional mutual assistance network among family members (mainly parents and children) continues to exist in a new form.<sup>13</sup> This is an indispensable and important pillar of China’s aged care strategy and even of China’s aged society. Since a systemic family policy is still absent, these developments will make future institutional arrangements very uncertain.

*4. The health level of the elderly population is improving, but its policy value remains to be explored*

In 2010, the male and female elderly population (60+) in China had a remaining life expectancy of 20.04 and 23.14 years respectively. Their self-care life expectancy was 17.22

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11 Data from the sixth population census shows that from 2000 to 2010, the share of the urban elderly in China rose from 6.36 percent to 7.68 percent, an increase of 1.3 percentage points. In rural areas, the figure rose from 7.10 percent to 10.06 percent, an increase of nearly three percentage points. Over the past decade, the proportion of the aging population in rural areas increased by 1.3 times as much as that in urban areas. Whether considered in terms of the level or the pace of aging, aging in the countryside is far higher than in the city.

12 Zhu Qin, “Quantitative Analysis of the Impact of Urbanization on the Aging of China’s Urban and Rural Population.”

13 Peng Xizhe and Hu Zhan, “The Contemporary Transition of the Chinese Family and the Reconstruction of Family Policy”; Hu Zhan and Peng Xizhe, “China’s Family Policies in the Context of Family Changes.”

years, and the average disability-free survival time was around 2.53 years,<sup>14</sup> representing a steady increase from 2000. The disability rate of the elderly population in different surveys ranges from 10.48 percent to 13.31 percent,<sup>15</sup> but the proportion of the elderly with moderate or severe disability does not exceed three percent. Increased life expectancy will bring benefits as well as costs and pressures: the “cost of success” and even the “failure of success.”<sup>16</sup> However, existing institutional arrangements have not made the adjustments required to improve the health level of the country’s elderly population and have failed to make effective use of the benefits of increased life expectancy or provide a timely response to the pressures it may bring. In particular, this reflects the lagging development of the social security system and the science and technology of aging, which may lead to a “longevity risk.”<sup>17</sup>

## II. Changes in Governance Thinking on Population Aging

Socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era. Accompanying the transformation of major social contradictions have been comprehensive changes in economic development, the level of science and technology, and the way people live and work. The path of social development is being upgraded from “social management” to “social governance.” The course of China’s aging population is in line with this epoch-making reform. However, due to inertia and immediate bottlenecks, we have not yet fully realized a governance pattern for the aging population. To actively cope with this issue, we must break away from the path dependence of “putting new wine in old bottles,” and abandon partial and static adjustments to the governance model or the policy adjustment approach, so as to rethink the strategic layout of overall governance from a dynamic global perspective.

Specifically, governance ideas for population aging should achieve the following transformation:

### *1. From emphasizing “Chinese characteristics” to constructing “Chinese advantages”*

How to deal systematically with an aging society is a new and urgent issue for the

14 Zhang Wenjuan and Wei Meng, “Estimating the Level and Duration of Disability among the Elderly in China.”

15 The China Urban and Rural Elderly Population Tracking Survey of 2010 showed the highest disability rate for the elderly population, at 13.31 percent. The China Health and Longevity Tracking Survey of 2011 had the lowest rate, at 10.48 percent. According to the sixth population census, the disability rate of the elderly population in 2010 was 11.20 percent. See Zhang Wenjuan and Wei Meng, “Disability Level of the Chinese Elderly: Comparison from Multiple Data Sources.”

16 “Cost of success” refers to the fact that the improvement of human life expectancy (“success”) has both benefits and costs. For example, an improvement in the survival rate of elderly people in poor health will be a severe challenge to long-term social care and the quality of family life. A more pessimistic theory is that success in extending the lives of the elderly and infirm will lead to higher disability among the aged, in a “failure of success.” See Yi Zeng, Qiushi Feng, Therese Hesketh, Kaare Christensen and James W. Vaupel, “Survival, Disability in Activities of Daily Living, Physical and Cognitive Functioning among the Oldest-Old in China: A Cohort Study.”

17 This generally refers to the financial risk of individuals or groups living longer than expected.



whole world. We can indeed draw on the many successful experiences of countries with earlier aging. The fact that in recent years, China's scholars and government departments' consultative construction and policy measures for aged care have mostly been based on the experience of these countries is an inevitable choice in the early stages of China's aging research. However, transformation of the governance model and reform of the institutional system are a continuous process. Countries share some common trends, but they also show marked differences and individuality that cannot simply be copied and adopted. China's national conditions and the peculiarities of the times mean that a China solution to the aging issue must be based on Chinese thinking. China has a strong and stable government and its organizational and resource allocation capabilities make it flexible and innovative in dealing with complex issues such as pensions (for example, the transfer of state assets to social security funds). This is a concentrated embodiment of our institutional advantages in meeting the challenges of an aging society. China's advantages as a major country and the variety of its regions provide a stage for the implementation of macro-strategies for the governance of an aging society and offer great flexibility and ample room for policy development in the allocation of resources. We also have the time-honored cultural traditions of looking after the old and showing them filial piety and respect. These traditions, passed down for thousands of years, constitute an important foundation for the continuation of Chinese civilization and lay a foundation for the ethical values of Chinese-style aged care, greatly expanding aged care resources and even coping with the resource configuration of an aging society. This is not all: the family has always been the backbone of Chinese society. Chinese families' demands for intergenerational responsibility and equity will maintain social stability while absorbing the costs of social transformation. This will provide us with unique advantages and resources to cope with an aging society, and is also relevant to the question of whether current Chinese society can successfully complete a historical transformation from tradition to modernity that is premised on aging. The governance plan for China's aging population should undoubtedly be based on these "Chinese characteristics," which it should transform into "Chinese advantages."

## 2. From "fragmented management" to "holistic governance"

The governance model and policy system for dealing with the aging of China's population is not an isolated set of strategies or countermeasures but an organic part of China's overall development strategy. They should be given more thought and planned deployment in the context of integration into the overall national development framework. This requires in the first place that we break through the inherent constraints of the traditional institutional mechanisms. Currently, the various department-led public policies and management dealing with aging tend to be fragmented and hollowed out.<sup>18</sup> The ranking of the various policies on aging in the developmental sequence of different departments and their determination of policy priorities targets all depend on the way the relevant departments understand

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18 Zheng Bingwen, "Sixty Years of China's Social Security System: Achievements and Lessons."



aging affairs, not to mention the overlap in their powers and responsibilities and the policy friction between them. This makes it difficult to carry out the basic task of transforming the governance model and public policy for an aging society and to address the underlying problems. The impact of aging has permeated every aspect of Chinese society, presenting a set of unstructured public affairs issues that cross functional boundaries. Effective governance is hard to achieve via the traditional mode of managing government business, involving as it does the detailed division of labor, clear hierarchies, a specialist orientation and administrative drivers. Therefore, we need to draw on the strategic perspective of holistic governance<sup>19</sup> to adjust and even reconstruct the current public policy and public management system that we implement and operate in order to solve the aging problem. At present, China's government sector reform, development of regional linkages, inter-departmental discussions and coordination mechanisms and grassroots governance innovations all partly reflect the idea of holistic governance,<sup>20</sup> but in the field of aging, research and practice undertaken from the perspective of holistic governance is still relatively weak.

We believe that current conditions call for a particular emphasis on the holistic governance of the aging society, creating synergy through the integration on this basis of the resources of different social subsystems. On the one hand, realizing the holistic governance of the aging society requires that we find and overcome the “gaps” and “loopholes” in the relevant public policies and management practices. Amplifying policy synergy will allow us to form an effective governance network. This requires that the government forms cross-functional and interdepartmental governance institutions or takes joint action through self-adjustment and even reconstruction. On the other hand, holistic governance requires strong government, strong markets and a strong society (including families and communities), as well as basic acknowledgement, trust and cooperation between them in the relevant public affairs.<sup>21</sup> Human needs are met through a variety of channels or systems, and public policy must promote and coordinate the common roles of different resources rather than relying solely on a project, a sector or a social system to assume the responsibility.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, in the context of the integration and cooperation of multiple governance bodies, we believe that valuing and supporting the family will become an important feature of China's response to the aging population.<sup>23</sup> Emotional and psychological satisfaction through the family cannot be replaced by any professional social service. Although the government, the market and other providers of social welfare will bear increasing responsibility for the

19 Diana Leat and Kimberly Seltzer, *Towards Holistic Governance: The New Reform Agenda*.

20 Jing Yijia and Chen Ruoqing, “The Development and Management Innovation of Home Care Systems in China: A Perspective of Coordination.”

21 Stephen P. Osborne, Zoe Radnor and Greta Nasi, “A New Theory for Public Service Management? Toward a (Public) Service-Dominant Approach.”

22 Zhang Xiulan and Xu Yuebin, “Building China's Family Policy for Development.”

23 Hu Zhan and Peng Xizhe, “Household Changes in Contemporary China: A Census-Based Analysis”; Peng Xizhe and Hu Zhan, “The Contemporary Transition of the Chinese Family and the Reconstruction of Family Policy.”

elderly, any aging policy that omits family responsibilities is defective; not only does it fail to provide the elderly with comprehensive welfare, but it also places an excessive burden on society. Family ethics is rooted in China's cultural soil; the key lies in effective government and policy guidance and support. In particular, strengthening the family's responsibility for the old as the population ages and children are few does not simply mean transferring this state or social responsibility to the family, but rather making clear the boundaries of the actors concerned, expanding or continuing the function of the family, and integrating its resources and functions in a framework in which different social systems cooperate. In other words, the welfare support different governance actors provide to individuals belongs to different forms and levels, and they cannot simply be substituted for one another.<sup>24</sup>

3. *From focusing on "the elderly" to emphasizing "the entire life cycle of the whole population"*

Strategic thinking and governance choices for coping with aging can be roughly divided into two categories. One is the question of adapting and adjusting the various institutions and policy arrangements in a society with a large elderly population in such a way as to realize the common development of the whole population and the maximization of social welfare; the other is mainly a question of meeting the elderly population's needs for economic security, medical care, psychological comfort, etc. The need to integrate these two categories of governance issues underscores the importance of the idea of "the entire life cycle of the whole population." To some extent, this idea is also the rightful meaning of "holistic governance." In emphasizing "the entire life cycle of the whole population," we are emphasizing the sustainability of the governance model and related policy systems for the elderly and the principle of intergenerational equity. Focusing too much on providing economic security and public services for the elderly population will not only cause unnecessary social panic but will also fail to meet the concept of balanced development across generations. The enormous inertia of population aging determines that the coping strategy of an aging society is not an emergency strategy; we still need to consider sustainable economic and social development. Although some emergency measures focusing on the elderly population are very necessary to alleviate immediate short-term pressures, the aging strategy should take into full account the needs and values of the population of all ages. It should seek a developmental policy model that integrates the functions of redistribution and production and should balance short-term emergency goals with a medium- and long-term development strategy while reducing the cost of social operations.

At the same time, the "aging problem" is by no means "the problem of the elderly." The different stages of life at different ages involve interrelated and overlapping processes. Only by considering each stage of individual development and each level of the demographic structure can we strengthen the foundation of social policy design for the aged. The World

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24 Donald Cox and George Jakubson, "The Connection between Public Transfers and Private Interfamily Transfers."

Health Organization (WHO) has proposed “healthy aging” and “active aging” as the strategic goals of coping with an aging society. Academic circles have also put forward such strategic propositions as “productive aging” and “successful aging,”<sup>25</sup> which to some extent reflect the concept of “the entire life cycle of the whole population.”

4. *From “making population change adapt to institutions” to “making institutional change adapt to population”*

A country’s population plays an important role in its social and economic development and its political and cultural transmission. Its huge population is one of China’s most important basic conditions. However, it would be biased to overemphasize the “dominant or decisive influence” of population factors on China’s social development, and on this basis form a governance model and policy adjustment logic of “making population change adapt to institutions” and habitually achieve institutional goals by intervening in population development. In fact, the population development of a country or region is an extremely complex process, one that is interwoven and symbiotic with the socioeconomic system and is far from being covered by the generalizations of causal linear logic. Nonetheless, at present many researchers working on the complex issue of social governance for the aged still cleave to the policy adjustment logic of “making population change adapt to institutions.” This is the logic of most policy studies, such as those that hope to curb the growth of an aging society by adjusting the fertility policy and encouraging childbirth among people of childbearing age,<sup>26</sup> or those that seek to maintain the sustainability of the pension system by delaying retirement and thus extending the working life of the employed population. With the long-term decline in fertility rates, the structural changes in modes and patterns of employment, the development of science and technology and the transformation of people’s way of life, it has become increasingly difficult to meet the requirements of traditional institutional arrangements by changing the population factor. The existing mode of policy adjustment which makes “population change adapt to institutions” essentially equates to forcing a society in which the elderly population is the main body to continue operating in the Procrustean bed of an institutional framework and mechanisms designed around the young. In the context of the new era, we need to make a rapid change in our thinking so as to gradually transform the governance mode and policy adjustment logic of the aged so as to make “institutional change adapt to population.” In the course of adapting to the aging population, the contradiction between the existing system and the changing age structure of the population should be

25 See WHO, *Active Ageing: A Policy Framework*; John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn, “Successful Aging”; Lin Ka and Lü Haoran, “Four Ideas of Aging Strategies and Their Policy Implications.”

26 It should be noted that we need to make timely adjustments to the fertility policy in line with trends in population development in order to cope with the aging population. Changes in people’s reproductive behavior can slow the pace of aging and smooth the inertial impact on society and the economy caused by the fluctuations in birth numbers, gaining time for future generations’ handling of the aging problem. However, adjustments to fertility policy cannot on their own fundamentally reverse the process of population aging.

coordinated through policy integration, institutional innovation and reconstruction.

At the same time, the governance model and policy adjustment logic of “making population change adapt to institutions” are constrained by the existing mindset—if we analyze the social forms of the post-industrial age information age with the thinking of the industrial age, our judgment of aging will often be negative, and the countermeasures we undertake will mainly be short-term and unproductive. At present, there is a widespread anxiety and fear about aging in society, based on the assumption that once an individual or group passes the age of 60 or 65, they will immediately undergo a transformation from “producer” or “manpower” to “dependents” or “burdens.” This one-sided focus on the physiological definition of “old people” and “aging” ignores the diversity, levels, stages and dynamic nature of aging, as well as the huge individual and group differences. This is not only because of people’s traditional concept of “aging,” but also because the design and operation of the existing policy systems related to aging are still based on traditional evaluation indicators and policy tools. Moreover, given the huge regional differences seen in China’s unbalanced development, traditional indicators cannot reflect the real impact of aging on a particular region, and still less can they reflect its resources and capacity to cope with aging. In view of this, it is necessary to redefine and reposition “old age” and “aging” to scientifically reflect the dynamic process of individual and population aging, cast off the shackles of existing aging research, change the traditional bag of policy intervention tricks, and alleviate the public’s unnecessarily pessimistic attitude towards aging. Only when public policy no longer automatically equates “old age” and “aging” with “burden” and “challenge” will we truly have a beneficial environment for actively coping with aging.

### **III. Strategic Deployment Points and Possible Policy Options**

At present, the series of policies and measures issued by the state to cope with the immediate short-term pressures of aged care are undoubtedly very necessary. However, given that an aging population has become the normal state of our society, we should not only focus on emergency strategies for the next five to ten years, but also lay a foundation for medium and long-term development strategies. We believe that the following four issues should be given priority in the current disposition of aging strategies.

First, strategic allocation should be based on the state of China’s population and the laws governing the emergence and development of aging. From the perspective of demographic research, an active response to China’s population aging should follow the laws of population development and take heed of the following three stages. 1) From 2020 to 2025, the future social dependency ratio will be relatively low and the structure of the elderly population will be relatively young. During this period, the temporary phenomena of “aging at the bottom” and “aging at the top” will weaken simultaneously. This is the strategic reserve and policy implementation period for coping with aging. 2) From 2030 to 2035, the social dependency

ratio will still be relatively low and the structure of the elderly population will still be relatively young, but the dependency ratio will have been significantly tilted toward the elderly population and the baby boomers of the 1950s will have begun to enter the stage of old age. This is the period of aged policy adaptation and strengthening. 3) From 2050 to 2055, the dependency ratio will be more than twice the current level, and the presence of an enormous population of the elderly means that their share of the population will reach its peak (2055-2060). Regional balance also needs to be securely dealt with during this period, one that is crucial for coping with the aging population and finally consolidating the foundation for the continued healthy and sustainable development of a Chinese society premised on aging.

Second, we should recharge our ideas and innovate our institutions on the basis of cultural and institutional inheritance. At the heart of actively handling the aging population is the construction of a “positive view of aging” across the whole society. At present, many problems in the governance of the aging society are rooted in traditional social concepts centered on the young and middle-aged. Cultural and institutional policy arrangements that have not adapted to the development of the aging society have led to intentional or unintentional exclusion or even discrimination against the elderly in social and economic life. This not only damages their interests but also leads to a great waste of the human capital they represent. In addition, traditional ideas tend to equate “old” with “weak.” This not only represents the lack of a modern interpretation of bioethics, but is also detrimental to the establishment of the concept of self-improvement of the aged and their ability to use their talents. It nourishes the soil of pessimism and the idea that the government has total power and total responsibility. We should therefore establish the principle of “age equality” at the level of systems and policy arrangements; redefine “old” and “aging” on the basis of respecting cultural tradition; and emphasize the concept of age equality in the reform and development of our society, economy and culture. We should remove the inherent obstacles and discrimination of the existing governance structure and realize the equitable participation and common development of different age groups.

Third, we should construct a social and economic support system that encompasses both integrity and dynamism on the basis of pluralistic co-governance and sustainable development. Traditional research and practice tend to emphasize the provision of greater social and economic support for the elderly, but in the social context of the normalization of aging, we must extricate ourselves from this fixed attitude. We should mobilize and integrate the roles of different actors in the social system, including government, communities, families, social organizations and enterprises, and coordinate the needs of different groups and generations and balance their welfare on the basis of concern for the overall balance of the social and economic system and the revitalizing of aging societies through innovative institutional and policy arrangements, particularly employment and industrial policies.

Fourth, we must attach importance to and strengthen research on the evolution of the elderly population and the future development of aged society. The aging of China’s society

is taking place in a special period of population and social transformation and economic transition. This significant change in the age structure of the population will accompany the whole process of China's modernization. What are the distinctive features and rule changes of China's future aged population? What are its internal heterogeneity and behavioral differences? What will be the shape and evolution of the future aging society? How will the huge elderly population reshape the social, economic and even cultural and political landscape of the future? These problems not only go beyond existing historical experience, but also bring much uncertainty to the governance of China's aging population. At the same time, the scientific and technological revolution represented by information technology is profoundly changing existing production and lifestyles, industrial patterns, social structure and political forms, and its influence on the behavioral pattern of the elderly and the design space of aging policy merits strategic attention. On the one hand, the aging process of China's population is synchronous with the rapid development of information technology. The development of such high-tech industries can effectively improve the degree of social "aging but not feeble," lower the physiological threshold for elderly self-care, and promote the transformation of the production mode and social role of the elderly. Undoubtedly, more policy support is needed in the future. On the other hand, the development of science and technology, and especially the upgrading of artificial intelligence and robot technology, will alleviate the plight of the declining labor force in the aging society and effectively improve the level of productivity. However, this will also constitute a structural blow to the traditional job market and further affect the resource configuration of the whole society as it copes with the aging population. Artificial intelligence, the Internet of things and life sciences are changing modes of production and ways of life in the world of today and tomorrow. At the same time, they are also substantially reconstructing our strategic setup and policy instruments for dealing with an aging society.

In the light of the current situation, we believe that the following aspects are unavoidable policy themes for our strategic deployment in the near future.

*1. Redefining "old age," expanding the space for policy response and optimizing the social environment*

The nature and connotations of aging policy depend on the definition of "old" and "aging." The traditional definition of old age makes it hard to fully assess the real impact of the aging society, and these misperceptions mean that many strategies for dealing with aging suffer from bias. At present, we need to re-examine "old age" and "aging," break down the focus on physiological age of the single traditional static standard, set standards for definition and a basis for classification that can accurately reflect population dynamics and social reality, and adjust the relevant institutional arrangements and policy systems on this basis. Scholarly attempts to address this issue have laid a sound academic foundation for narrowing the boundaries and extensions of the concept of "old people." On the basis of academic research, statistical departments and government agencies involved with the elderly should conduct



appropriate follow up and develop an official definition and indicator system. At present, in the context of the release of big policy ideas about delaying retirement, the government could first try out changing the concept of “retirement age” into “the minimum age for receipt of a full aged pension,” uncoupling the concept of “retirement” from the image of “senescence” and having the relevant policies interact to redefine old age and aging. In fact, given the technological development and changing lifestyles of modern society, the rules for allocating pensions, as a kind of public resource, will become ever more precise and detailed. At the same time, the space for lengthening people’s effective working life is also shrinking, so the right (or partial right) to “withdraw from the labor market” should gradually be made an individual choice. This will support the elderly population’s relatively independent participation in the process of social development and their sharing in the fruits of social development. Another important function of the redefinition is to change people’s traditional ideas and upgrade their culture, so as to create a positive social atmosphere for aging. Government and society should actively guide popular participation in discussions on the response to aging, eliminate over-interpretation of aging, and lessen unnecessary worries and even fears about the aging society. Moreover, the taboo on death in Chinese culture gives rise to problems related to aging and death, such as insufficient popular participation and conservative system design. Academic circles and the government need to guide the populace to face bioethics squarely and pay attention to “good births” and “good deaths” simultaneously. The relevant majors in higher education and professional/vocational education should set up courses related to the ethics of life and death and strengthen social propaganda and education.

*2. Establishing a normal overall planning mechanism lays the necessary administrative foundation for the realization of holistic governance*

At present, a large number of government agencies, ranging from ministries and commissions to local governments, are still involved in the governance of aging, reflecting the state’s emphasis on aging work. However, this can lead to the multiplication of approvals, rash initiatives, duplicated construction and disorderly competition, as well as difficulties in policy integration. The existing coordination mechanisms for aging need to be innovated and upgraded to further deepen and improve their effectiveness, so as to carry out the necessary overall planning for promoting and realizing the holistic governance of our aging society. It is therefore it is necessary to trawl through all levels of government, all kinds of agency and all regions to identify the inputs, connotations of their offices, and policy accumulation and development goals with regard to the governance of aging, with a view to setting up a sound system of information exchange and communication, resource inputs and common enjoyment, adjustment of powers and responsibilities, decision-making consultation and participation, policy support and network construction, and administrative mechanisms for policy evaluation of cross-sectoral and cross-regional coordination as a whole.

One example is the construction of a system of community aged care services. At present,



the government has invested a substantial amount in this area. However, due to the limitations of fragmented vertical and horizontal responsibilities, the management of these services has had trouble linking up and joining forces; resource wastage and resource shortages coexist; integrated resource utilization is inefficient; and information fragmentation is a big problem. At the same time, the aged care service industry is faced with the problems of a heavy investment, little room for operating profit, a long recovery cycle, a lack of motivation on the part of market entities and social forces for involvement in the field of community aged care services, and these services' inadequate level of market and social participation and low degree of professionalization. It is therefore necessary, on the basis of funneling resources downward and merging data, to realize the effective integration of community aged care resources and the accurate linking up of service supply and demand, so as to break down fragmentation and enhance community projection. At present, the promotion of various urban community initiatives such as a "time savings bank," "old partner plan," "service stamps for the elderly" and other practices in social work, as well as some experiments in "village-run aged care," mostly does not need a heavy government policy or funding input. At the same time as they meet the immediate needs of the elderly and improve the efficiency of related work, these initiatives also perform propaganda and educational functions and are of great value as a means of spreading and supporting this work. The integration, coordination and unified management of government investment in the community alongside private resources is undoubtedly a vivid annotation to holistic governance.

### *3. Reinterpreting the meaning of "family planning" and accelerating the lifting of restrictions on fertility*

At present, the main contradiction in China's demographic change has shifted from having too large a population to having a rapidly aging population structure. Future risks to population development are concentrated on the "two lows": a low fertility rate and low fertility intentions. The continuous reduction in the population of child-bearing age has thus become a forgone conclusion. As aging intensifies, a fertility rate that is too low for too long will make any institutional arrangements hard to sustain. It is therefore necessary to reinterpret the basic national fertility policy, changing it from "births directed by policy" to "autonomous family planning decisions" as soon as possible. The population strategy for the new era should not be family planning in the narrow sense, which determines that "It's good to just have one," or "It's good to just have two," and still less is it the same as "limiting births" and "controlling births." It is still "planned," that is, it urges the couple to make their own decisions on family planning according to their individual conditions and family circumstances and their assessment of the socioeconomic environment, including the number of children they have and the spacing between them. This emphasizes citizens' rights rather than civic duty. In the next decade or so, the number of people of childbearing age in China (especially those in the peak childbearing cohort) will decrease rapidly, providing a favorable window for the rapid adjustment of family planning policy. Further adjustments will

effectively curb the sharp decline in the number of births and flatten the excessive volatility of the demographic structure. At the same time, it will reduce the administrative costs incurred by the government in suppressing births and make the populace feel they are getting something out of government policy. It must be pointed out that although the basic trend of population aging cannot be reversed by lifting the limit on the number of children, doing so will create more favorable conditions for China's long-term balanced population development and will buy time for future generations.

At the same time, the government should, at the appropriate time, promulgate family-friendly birth policies to optimize the childbearing and child-rearing environment of family nurture; establish the policy stance of "responsible family parenting;" support families so that they are better able to assume the responsibility of child-rearing and nurturing; and block the intergenerational transmission of poverty and ignorance, so that people of childbearing age will be able to have more children, will dare to have them and will wish to have them. This will bring up further reproductive potential and achieve the mid- and long-term goals of population policy. One of the goals of this policy adjustment is to increase reserves of human capital. Good family functioning is the primary environment for the formation and development of high-quality human capital. Fertility policy and family policy should pay special attention to the effect of coping with the challenges of aging.

#### *4. Strengthening research on intergenerational transfer payments and increasing investment in the working population*

The peak age for labor income in China went from 40 in 2002 to 30-32 in 2007-2009,<sup>27</sup> with the increase in the labor income of the younger labor force being significantly higher than that of the middle-aged and elderly labor force.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, thanks to the economic development of the last thirty years, the latter have accumulated certain assets (such as real estate) in the course of this process, which later generations have no chance of matching. This kind of intergenerational difference in income and assets will exist for a long time in the future. Although young people now enjoy higher incomes, their accumulated assets do not equal those of the parental generation. As higher education expands and the level of urbanization rises, together with the upgrading of the industrial structure due to scientific and technological progress, balancing the relationship between income and assets on the basis of inter-generational harmony will create space and time for coping with the financial pressures of the aging society in the future.

At present, the old age pension scheme implemented by most countries, seen in terms of the real economy, is planned on the basis of reliance on future generations' care for the

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27 Ke Shen, Feng Wang and Yong Cai, "Patterns of Inequalities in Public Transfers by Gender in China."

28 Two important factors are the large increase in the proportion of young workers with university education and the large-scale transfer of young rural workers to urban non-agricultural industries with higher incomes.

aged. The material basis of growth in the old age pension has always been an increase in the employed population of the next generation and the improvement of labor productivity. China's current social insurance system is facing "systemic aging";<sup>29</sup> forward-looking system design and research is urgently needed to ensure that its social security system will be sustainable and balanced in the long term in the course of profound aging. There can be no doubt that investing in human capital and promoting industry upgrading should become one of the most important institutional arrangements in China's aging response: its "replacing quantity with quality" development strategy. To achieve these goals and provide conditions for institutional innovation and change, the government should use the "demographic dividend" it has already harvested to invest more in sectors such as education, health, and welfare that are directly concerned with the labor productivity of the future population, and should promote the establishment of lifelong learning in the true sense. This will ensure that the labor force will always have a level of knowledge and skills that are attuned to social and economic development, thus truly putting into practice the strategic goal of "active aging."

*5. Envisaging a diversity of employment patterns and formulating industry plans suited to the development of an aging society*

The development of the Internet of things, big data, high-speed rail, artificial intelligence, robotics and other technologies, as well as the innovative economic forms of the network economy, the sharing economy, etc., will have a tremendous impact on traditional economic activities, economic organizations and employment models, and may result in the restructuring of the existing labor and employment market in the next twenty to thirty years. This provides a great opportunity for the "re-employment" of the middle-aged and elderly workforce and the development of industries for the old. The initial emergence of these factors is already visible: elder finance, aged care and intelligent nursing are creating a large number of new careers and positions. Some jobs do not even belong under the traditional concept of employment, and exist in forms that are still "unconventional" today. Existing statistical methods and calibrations are unable to accurately reflect the realities of the current forms of social employment.

Against this background, public policy should involve the roles of government, market and society as a whole; the creation of a favorable institutional and policy environment; active promotion of the rapid development of industries for the elderly, in order to provide the great number of middle-aged and elderly workers with jobs suited to their physical and mental characteristics; and making use of their human resources and social capital in a way that avoids competition for young workers. It should be pointed out that although the cost of exploiting elderly human resources is relatively low, the development of industries suitable for the employment of the elderly still requires a necessary investment in education and skills

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29 That is to say, in the social security population, the number of people enjoying the benefits increases and the number of people paying contributions decreases. See He Wenjong, "The Aging of the Social Insurance System."

training to improve their employability. This is not only the meaning of a learning society, but also an important measure by which China can develop from a country of human resources into a country of human capital.

*6. Emphasizing the “combination of medical and nursing care,” and prioritizing and focusing on solving the issue of the long-term care of old people suffering from disabilities or dementia*

In the medium to long term, the greatest burden of an aging population is not living costs but the cost of health care. Since the end of 2015, the question of “combining medical and nursing care with maintenance” has been heating up. However, for the majority of the elderly population, the most urgent need is not medical services based on diagnosis, treatment and surgery, but daily life care and non-therapeutic rehabilitation, or “long-term care services.” Especially at present, the age structure of China’s elderly population is still relatively young, and the “baby boomers” of the 1950s still have about fifteen years to go before entering the stage of advanced age (80+). This is an important window of opportunity for the improvement of China’s system of aging services. During this period, the state should focus on the development of long-term care services for the elderly as part of its grand strategy of a “healthy China,” emphasize “combining medical and nursing care with maintenance” and position it as a “social service” rather than a “medical service.” Practice in Western developed countries has shown that, apart from necessary medical services, delivering public service content through a social services channel costs on average around thirty percent less than delivering the same content through a medical services channel.<sup>30</sup>

It also should be noted that one of the mistakes in China’s current aged care arrangements is that they seek to cover all bases but lack key breakthroughs. The current focus of long-term care services should be on old people suffering from disabilities or dementia. The emergence and development of these conditions and the length of time their sufferers survive have relatively stable rules, and their living needs in the final stage of life are relatively stable and limited. This lays a foundation for improving the policy success ratio and effectiveness.

*7. Guiding and supporting the construction of modern families on the basis of reconstructing family policy*

Supporting family development should be a feature and focus of China’s aging response; it not only achieves short-term results, but also contributes to the sustainable development of the policy system. In addition to the above mentioned points about family planning policy adjustments being coordinated with improvements to family policy as soon as possible, the state should, on the basis of clarifying the boundaries of the responsibilities of the government, market, society and family, seek to make the whole family the basic target of social security with the family or household as the unit of social policy, while giving those responsible for an elderly person or with young families more support and help. Direct

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30 Tang Jun, “Current Situation, Issues and Development Prospects for Elderly Services in China.”

support for middle- and low-income families with elderly care-giving needs and even poor families will be an important part of China's anti-poverty strategy and an important aspect of the balanced development of new rural areas in the course of new-type urbanization.

In addition, a number of surveys have shown that the current imbalance between supply and demand for "childcare services" and "home care services for the elderly," not only highlights the lack of family services, but also greatly restricts the effective development of elderly human capital, and may to some extent even make it hard to implement the policy of "delaying the retirement age." The government should focus on supporting and standardizing the family services industry, study strategies for the specialization and professionalization of family services, demonstrate the feasibility of "government purchase of services," and gradually establish an outcome evaluation system based on a summary of existing practices in various regions with a view to timely promotion and improvement.

*8. Making good use of the "demographic dividend" and demonstrating the possibility of reaping new dividends in the context of globalization*

China is still in the last window of opportunity for harvesting the demographic dividend. The government should further encourage orderly migration on the basis of new-type urbanization and reform of the household registration system and should utilize the varying degrees of aging in different regions, adopt a corresponding differential development strategy, extend different areas' window of opportunity for harvesting the demographic dividend as far as possible and maximize the harvest from the last traditional dividend, while investing in education and health in order to make the demographic dividend achieve the change from quantity to quality.

It should be noted that the traditional conditions for the demographic dividend were full employment and a plentiful young workforce. Although China no longer fully enjoys these conditions, we still have a great opportunity to reap the demographic dividend on a global scale. In the past thirty years, developed countries have benefited a great deal from China's demographic dividend through foreign direct investment and other means. In the coming decades, it is reasonable to think seriously about how we can benefit from the efficient use of the large numbers of young people in developing countries, while at the same time boosting local economies and achieving win-win outcomes. As reform deepens and development continues, China is likely to reap a new demographic dividend in the context of globalization provided it can make use of a favorable international trade and political and economic environment as well as "Belt and Road" and other strategic arrangements. Despite the resurgence of trade protectionism, the global economy is increasingly integrated, and the competition for economic interests and development resources is, in a sense, a process of resource allocation by which countries cope with the aging society. It is necessary and possible for China to break through the limitations of domestic economic resources and think about the coping strategy of our aging society from the perspective of globalization.

## Conclusion

To sum up, China's aging population response is by no means an emergency strategy. We must pay more attention to the integrated participation of diverse actors and the long-term development of the economy and society, and combine short-term goals with medium- and long-term development strategies on the basis of ensuring the sustainability of governance models and public policies. In view of this, given the above-mentioned points about the transformation of the governance model and the public policy response, we believe this consensus should be further consolidated.

First of all, the aging population presents Chinese society with both challenges and opportunities. China has a late-mover advantage in dealing with an aging population. Unlike Western developed countries, we are entering the aging society against the background of information and networks. On the one hand, this provides unprecedented opportunities and resources for China to actively handle its aging population; on the other, it reduces the operating space for traditional institutions and policies. The deepening of reform entails constant innovation, and these reforms and innovation will further tap into and utilize the potential opportunities of an aging society.

Second, the governance model of China's aging population needs to create a "China solution" based on "China thinking." China's aging population has its own unique social, economic and cultural background, and its developmental process is different from that of other countries. Its governance model should be based on the realities of China's society, economy and environment against the background of globalization, marketization, informatization and new-type urbanization. On the basis of "China thinking," we should put forward programs for social reform and institutional reconstruction suited to Chinese practice and gradually transform "Chinese characteristics" into "Chinese advantages."

Third, the governance of China's aging society needs new ideas, new culture and new institutions. The traditional social governance model and institutional framework based on the young being an absolute majority needs to be readjusted and reconstructed in line with developmental trends in aging. We must recast or change our original mode of production and life, our way of allocating resources and the structure of our institutional arrangements, as these are premised on adapting to demographic change.

Fourth, the governance of China's aging society should develop a global vision with all due speed. As human society moves toward sustained and universal aging, the aging of China's population has critical influence and a special course of development. Aging will transform the remolding of China's population and labor force into a strong demand for the upgrading of industrial structures and economic forms, and will further affect global industry deployment and trade structures. The governance of aging will break through boundary constraints and evolve into a global governance issue meriting global governance resources, which should be prepared in advance.



Finally, as this paper has emphasized several times, as a totally new and irreversible demographic and social pattern, the aging of the population has already become one of our new basic national conditions. With further changes in the global social and economic situation and the rapid development of modern science and technology, China's basic national conditions—its political system, the size of its economy and population, its regional differences and its cultural traditions and family ethics—provide us with an abundant resource endowment and diversified governance paths for coping with the aging population. Our endeavors will ultimately create a society that is “jointly built, governed and shared by all regardless of age.”<sup>31</sup>

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31 In 1995, the United Nations formulated an action programme on global social development for “all people of all ages.” In 1999, it made this the theme of the international year of older persons, calling for harmony among people of all ages. The report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, which clearly proposes to “build a pattern of social governance that is jointly built, governed and shared by all,” attaches great importance to social governance. This article, aiming at the governance of an aging society, attempts to combine the two proposals.



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—Translated by Li Guanghui from  
*Social Sciences in China* (Chinese Edition), 2018, no. 12  
Revised by Sally Borthwick