



**SOCIAL PROTECTION IN ASIA**

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# **The Practice of Old Age Support during a Period of Social Transition: The Case of Rural China**



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# **The practice of old age support during a period of social transition: the case of rural China**

Pei Xiaomei, Chen Pei, Hu Yi, Tang Youcai and Xu Xiaofeng

## **Introduction**

Old age support as a social issue has increasingly become a focus of public attention in contemporary societies as a result of the rapid rise in proportion of elderly people in many societies. However, the issue presents different challenges for developed societies and developing societies.

While in developed societies old people are usually covered with relatively comprehensive social security programmes, the majority of old people in developing societies still rely on family resources, which are significantly undermined by economic transition locally as well as globally.

One difference in terms of providing social support for the aged between the already industrialised societies and those societies that are still in the process of industrialisation lies in the difficulty in organising public programmes of social insurance. In industrialised societies where the majority of the population are employed in sectors paying wages and salaries, social insurance based on contributions of both employee and employer serves as an effective approach to public provision for old age. However, social insurance can hardly be organised for people in societies in transition, where the majority of the population is still rural and does not earn a stable income. As the elderly segment of the population increases rapidly in some transitional societies, it is necessary to explore ways of providing social support for the rural elderly.

China presents a case illustrating the above problem. Rapid economic growth in the last three decades has led to a rapid accumulation of social wealth in Chinese society. However, this accumulated wealth has not been distributed equitably. Recent public debate on the negative effects of the growing gaps between different segments of the population in terms of income and consumption has pushed policy makers to transfer more public resources to vulnerable groups. For example, there has been an increase in funding for social relief programmes for the rural population, which increasingly comprises elderly people because of increased migration of young people to the cities.

Previous experience has shown that the number of beneficiaries of public relief programmes is always limited and that most people in need of relief are excluded. Even for those who do benefit from a programme, the level of benefits are usually too low to protect them from falling into poverty. It is quite clear that providing social support for the elderly in rural communities under rapid social transition requires not

only a fair distribution of government resources but also a change from mean-testing relief to universal protection. It is necessary that older people themselves, their families and community organisations are actively involved in identifying needs and organising services to meet those needs.

Encouraging the involvement of older people in the community is critical for the effectiveness and sustainability of any support programmes. The purpose of our research is to explore potential mechanisms for community involvement in the organisation of elderly support based on an understanding of local institutional and cultural environments so that incentives for stakeholders to provide support to elderly residents can be cultivated and grassroots-level programmes established and sustained. A study of three types of support for the rural aged in different locations in China is expected to generate knowledge of the development of social support programmes for older people in rural China.

By social support, we mean support that could lead to older people actively participating in local development and receiving their fair share of the benefits of development. The concept of support used in this paper has four dimensions: stable income, affordable healthcare, opportunities to work, and recognition of older people's contribution to families and communities. Local communities include families, neighbourhoods, businesses, non-government organisations, public organisations and local government agencies; they are viewed as the stakeholders in social support for the elderly. The emphasis of this study is on understanding the involvement of rural old people in organising elderly support within the community. Collective approaches to the organisation of elderly support by making use of the local economic, social and cultural capitals will be explored.

## **1. Literature review**

### ***1.1. General conditions of Chinese rural elderly people***

According to the *Report on the Development Trend of China's Population Aging* by the China National Committee on Aging in 2006, China has been through a rapid demographic transition since the 1980s and Chinese population became aged by the end of the Century. By the end of 2005, the number of people aged 60 or over reached 144 million – 11 per cent of the total Chinese population. The same report predicted that by 2020, the number of elderly Chinese will be 248 million – 17 per cent of the total population, and by 2050, that number will be over 400 million – 30 per cent of the population. There is no doubt that the nation will face increasingly serious problems as a result of an aging population.

Research on social transition in rural China has accumulated abundant evidence for the difficulties faced by older people in rural areas. A pension system was introduced in 1952 but it supports only employees of state-owned enterprises in urban areas; its

coverage now includes about 140 million people (Poston and Duan, 2000: 721). While the overwhelming majority of the rural elderly have to rely on their families for a living, family resources for elderly support have been greatly reduced by the changes in rural economic production, the redistribution of local resources and the migration of the rural labour force to urban areas (Luo et al. 2008). As a result, the traditional norm of family support for the elderly is becoming dismantled (Yao 2001; Wang and Xia 2001; Xu 2001). More and more rural elderly have been left in poverty and with no care and support (Na 2007; Shi 2007), and, on average, the oldest women in China are seriously disadvantaged in every respect save sheer survival itself (Zeng et al, 2002).

The China Research Center on Aging conducted a national survey in 2000 and found clear evidence of the unfavourable condition of the rural elderly in comparison to their urban counterparts; 42.4 per cent of the rural elderly continued working in the fields, while in urban areas only 0.9 per cent were still working. Among those who no longer worked in the field, 91.2 per cent were physically unable, which means they were involved in productive labour as long as they were physically able to do so. One of the reasons for older people continuing to do field work was that productive labour on farmland tended to be the only source of income of their own.

Compared with the urban elderly, older people in rural areas received much less help from the state. The Research Center on Aging survey indicated that only 7.7 per cent of the rural elderly ever received any sort of local government subsidy or community relief. Only 1 per cent of the rural elderly were covered by the state old age insurance programme. Very few (7.8 per cent) had savings, and among those who had, the average amount was 682 yuan. Obviously, the level of savings was far from being enough to maintain a decent living in later life.

Shrinking family size and the decline in profits from agricultural production have undermined the traditional practice of family support for elderly members. Nevertheless, the family has continued to serve as the most important source of support for the elderly; 82.4 per cent of rural elderly indicated that they received some form of support from adult children.

Analyses by gender showed an obvious gender difference among the rural elderly, with considerably more women than men without any stable income (61.2 per cent for females and 49.4 per cent for males). Even among those who had stable income, the average level of monthly income for men was 181 yuan. For women, it was 124 yuan, only 68.3 per cent of men's income. In terms of healthcare, older women spent much less than men on medical expense. Elderly women spent on average 80.70 yuan a year on medical care, while elderly men spent 133.16 yuan on average. However, because of inadequate healthcare, older women's health in rural areas was not good in comparison with men and other age groups.

The above description of the living conditions of the rural elderly, as reflected by the

national survey, shows that the rural elderly in China are generally involved in productive labour activities in order to care for themselves. Family resources are decreasing. The state old age insurance programme has not yet been extended to cover them. Self-support is not a choice but a way of living. Older people in rural areas are forced to adopt in the absence of public support and the inadequacy of family support. As a consequence, the rural elderly in general maintain a relatively low standard of living, with many basic needs unmet, including decent housing, stable incomes and medical care. As a vulnerable group, their needs require the attention of policy makers.

## ***1.2. Practice of support for the rural aged***

### **1. Family and family care**

The neglect of the needs of the rural elderly in policy making has long been based on an assumption that the traditional practice of family support is still working in rural areas. One of the problems with this assumption is that Chinese families have been changing tremendously along with the socio-economic transition. Therefore, any evaluation of the function of family support for the elderly should take into consideration the impact of changes to family structures on elderly care. The changes include a decrease in family sizes, the restructure of family relations, the change in power relations within the family, the reconstruction of traditional family notions, the building of a care-based family network and the decrease in family care resources as a result of migration.

Research (Pan 2008; Yan 2006) into family changes has concluded that China has been going through a process in which family size is increasingly reduced and family structure is increasingly nuclearised. Along with these trends, has been the decrease in family care for older members and the transferring of care responsibilities beyond the family. Although the stem family and family network still play a supplemental role in care for family members in need, this role has been seriously challenged by the uncertainty of the economic transition (Pan 2008). As the general adoption to the market exchange principle occurs, family cohesion has to be strengthened when care is needed (Yang and Wu 2003).

It has also been found that within the family there is a change in power relations between generations, and power has been transferred from the older to the younger generation (Yan 2006). Young people gradually obtain a dominant position in the process of family decision making. Power relations between genders present a more complicated picture. Some studies reveal that, while authority and resources are still unequally distributed between men and women, there is a trend of changing relationships between mothers and daughters-in-law – from traditional obedience of daughters-in-law to mothers-in-law to a mutual benefit and collaboration of the two (Guo 2004; Tong 2006).

The traditional practice of family support for elderly members has an ideological

foundation of filial piety and mutual support. The growth of individualism, along with rapid social transformation, has greatly undermined such a foundation for family support. Although filial piety is still rhetorically received, it no longer acts as a rule that could regulate people's behaviours, especially the behaviour of the younger generation, who emphasise material rather than emotional exchanges with the older generation. Older people in rural areas find that their knowledge and wealth are not enough to attract their children to the creed of filial piety (Fei 1983; Liu 2007; Guo 2006). Mutual responsibilities between generations have changed in focus from an emphasis on moral obligations of the older generation to the younger one towards an emphasis on legal obligations of the younger generation to the older one (Yan 2006). The result is that younger people now would prefer to spend their resources on their children rather than on their parents and grandparents (Yan 2006), and older people tend to be more independent of their adult children. In this sense, family care actually means self-care (Luo and Peng 2007).

Studies of social networks in China provide some evidence that while the size of families is decreasing, there is a tendency towards family network building in many places. Wang and Zhang (1995) in their study of a village in northeast China found a form of loose collaboration among several nuclear families to deal with the problems of production and care provision. This type of 'semi-combined family' follows a pattern of 'division but not separation' by making use of existing blood-tied resources to make up for the decline in the productive function of the nuclear family and for the absence of community services.

Increasingly, recent studies on family change are looking at the effect of migration on rural families. More and more migrant labourers, including female labourers, from rural areas to urban areas leave older family members behind. However, there is not enough research into migrant labour from rural areas and family support for the aged, although the media has paid much attention to this issue. For those young people who settle down in urban areas, few want to live with their parents, and many parents continue to live in rural communities. Although urbanisation may sometimes mean better financial support from younger people to the elderly, family care is often not enough, a trend that is aggravated by the decrease of labour life expectancy and the increase of human life expectancy (Gao 2003).

## 2. Social support

Social programmes for care of the elderly in rural China have always been kept at the minimum level. The major form of social support for the rural elderly has been *Wubao* (five insurances), which is a social relief programme targeting those people who have no legal family supporter, no ability to work and no income. The benefits cover expenses for food, clothing, housing, medical care and funerals. For many years before the 1980s, the proportion of people who qualified for *Wubao* never went beyond 1 per cent, and coverage has never been extended to elderly people with family who are in need of support (State Department of Civil Affairs 2003).

Funding for the *Wubao* programme comes from local rather than central government. Before the 1980s, resources generated from the rural collective production were used for the provision of the programme and the early 1980s saw a rapid increase in the level of provision as a result of local economic growth. But since the 1990s, the rural economy has obviously lagged behind the urban economy. While tax reform at the end of the 1990s reduced the tax burden on farmers, there was a reduction in local revenue on which social programmes such as the *Wubao* were funded. As a result, the *Wubao* programme failed to include quite a number of elderly people who were qualified and there was also a decreased level of benefits for some existing beneficiaries. The report from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, based on a survey of 12 provinces, highlighted clearly the importance of funding from central government for the continuation of the programme (Department of Social Relief, Ministry of Civil Affairs 2003).

Another social relief programme is known as *Dibao*, a programme that aims to ensure basic income subsidies for the poor. Theoretically, all citizens living in poverty qualify for the subsidy. In practice, the majority of the beneficiaries are the urban poor and only a very limited proportion of the rural poor is covered. Like the *Wubao* programme, *Dibao* was funded by the local government, and the number of people covered and level of benefits depend on local financial resources. Thus, there is a contradiction built into such programmes: the less developed an area is, the more people will need assistance, but the local government will be unable to generate the resources needed to provide that assistance.

The exclusion of the rural elderly from the existing social security system in China resulted in a general lack of support for the rural elderly, and this fact has been well recognised by the public and policy makers. In the early 1990s the state tried to organise an old age insurance programme for the rural elderly. The Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) conducted a pilot project on social insurance for the rural aged in Shandong Province in 1991. Based on the experience of this pilot, the MCA announced a national plan for organising rural old age insurance at county level and pushed for gradual implementation in areas where it was feasible. By the end of 2000, about 61 million rural people, 11 per cent of the rural population participated in the program through making contributions. The number of elderly people who currently benefited from the insurance was even smaller and the average level of yearly benefits from the insurance was even lower than the level of benefits received from social relief programmes for poor people. As a result, the programme ended at the beginning of the new century (Ding and Chen 2005).

Several reasons have been given for the failure of the rural old age insurance programme. First, the programme was based on the idea of commercial insurance, where flat-rate contributions were expected from individuals. However, farmers did not receive income as stable as that of urban workers and their income was so low

that they had difficulty finding extra money to contribute to the old age insurance fund. Even if they joined the programme, they tended to keep the insurance at the minimum level. Second, the programme was organised in such a way that only those who were wealthier and younger could benefit. Those who were relatively poor and older tended to be excluded. Third, even in places where farmers could make contributions, programme organisers lacked the experience to prevent financial risks to the funds. In fact, problems of inappropriate management of funds were found in a number of areas. The last, but not the least, cause of failure was the lack of a legislative basis for organising such a programme. This led to a competition among government sectors for fund management without effective systems for monitoring (Qiao 1998; Gao 2003; Huang 2004).

There is a growing optimism among researchers for expanding the social security programme to cover the rural aged population as they see the rapid economic growth and the increase in general revenue. Some argue that a state-level programme is still feasible, if only the state could provide all the funds, since this is more a political issue than an economic one (Lu 2004). Some argue that when China's rural population accounts for less than half of the total population, such a programme would be very feasible – and the ratio in 2007 is very close to one-half. Others claim that although a nationwide rural old age insurance programme is not currently possible, it is feasible in some better developed areas, such as the eastern seaboard (Yang and Du 1997).

### 3. Collective or community support

Research on elderly support tends to divide it into four types of provision mechanisms: (1) social support; (2) community support; (3) family support; and (4) individual support. Among these, community support is as important, if not more, as family support. As the latter is inevitably declining, while social support is currently not feasible, more effort should be put into community support enhancement (Tan 2002), which could help to bridge the gap between family/individual support and social support (Xu 2007b).

The importance of community in the life of farmers was obvious in traditional China. Among Chinese researchers, there is a consensus that pre-modern Chinese society was structured with three layers – state, gentry and individuals, rather than a structure of state and individuals. The three-layer structure allowed the central government to control the local directly through the local gentries. In this sense, the public sphere of the farmer's daily life was the rural community, i.e. the village. When farmers' needs could not be satisfied by individuals or the family, it was the community, in the form of extended family organisations led by local gentries, that provided potential assistance. Along with the process of modernisation, the power of the gentry class declined rapidly (Kong 2002) and the expansion of the state's power to community level undermined the existing community organisation (Du 1996). The experience of rural communities in China from the 1950s to the 1980s provides evidence of such stretching of state power into village life and the consequences of that. It was not until

2003, when the policy of tax exemption for agricultural production was implemented, that rural community organisations began to revive.

In general, communities currently provide support to old people in indirect ways. Pressure from public opinion may help to reinforce family support in rural communities, especially in remote and underdeveloped communities. The mechanism through which community support is provided is based on the philosophy of filial obligation. Younger people's behaviour towards their parents or grandparents must be approved and supported by the community they live in (Yang 2003).

As collective or community support for the aged is not as prevalent as family support in rural areas today, there is also insufficient research on community support for the aged. Most research is exploratory, showing the possibility or will rather than the facts of community support. There are a few researchers who have documented the efforts made by old people themselves in some communities to organise self-support, with or without help from local government or non-government agencies (Tao 2004; Shen et al. 2005; He 2007b).

Despite the documentation of cases about rural community action for old age support, questions about this phenomenon still remain. How were these local activities organised? What were the forces that led to these activities? How did these local organisations mobilise resources for their activities? Are there connections between these activities and government programmes? If there are, how they are linked? What strategies are used to overcome the barriers to their success? How much could an individual case be generalised for a larger population? The answers to these questions are critical to the development of old age support systems in rural China.

### ***1.3. Current needs of the rural elderly for support***

#### **1. Need for income security**

Almost all of the research about support for the rural aged has shown that family support is still the main form of support for the rural aged – the most important reason being that the rural aged have very low, if any, cash income. Social support as well as community support is still an insufficient supplement (Mu 1999). Almost all of the income that the rural aged could obtain is from crop farming production or money transfer from their children.

Lack of sufficient cash income has led the rural aged to be highly dependent on their adult children, which actually means their sons. Such a fact has caused certain problems in rural areas: (1) a desire for sons rather than for daughters; (2) tensions between the elderly and their children when the children are not financial sound; and (3) the relatively uncomfortable life of the rural aged both materially as well as emotionally (Wang and Li 2005).

Pauperisation among the elderly in rural areas has become a serious social problem.

For historical reasons, the current generation of the rural aged was completely deprived of the opportunity to accumulate any private property when they were young.<sup>1</sup> The current “remuneration linked output” productive system in rural China still gives them no ownership of the land they use and they are unable to bequeath their land to their children. As family support for the aged is generally built on future heritage, older people now hardly have any material heritage to encourage their younger family members to support them adequately. The rural aged are unable to sell their land for cash or turn it into social security income, as land is not private property and cannot be commercialised. Their only choice is to grow crops on the land for income, but their health often does not permit them to do so and the output is often not enough (Chen and Chen 2007).

Furthermore, the acceleration of industrialisation and urbanisation is leading to increased poverty. Even the huge national ‘New Construction of the Rural Areas’ plan, carried out since 2005 all over China, has no specific policy for improving the life of the rural aged, which may hinder the implement of the huge social movement of new construction of the rural areas (Li 2007).

## 2. Need for decent housing

There have been frequent reports of so-called ‘empty-nest families’ in rural areas. Some researchers estimate that the proportion of such families in rural areas has risen to about a half of the total households, due to migrant labour and other reasons (Hu 2006; Hu and Ding 2003). Most of these empty-nest families are made up of old people who usually live in shabby houses in a poor state of repair, where potential safety hazard often exists.

For those rural elderly who live with younger generations under the same roof, some are happy while some are not. In some households, the elderly members are excluded from family life. Some researchers have found that separation inside families is prevalent and old family members usually live in older, shabbier spaces compared to their children and grandchildren. Moreover, the old people and their children often cook and eat separately. Sometimes the situation may turn into serious fragmentation, where different generations seem to live in different times (Gao 2002; Mu 1999).

However, there is very little literature about the housing conditions of rural elderly people compared to research about other aspects of support for this group. There is great research potential for this topic. Housing does not appear to be one of the major concerns for older people in rural areas since they tend to adapt to shabby living environments. They seem to be more concerned about income security and the availability of medical care (Zhang and Wu 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> When this generation of older people was young, they were forced to participate in collective production, which made it impossible for them to accumulate any private property or resources. When the time of reform began and people were encouraged to accumulate private properties, they were already too old to continue in productive labour.

### 3. Need for medical care

Becoming poor leads to difficulties in paying for the ever-rising cost of medical care (Lu 2002). Urban-biased policy in China has led to the imbalance of medical resources between urban and rural areas, and the rural aged have become one of most disadvantaged groups in relation to access to healthcare. Moreover, peasants in China have been deprived of any medical security since the mid-1980s (Wang 2003). According to the *World Health Report 2000* published by the World Health Organization (WHO), China ranked 144 among the 191 member countries in terms of equal distribution of Health care (WHO 2001).

The rural elderly are one of the most disadvantaged groups in relation to access to medical resources and services in China. Due to lack of cash, more than half of the rural elderly will choose not to stay in hospital or not to stay enough days in hospital when their illness requires a stay in hospital. Meanwhile, around 60 to 70 percent of beds in rural hospitals are empty most of the time because poor and ill peasants – most of them are the rural aged – cannot afford certain medical services in hospital (Wang 2003). So it is not difficult for us to conclude that lack of medical care for the rural aged is fundamentally not due to a lack of infrastructure but a lack of a medical security system and an income security system.

Fortunately, a grand medical security system for peasants, the National Corporative Medical Scheme (NCMC), introduced in 2003, has been expanded across rural China, and is expected to help the rural aged to pay their doctors' bills, to some extent. However, many researchers are concerned that the scheme may fail, as it has, like other grand security systems for peasants, failed to take into consideration the long-term care needs of the aged. Even among those rural aged who can take care of themselves in daily life, their complaints about lack of escorts and support for medical issues can become major cause of disputes in families (Yao 2006).

An investigation indicates that most young and middle-aged people in rural areas preferred to invest in the medical care for their children and themselves rather than for their parents or grandparents. This is partly due to the limited access to medical services in rural areas, as well as to the constrained resources they have to pay for services and drugs. (Ma 2006).

Mental problems among older people in rural areas is gradually becoming an issue among academics. One research study showed that among different types of families the rural aged living alone in empty nest families have the highest potential for depression. Those living in empty nest families but not living alone have the second highest potential (Zhou et. al. 2008). Although there some academic journals have covered mental health among the aged, the specific mental problems of the rural aged are often ignored. There are almost no treatments or resources to address such problems, as the primary health concern of the rural aged, as well as their children, is

still physical health.

#### 4. Need for long-term care

Although most elderly people in rural areas are generally able to take care of themselves (Zhang 2000; Lu 2002), life expectancy is rising rapidly along with a decline in physical function. Older people who are not in good health often need more intensive family care. However, many studies have found that family resources are decreasing, as young women often become migrant labourers and move away from the family (Gao 2003). Furthermore, when the rural aged live separately from their children, long-term care from the family is unsustainable (Zhang and Lu 2007).

Moreover, the need for intensive care often cause disputes and tension within families, as members feel that the filial obligations are too difficult to be fulfilled. Conflicts may break out both between the aged and their children and among children (Yao 2006). Lives may have already become very difficult for the rural elderly when they are disability or ill (Jiang and Zhong 1999).

It has been estimated that self-care for the rural aged with help from nuclear family/stem family or community would be the main form of care in the future (Luo and Peng 2007; Yu et. al. 1992). However, predictions for the long-term care of the rural aged when they become too fragile to live independently or take care of themselves are certainly not optimistic. Unfortunately, few researchers, policy makers or rural residents have seriously considered this issue.

#### 5. Need for social opportunities

In rural areas, social opportunities for older people are often viewed as leading to self-fulfilment and independence. Most older people in rural areas seem to have their own sub-groups and unique sub-cultures, to some extent through being isolated physically and culturally. Lack of entertainment in the countryside has often led to the emptiness of intellectual life of the aged in empty-nest families (Zhou et. al. 2008) and lack of participation in community activities has aggravated the situation (Xie and Li 2006).

There are many reasons for the need to provide social opportunities for elderly people in the countryside. First, modern societies provide more opportunities – especially economic ones – for young people rather than the aged, which shakes the foundation of traditional respect for the aged (Fei 1983), and young people become unwilling to ask older people for advice. Second, older people are no longer in charge of the family economy, which has led to the decline of their status in both core family and stem family (Liu 2007). Third, older people's accumulated knowledge is no longer useful or supportable for the younger generation, which creates communication difficulties and widens the generation gap. And finally, some older people spend most of their time taking care of grandchildren and there is generally a lack of public space for the elderly in the rural community (Geng and Lu 2007).

There is little research into social participation by the rural aged, partly due to social expectations for older people to stay in private areas, especially in the countryside. There was, however, a national effort to promote social participation among the rural elderly during the 1990s, when more than 70 per cent of the villages in China established an Association of the Aged under the requirement of China Aging Problem National Commission and local Senior Citizens' Work Committee. Although most of the associations are not very active or exist only in name, some have improved the social participation of older people in rural areas and empowered them significantly with or without help from the local governments or outside non-governmental organisation (NGO) or non-profit organization (NPO) (Wang 2006). Activities organised by these grassroots organisations include short- or long-distance trips, daily entertainment activities, environmental cleaning work, dispute resolution within the community and some certain economic production work.

#### ***1.4. The responses of the public to the needs of the rural elderly***

##### **1. Recognition of the need for institutionalised social support**

To meet the challenges of providing support, and in recognition of the inadequate public support programmes for the majority of the rural elderly, recent research has focused on the responsibility of the government to provide universal relief subsidies to older people and their families (Zhang and Xu 2003; Tang 2007). All the researchers agree on the need for social support for the rural elderly, but they disagree on whether it is feasible for China to adopt a universal social pension programme at this time. Most of them believe that a nationwide pension programme is not feasible but that local, flexible programmes would be (Yang and Du 1997; Qiao 1998; Liu 1997; Xi et. al. 1996), although a few insist it is time to create a nationwide pension programme (Lu 2003; Tang 1998).

In spite of these arguments, it will be inspiring to look into similar experiences in other developing or developed countries around the world. South Africa introduced old age pensions for aged white elderly in 1928 and broadened the system to include Africans in 1944. As a consequence of state initiative, pension income became crucial for the economic survival of many African rural households and contributed indirectly to the increased self-respect and social status of African old-age pensioners from an early stage (Sagner 2000). The experience of South Africa is mentioned here because the urban–rural division of China has often been compared to apartheid in South Africa or the caste system in India.

The World Bank also argues that for developing countries, old-age security systems with a large, funded and defined contribution component, decentralised competitive fund management and a social safety net are most likely to promote economic growth, provide acceptable income to the old and reduce risk by diversification (James 1998).

HelpAge International insists that social (non-contributory) pensions are affordable,

practical and politically possible. In terms of the feasibility of social pensions, 72 countries worldwide have some form of social pension; 46 of these are in low- or middle-income countries. Social pensions are politically and administratively feasible in developing countries; 16 per cent of all low-income countries have a non-contributory pension. As for the cost, of 18 low- and middle-income countries surveyed in detail, 67 per cent deliver a social pension for a public expenditure of less than 1 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). There is a relatively wide coverage in countries that have a social pension. In 17 countries surveyed, 24.3 million people over 60 are covered. On the other hand, a significant proportion (83 per cent) is not covered, either because social pensions are means tested or the age limit is set too high (HelpAge International 2006).

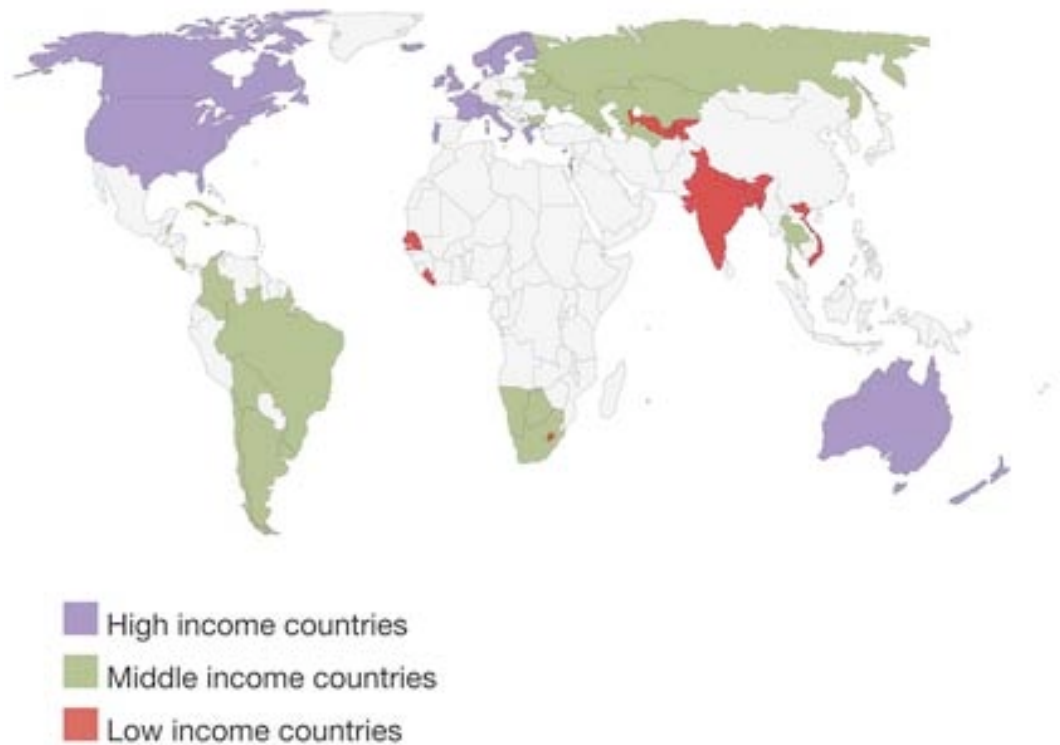
Evaluations of social pension programmes in different countries reveal a significant impact of the programmes on the status of the elderly who are covered. Pensions reduce elderly and household poverty, increase older people's status and improve their family's access to basic services and employment. Pension spending also has an impact on labour force participation. Social pensions empower older people by increasing their household food security and nutritional intake, promoting women's empowerment and balancing gender relations, and mitigating risks and vulnerabilities that cause chronic poverty (Samson et. al. 2006; Tabor 2002; Devereux 2005).

In Brazil and South Africa, non-contributory pension programmes reach a large number of poor older people (5.3 million in Brazil and 1.9 million in South Africa) at relatively low cost (1 per cent of GDP in Brazil and 1.4 per cent in South Africa). The programmes are financially sustainable and attract a large measure of political support. In South Africa, recent research suggests that social transfers, including pensions, facilitate access to employment and create jobs (HelpAge International 2006). Brazil and South Africa are large developing countries that share some similarities with China.

Social pensions can effectively reduce poverty and support the most vulnerable. Households with a non-contributory pension recipient show greater financial stability and lower probability of experiencing a decline in living standards and preliminary analysis of a range of deprivation indicators also show that pension recipients have a lower incidence of deprivations. Having a pensioner in the family reduces a household's probability of becoming poor by 21 per cent in Brazil and 11 per cent in South Africa (Barrientos, 2005). In Chile, 55 per cent of recipients the PASIS social pension have moved from being 'extremely poor' to 'poor' and 45 per cent have moved out of poverty altogether (Bertranou 2006).

In South Africa, the pension reduces the number of people living below the poverty line by 5 per cent (2.24 million). The pension also reduces the poverty gap ratio by more than 13 per cent in South Africa and nearly 8 per cent in Brazil (HelpAge International 2006).

Countries with a social pension are shown in map below, categorised into high-, middle- and low-income countries.



*Data source: <http://www.helpage.org/Researchandpolicy/PensionWatch/Feasibility>*

It is proven that social pensions are a cost-effective way of empowering older people. Social pensions also contribute to the human rights agenda, recognising the right of older people to share the benefits of a country's economic and social development. A pension scheme is a 'social contract' between a government and citizens that must be upheld; it is not just another donor-driven experiment to be abandoned when the project cycle ends (Helpage International 2006). Social pensions deliver on the rights of older people and support their contribution to development. They build good governance and political support for citizenship as well as social cohesion and household coping mechanisms (United Nations Development Group (UNDG) 2003).

The experience of the countries in practice of social pension provides inspiration in thinking about institutional support for the rural elderly in China. The above review of the needs of rural aged population leads us to the belief in the necessity of a universal non-contributory social programme in China. However, there are political and financial barriers to be overcome to the development of such a programme. As a developing country, China is at least in a position to choose a preferred multi-pillar social pension system almost from the start before these obstacles arise (James 1998).

## 2. Recognition of the supplemental function of the family for old age support

Although family support was and remains the main form of support for rural elderly care in China, many scholars believe it will become a supplementary form rather than the mainstay. They suggest there will be more social support for the aged or socialisation of family support. Some of them see the coming of an aging society and the growing needs of the aged for support. Families can no longer bear the burden of supporting an aging society. Changes in economical production, social institutions and public opinion all point to the need for social support for the elderly (Wang 2001; Li and Yang 2005).

As the ability of the family to provide care for their elderly members has been undermined by the shrinking of family size and tendency toward nuclear family type, families no long possess the capacity to provide adequate care (Xia 2003). In fact, family support has already become self-support in many places, turning the elderly into a socially disadvantaged group (Wang 2004). Moreover, the rise in poverty among the rural aged can only be alleviated by an increase of older people's income; what they need most is cash. Rural families have been limited in their ability to provide enough cash for the elder members (Miao 2005).

Research shows that most rural elderly are expecting social support as a main form of support in old age, although family support is still their main source of support currently (Cui 2006). Reliance on family support would also hinder the implementation of the family planning policy (Zeng and Fang 1997), as the policy itself weakens the function of family support (Ma and Li 2007). The one-child policy actually increases the risk of family support for the aged failing, as the child is very likely to become a migrant labourer, unable to take care of his or her elderly parents. Or the child may have some economical or health (including mental health) problem and thus unable to support parents well and fulfil the filial obligation. As a result, there is a growing public expectation of the government to help both urban and rural families, and to take action to reduce the risks to old age support (Duan and Zhang 2007).

On the other hand, some scholars consider that family support should remain the main form of support for the rural aged in the future. Nevertheless, they are also very pessimistic about the future prospect of such support.

## 3. Community efforts and resources to bridge the gap between family and the state in transition

Although community support for the rural elderly is currently not prevalent in China, much research has been devoted to exploring ways of providing support for the elderly in the community as an extension of family support in the absence of public support. There is much hope that it will fill the gap between family support and social support in a society that is in transition.

Evidence shows that communities can play an effective role in care provision for the

elderly internationally. A study of a hospital noticed that if community nurses intervened with children to help them achieve maturity or resolve crises, they could more objectively evaluate the appropriateness of all community resources, instead of quickly looking to nursing home placement as the only solution (Hayes and Truglio-Londrigan 1985). Older people are now involved in a wide range of collective activities, including community groups, centres and clubs, religious societies and the like. The support offered by NGOs, communities and families usually needs to reflect the diversity of national populations (HelpAge International 2005).

Usually, civil society organisations (CSOs) are formed to meet demands for particular types of goods and services, as they have access to special advantages and resources and thus occupy niches in the provision of public services. The special goods and services they offer may link to market failure (free rider) and government failure (red tape). They serve to create solidarity among individuals and strengthen community in a variety of ways (Smith 2005). Specific activities undertaken by CSOs caring for the elderly include raising awareness through the media, volunteer programmes, provision of information, advice on rights and legal issues, intergenerational activities, health and fitness classes, courses in bee keeping, mushroom growing and sewing, hobby groups, employment services, self-help groups, skills training and cultural activities such as concerts and excursions. All of these community activities could help tackle disillusionment, exclusion and deprivation among the rural aged as well as increasing self-fulfilment (Hinchliff and Hall 2002).

How far these models are suitable for China's rural communities remains a question. So far, many reports view community support as the transition between family support and social support, since family support is no longer sustainable and social support is difficult to carry out at the present time (Xu 2007a; Gan 2007). Community support also helps to improve older people's standard of living in rural areas where a community support system has been built up (Xue et al 1998).

Community support is also expected to expedite the modernisation and development of the rural community itself as well as providing for the security of the elderly (Cheng and Zhao 2006). The current imbalance between demand and supply for care for the rural elderly also requires community support (Zhao 2006). It can benefit the rural elderly not only physically and mentally, but also economically and in accordance with their human rights (Ye 2005), especially those who live in empty-nest families (Zhang and Yu 2007).

Some studies divide the rural aged support system into an informal and formal support system. The former comprises support from spouses, children, relatives, neighbours and friends, while the latter includes support from the community, institutions, agencies, organisations and the social security system. The informal support system is able to provide some help for the rural aged care effectively, but it is

impossible for the support to be sufficient in a modern society. It is believed that the future development of the rural elderly care system will be the establishment of formal support systems in rural communities (Yang and Wu 2003; Jiang and Zhou 2003).

In the view of some researchers, community support in rural areas represents the collective effort. With the development of a collective economy as well as the increase of the collective power, community support has a very bright future and much space for development (Liu and Li 2006).

Some scholars divide community support for the rural aged into community care and community financial support (Liu et. al. 2007; Yang 2007). Community care is currently more prevalent in underdeveloped areas and can be seen as the partial socialisation of family function. Community financial support is more prevalent in developed areas and shows the direction of the social support function. Great attention has been paid to both forms of community support. As China is going through a process of democratisation, community support has great potential to be developed.

The emergence of self-organised community support for the elderly in rural China coincides with a trend towards social protection for the aged in some Asian and African countries. HelpAge International has observed that CSOs are becoming active in the move to expand social protection in Africa and Asia (HelpAge International 2007). As the Chinese government has pledged more effective strategies to enable older citizens to share the fruits of economic and social development, we could expect more and more public undertakings for the benefit of older people. On the other hand, and based on past experience, the success of these undertakings may very well depend on the extent of CSO involvement. Therefore, there is a need for research into support and care for the elderly in rural China from the perspective of CSO participation.

### ***1.5. New perspectives***

Providing adequate support to the rapidly increasing older population poses serious challenges to transitional countries like China. It is commonly accepted that there is a need for new approaches, approaches other than the social insurance systems of the industrialised countries, which will combine resources from the state, family and community to form a new model that provides security for the elderly and redefines the responsibilities of the family, the community and the state.

In an attempt to explore approaches to social protection for the rural elderly in a time of social transition, Long (2007) suggests the establishment of a multi-model system to solve fundamentally the problem of rural aged support. As the task of providing for the rural aged is huge, no single source of support could fund such an endeavour. Only a combination of resources from family, community and the state could adequately provide welfare to the rural aged (Zhou 2001). Furthermore, the growth of

a market economy has also necessitated a comprehensive social security system for rural population (Jiang 2003).

Some scholars have divided this three-in-one multi-model system into two sub-systems based on a dichotomy of time or space. Some suggest that in developed areas community support should become the mainstay of the three-in-one rural aged support system, while in developing areas family support can remain as the mainstay for a period of time (Zheng and Wang 2005). Others suggest that currently family support could remain as the mainstay of a rural aged support system with community support and social support as a supplement, while in the long run the social support should become the core system with community support as the main part and family support as supplement (An and Dong 2002).

In some relatively developed areas of eastern China, community support has already become the mainstay of a three-in-one system and worked rather effectively in some villages. It is also regarded as move towards the development of a harmonious society, which is the aim of current social policies in contemporary China (Jia and Duan 2006).

Despite the optimistic vision of the future welfare system that covers the rural population and the general design for a model of multiple sources of support for the rural elderly, there is a lack of clear definition of responsibilities of the community, the family and the state in transition. Future research on rural elderly support in China cannot avoid the need for such clarification.

In summary, the absence of a social security system for the rural population and the crisis in traditional family functions prevent the rural elderly from have a life of security. At present, there is little sign of state willingness to extend the coverage of the existing old age insurance programme to include the rural elderly, although rural old age security as a policy issue has received considerable public attention. At the same time, traditional family support practices are inevitably losing their advantages in the process of urbanisation and modernisation. It is in this context that our project was planned: to seek alternative approaches to old age security for the elderly in rural areas under rapid socio-economic transition.

## **2. Methodology**

This is an exploratory study relying heavily on qualitative research methods of field observation and in-depth interviews with community residents to collect information on the daily lives of the elderly villagers and their living environment. The selection of the villages was not random but took into consideration the various levels of development. Among the three villages, one is located in an economically more developed area and community life remains relatively collective. The second one is

located in a region that is at a medium level in terms of economic development. The third village is located in a region that is relatively underdeveloped. China is a large country with very different geographical areas. We did not, therefore, intend to use random sampling but selected cases to represent different conditions as a result of different levels of socio-economic development in different regions. We are fully aware of the limits of the method used and limited our understanding of the information collected to the generation of meaningful questions about the rural aged support, rather than making any generalisations.

### ***2.1. The potential of rural communities to generate resources for elderly support***

Our project focused on exploring potential community resources for old age support in rural China, on understanding how community resources can be coordinated and organised for supporting the elderly, and on examining the implications of community-organised elderly support activities for a state programme of rural old age security. To explore potential community resources, this project selected three sites for observation: JX Village in Jiangsu Province, DZT Village in Shandong Province, and ZZ Village in Shanxi Province. The three villages are similar in having certain collective or self-organised efforts for elderly support, although these cases are quite different in terms of organisational forms and the level of old age support. An introduction to these villages and the way in which old age support has been delivered may indicate the potential for community efforts.

#### **1. Social security and participation: the case of JX village**

The case of JX village provides evidence for the potential of a rural community to generate resources for organising local old age support programmes. In this village, one could find a comprehensive programme of old age security funded by the profit generated from collective economic production and an ideology of equity within the community.

Geographically, JX village is located in the Changshu County, Jiangsu Province – an area considered relatively developed in terms of economy along the central east coast of China. A typical village along the Yangzi River, it occupies a three-square kilometre piece of land. At the end of 2007, its population was 871 people within 186 households. Administratively, the villagers are divided into 12 groups.

Unlike traditional communities, which rely heavily on agricultural production, JX village has an economic structure that integrates farming, manufacturing and the tourist industry. The village collectively owns four factories producing steel frames for building construction, which generates 95 per cent of the total income of the community. In 2007, the total output value of the village was 1.27 billion yuan<sup>2</sup> and the GDP per capita was over 140,000 yuan (about \$20,000 USD). The average net income of the villagers was 17,600 yuan – four times the average yearly income

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<sup>2</sup> The exchange rate of the USD to RMB (renminbi) was around 1: 6.9 in 2007.

(4,140 yuan) of the rural population for the same year.

The collective economy successfully laid the infrastructure for funding a community welfare system. The welfare provisions for community members include yearly dividends on shares, employment security at the collectively run enterprises, unified supply of villas and grains at subsidised prices, subsidies for individual contributions to medical insurance and expenses, and a pension and free apartment for the elderly. In 2007, the total expenditure on direct welfare provisions (excluding the expenses on building and maintaining villas and old age apartments) was 1.86 million yuan.

Besides the economic foundation, the political determination of the community leaders to ensure 'wealth for all' played a critical role in constructing the community welfare programmes. Since the 1980s, the village leader, a charismatic figure, has persistently held a belief in collective ownership of the land and other production materials as an approach to collective prosperity. Under his leadership, the village experienced a rapid growth in industrial and agricultural production and a fair distribution of the wealth accumulated through the economic development. As a result of the welfare provision, the distribution of income and material resources among villagers was relatively even.

In terms of old age support, the village demonstrated an effective combination of government and community support. As mentioned above, the village is located in a relatively well developed area compared with many other parts of the country. In 1992, the local government started to organise a pension programme for farmers, funded by insurance contributions from farmers and subsidies from local government. The pension from the old age insurance provided elderly people with an income that was stable but at a relatively low level. To provide more adequate support to the elderly, as a supplement to the government programme, JX village organised a village pension programme funded by the interest generated from collective production.

In addition, the community took a proportion of the collective income to provide welfare for the aged, including elderly housing. The village provided free old age apartments, with furniture, for women aged 55 or over and men aged 58 or over. Since the old age apartments were located within the community, this kind of living arrangement provided elderly residents with independence while having easy access to interaction with their children, who lived in villas. The elderly were encouraged, however, to live with their children. If they did, the family would qualify for a yearly subsidy of 2–3,000 yuan. For those who were too old to live independently, the village would provide resources to encourage their children to care for them within the family.

The community also created opportunities for the aged people to participate in paid productive activities, such as gardening, street sanitation, vegetable growing, etc. The work load was decided according to the each one's physical status and the work time was flexibly arranged by each person involved.

## 2. A productive life in construction: the case of DZT village

The case of DZT village illustrates a self-organised effort to generate resources for old age independence and support. In order to increase older people's income security and self-fulfilment, efforts were made to include them in village development by creating opportunities for them to contribute to the local economy. DZT village is in Shandong Peninsular, where the level of economic development is average for China. Village records indicate that at the end of 2006, there were 718 households and a total population of 2,668. The average income of the villagers in the same year was 7,506 yuan – 19.9 per cent higher than the average income in the area, but much lower than in JX village, the first case.

One of the characteristics of DZT village is its self-organised Association for Old Persons, which actively searched for opportunities for the older villagers to live independently while contributing substantially to local economic development. The association was initiated and led by a group of people who had retired either from teaching or from commercial institutions in 1992. The original purpose for establishing such an association was to manage and regulate the village-based wholesale vegetable market. After 16 years of hard work, the market has become one of the largest vegetable trading centres, providing commercial services to a population of over 100,000 vegetable growers from about 1,000 villages in the region.

The market has become the major source of income for the community. Along with the development of the market, the Association for Old Persons generated funds for starting up 13 service businesses such as vegetable storage, oil supply, inns and restaurants, two trial programmes for vegetable growers – respectively the vegetable planting demonstration and the tropical fruit growing demonstration, and three workfare programmes particularly for old people involved in gardening, freshwater aquiculture and courtyard production.

Over the last 16 years, this self-organised elderly association has accumulated assets of over ten million yuan, generated an income of over 85 million yuan, paid total tax of 17 million yuan to the state and contributed over five million yuan to the village collective.

Older people in DZT village benefit from the efforts of the elderly association in terms of opportunities for flexible employment and related income, which enhance their ability to be financially independent and secure. They also benefit from the village welfare programmes funded by an increasingly sound collective income. These programmes include collective contribution to the medical insurance (the New Cooperative Medical Scheme) for all the members of the association, welfare subsidy provision among members, operation of the old age school and the senior centre, and tours organised for the elderly villagers. In general, the Association for Old Persons acts as a significant resource for local old age support.

The overall increase in villagers' living standards and the specific empowerment of the elderly through organised efforts has led to changes in intergenerational relationships in village families. More and more old people choose to live independent of their children in a separate household. Like those elderly living in old age apartments in JX village, this independent living arrangement has promoted more positive interaction between generations, for it enables the elderly to relate to their children on a more equal basis.

### 3. A pursuit for independence: the case of ZZ village

The case of ZZ village illustrates a situation in which there is less organised effort by the rural elderly to seek opportunities for economic independence and living autonomy. ZZ village is located in the southern tip of Shanxi Province, along the Yellow River, an area in the northwest of China that separates the three provinces of Shanxi, Shan'xi and Henan. Although the area is historically and geographically important in China, it is much less developed in comparison to the coastal areas. Currently, its main economic output comes from agricultural production, specifically asparagus. The area is the largest base for asparagus growing in China and has eight asparagus processing businesses. The average income in ZZ village reached 3,000 yuan in 2005. As one of 35 villages in the area, ZZ village has a population of 1,524 and 388 households. The households are divided into five administrative groups. The cultivated land of the village is 1,883 Mu (about 126 hectares).

The unique characteristic of ZZ village is that some of the elderly do not live in the village but rather on the beach, two or three miles from the village. In the 1980s, the village leader decided to encourage villagers to cultivate land on the beach. Some villagers in their 40s and 50s responded to the call by settling along the beach of the Yellow River. Two decades have passed and those who were engaged in beach land cultivation are now in their 60s and 70s. They have been living in houses on the beach and have formed a new way of living that they refuse to give up by moving back to the village.

The elderly on the beach believed that the place was more appropriate for them to live. They said the air was cleaner and the water softer in comparison to the village. They live in very modest houses of 20 to 30 square meters with two or three furnished rooms. Some have a TV set while some did not. The houses tend to be surrounded by the cultivated land or orchards. All the old people living on the beach have remained physically and functionally independent. Although they live independently in their own houses, they have formed a neighbourhood that allows for close communication among themselves.

Not all the village elderly live on the beach. About two-thirds still live inside the village. Old couples tend to live independently in a house of their own. Those who have lost a spouse tend to continue living independently or live with one of their children,

depending on whether there are adult children in the village as well as on the financial situation of the elderly themselves and their children. Older people have had to rely on children for a living when they were no longer able to work.

The majority of the aged villagers were actively involved in productive labour, including some 25 people aged 80 or over. Besides those who were actively involved in agricultural production on the beach, those who stayed in the village worked in the fields. As the income generated from agricultural production was unstable, elderly were living very modestly.

Two organisations, the local Farmers Association and the village Association for Aged Persons, played a role in old age support. The Farmers Association was a relatively influential organisation with 3,865 members in the surrounding 35 villages. The organisation explored opportunities for productive work for its members, including opportunities for the elderly to get paid for spinning cotton into yarn for the local textile workshop. The Association for Aged Persons mediated in family conflicts and liaised between individuals who were in need of help and the village administration.

The above three cases provide us with a limited picture of old age support in rural China. It seems that traditional arrangements for older people to live with one of their adult children under the same roof have been seriously undermined. Most of the elderly who have a stable income choose to live separately from their children. But this separate living within the community does not disengage the old people from their families. On the contrary, it gives both the elderly and the younger generation more free space and avoids some generational conflicts.

There is a need to think of elderly people as valuable resources for rural community development. The overwhelming majority of old people in these villages, especially those under the age of 80, are not dependent on anyone for a living. Some have to work because they lack support, but many engage in production as a way of life even if they have enough income from family and the community.

There are still problems for those who do not have any income, who are too old to work or whose children are not in a financially sound situation. Many of these people are elderly women. Even if they live under the same roof, they tend to be neglected by other members of the family.

It seems that the status of old people is related to both the local economy and community organisations. Resources only from farming usually are enough to fund welfare plans for the aged. Industries and commercial businesses need to help with funding. Grassroots organisations, whether it is the village committee, local farmers' association or village aged associations, have important roles to play in advocating and organising action for old age support.



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