
F L O O R

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE, LAND POLICY, AND GLOBAL SOCIAL RIGHTS

Working Paper No. 21 (2014)

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Intellectual origins of the Chinese Minimum Living Standard System

Applying a model of multiple knowledge diffusion

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**FLOOR is an interdisciplinary research group,
partly funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.**

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Abstract

Research on the global diffusion of knowledge and ideas especially in the field of global social policy has emphasized vertical “top-down” transfers of ideas promoted by global actors. Additionally the diffusion of knowledge through the “horizontal” transfer of ideas between nation states has been considered. This investigation into the social cash transfer system in China goes beyond these forms of mapping the diffusion of ideas, emphasizing that knowledge has been disseminated in a multilevel and multidimensional way. The paper emphasizes the important role of a variety of international organization and world regions in the development of social policy in China. The paper, which is based on literature study, in-depth interviews and document analysis, concludes that several international and transnational actors have been involved in the establishment of a social assistance scheme in China, each contributing to different aspects of designing such a scheme. A rationalized social model defined as a “social assistance scheme” has been socially constructed by the Chinese intelligentsia from a variety of different models of social cash transfer schemes around the globe, leading to a new, modern welfare system designed to protect all Chinese residents.

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Introduction

Social policy in developing countries is often influenced by ideas and models from Western countries and international organizations. Despite much empirical research about knowledge diffusion, remarkable research gaps remain. This includes the question whether global knowledge diffusion applies mainly to less developed countries with weak governments. To what degree and in which ways does knowledge diffusion extend to large and economically powerful southern countries like China?

The selection of China as a case study may yield fruitful theoretical insights in the research of global knowledge diffusion. First of all China is generally perceived as an autonomous nation which is immune to any influences from outside. Secondly China, as a country, is made up of a huge continental area which is subdivided into very heterogeneous sub-national regions. The noticeable difference within such a continental-scale nation makes knowledge transfer between different local regions in China possible and is not out of the ordinary. The adoption of pilot projects in very different social policy fields and their subsequent dissemination across China shows the intensity of internal knowledge diffusion. Thirdly in comparison to other nations China has a few notable peculiarities as a nation: there are many different Chinese societies outside mainland China, like Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and Singapore, and China also has a large diaspora outside Chinese territory. Millions of Chinese people are scattered all over the world, overseas. These multiple Chinese societies have a lot of power to influence economical, social and political change in China. For these reasons an investigation into social policy in China constitutes a hard test of the manner and extent of global knowledge diffusion.

This article will investigate the core program of social cash transfers in China – MLSS, the Minimum Living Standard Scheme. It will seek to investigate the impact of global knowledge diffusion on the evolution of social assistance scheme in China. The central focus will be to test if knowledge diffusion from the global community shapes the social assistance scheme in China at all. If this diffusion can be verified, how can we conceptualize knowledge diffusion in China? What are the theoretical implications for research into global knowledge diffusion based on this case study? The research findings show that a multilevel and multidimensional global knowledge diffusion has shaped the emergence, extension and further development of the MLSS in China in which national, bilateral and multilateral actors all over the world are involved. During intensive interaction between China and the world society at the global level Chinese scholars and bureaucrats have adopted some new normative ideas and values from the outside world. The changing cognitive ideas of the Chinese elite have created a new philosophical foundation for setting up a new institutional order defined as a modern state social policy scheme to cover all Chinese citizens.

This essay is based on two empirical research trips to China in March and September 2011 during which I made several expert interviews with scholars and bu-

reaucrats who have been involved in the establishment of the MLSS in China. Besides the field research I attended and participated in a symposium in Nanjing in May 2011 which put social assistance at the top of the agenda. I have also included some additional interviews from this conference.

Theoretical Framework

Knowledge diffusion

Knowledge diffusion denotes that new ideas are interpreted, carried and transferred between actors. In any one society there are opinion leaders who receive new ideas first and then convert them into an analytic context (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, 2000; Kern 2000). Those opinion leaders consist usually of journalists, lawyers, scholars, leaders of social movements and politicians who dominate the discourse of power (Rogers 1962). Some other theoretical approaches like the “advocacy coalition” approach (Sabatier 1991; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999) and the “epistemic community” approach (Haas 1990) underpin the theory of knowledge diffusion by highlighting the influential role of science communities who have the power to create new thinking and ideas in a knowledge market. If a network of discourse between scientists, scholars, journalists and politicians has been set up, they can exercise their organized power to spread new laws, values, norms and knowledge jointly in a society, or they can block the reception of ideas collectively. The reception and diffusion of norms and ideas involves a construction of rationality, as the actors believe in those ideas which they prefer and perceive as rational and progressive, and they vote against other ideas by interpreting them as irrational and unsustainable.

In addition, the connection of the theory of knowledge diffusion with world polity theory may broaden theoretical insights in social policy research. Representative scholars of the world polity school like Thomas Boli and John W. Meyer have been exploring an independent level of global reality operating beyond national state borders. With a foundation of comprehensive empirical data and through wide ranging investigation the Stanford scholars have detected the emergence of a cosmopolitan world society, illuminating simultaneously a worldwide diffusion of rationalized models in the realm of high school education, higher education for women, environmental protection, competitive democracy, and the institutions of the market economy etc (Boli and Thomas 1997; Boli 1987; Meyer 1977, 1980; Meyer, Frank, Hironaka, Schofer and Tuma 1997).

This dissemination of values and rationalized models induces a logical consequence of isomorphism: similar institutional and structural development has taken place in almost all countries independent of the heterogeneous local cultural configuration and discrepancies of economic status at national and sub-national level. These rationalized models are legitimized by some basic world cultural values such as individualism (basic human rights), universalism (for example the equality discourse), rationalism (institutional accountability instead of supernatural and transcendental magic) and socially progressive ideas (such as economic growth, improvement of health care system) which originate from Western society

(Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez 1997; Meyer 2005). The central value of world culture centres on the discourse of human rights which is based on the ontological status of individual, since the individual represents the smallest irreducible societal unit which has an ultimate significance in modern society. The world society values with a central focus on human rights and individualism are unexceptionally originated from Occidental culture and become universal norms by declaring their universal validity beyond national cultural heterogeneity (Meyer 2005). These values and rationalized social models in different domains convert increasingly into institutional myths and unquestionable beliefs which are internalized by the actors not only in Occidental countries but also world wide in all countries (Meyer 2005).

How are ideas “traveling” around the world and shaping institutional changes at the national and sub-national level? Research into knowledge diffusion has shown a wide variety of different diffusion paths. The major focus has been on the sender actors; and the following questions have been raised: how, to what extent and through which ways and communication channels have international science communities and international organizations disseminated ideas to the developing world? One of the most common diffusion means which is exercised by the Bretton Woods Institutions is the granting of loans. The World Bank and IMF for instance make loans conditional on the acceptance of certain programs by the recipient countries. The classic example of this is the diffusion of the multi-pillar-model of the old-age-pension to the post-communist and transformation countries in East European, CIS and Latin American countries (World Bank 1994; Orenstein 2003, 2008; Deacon 1997). One international science community – the Chicago School of Economics, which is famous for its alleged title “The Chicago Boys” cooperated with World Bank and both of them invited many liberal-wing scholars from transformation and post-communist countries to visit the original country which created the capital funded old age pension – Chile, and they organized and funded these visits in order to spread ideas of privatization of old age pensions (Orenstein 2003, 2005). Some American think tanks for instance the Ford Foundation and the Carte Centre have funded and organized a great deal of work shops, international conferences and symposiums and thus have transferred neo-liberal or sometimes social-liberal ideas to the scholars from the global south (Liu 2005). The more frequently used diffusion mean is for international organizations to send experts and specialists from different economical, social and political fields to the global south countries who cooperate with the scholars or with grass-roots-activists from those countries. These international experts have then disseminated new ideas and models to these southern countries. Usually the World Bank and IMF on the one side, and the UN, ILO and ISSA on the other side have published reports annually about a variety of social and economical issues and provided data with respect to some social and economical indicators all over the world. By compiling data from countries around the globe international sender actors can create an international comparison horizon. All countries are able to use these international rankings to inform about how well their systems are functioning. The other means of diffusion which is commonly exploited by national or international development organizations is in the promotion of pilot projects. They commonly

fund local experimentation projects, cooperate with the local political, social and ethnical actors and seek to prove if models are useful and able to be adapted in the local field. If local pilot-projects have proved to be successful, then they are transferred to other areas in the country. Different forms of knowledge diffusion contribute to the transfer of ideas: one is the vertical diffusion form through which a top-down diffusion is spurred by the international organizations and some bilateral development organizations; the other form is the horizontal diffusion form which refers mainly to the policy learning and policy transfer between national states or between some sub-national actors. The major questions in my case study are to discover how we can portray the forms of knowledge diffusion in China. What is their resemblance to the usual models of knowledge diffusion within the “world-society”? What are the special features of the knowledge diffusion in China?

In the next chapter the construction of the Minimum Living Standards Scheme in urban areas in China will be scrutinized.

A constructivist model of multiple knowledge diffusion in China

The set up of the MLSS scheme in China was originally triggered by the internal problems encountered by local governments. The market economic transformation, the deficient unemployment insurance system and a massive rising number of dismissed and laid off workers were the major driving forces in building up a new institutional social assistance scheme granting an institutional cash allowance to local habitants by securing their basic needs (Tang 1995, 1997; Zhang and Tang 2010). One of the most intriguing motivations for the local governments’ actions is undoubtedly the political consideration of maintaining social stability; some scholars have argued that the experimental MLSS schemes in the local context are a political instrument to avert social turmoil. For the same reason the central government then interfered in this domain frequently and the issue became a question for the central state rather than simply a local issue.

Can we then come to the conclusion that the establishment of the MLSS scheme can only be explained by an endogenous approach? Will a stimulus-response model be the dominant explanation model for the development of a social assistance scheme in China? The answer is Yes and No. The functionalist approach has indeed traced the real problems which appeared in initial market economic reform, and attributed the construction of the MLSS scheme solely to mechanical feedback by the Chinese authorities in response to the mounting problems which they encountered. This monocausal explanation has on the one side magnified the danger of social conflict and on the other side underestimated the changing ideas, norms and perceptions of actors towards the relationship between state, society, household and individual. Without analysis at the ideational level with respect to the ways of thinking by leading scholars, practitioners, bureaucrats and the major think tanks in China one could come to a very simple conclusion that the rapid change of Chinese social policy was merely driven by social problems – but this analysis would be deficient. The other deficit of the stimulation-feedback approach is that it totally disregards the way in which the social assistance scheme is socially and culturally embedded. A functionalist approach cannot explain why

the Chinese authorities adopted a state-organized institutional social safety-net to compensate for the new risks created by economic reform instead of stretching the formal traditional “Five-Guarantees-System” from rural to urban areas.¹ Nor does it explain why the Chinese central government now annually pays more than RMB 10 billions yuan annually into this new institutional scheme. What is the moral and normative foundation for such a remarkable redistribution scheme, which had never been thought of by policymakers in the past? Why would the state take more and more responsibility for the welfare needs of people who have working ability but do not join in the labor market? Why would the central government seek to shape a more centralized system instead of letting “one hundred flowers blossom”² in local experiments?

Regarding the interweaving and interconnection of the local, national and transnational actors in globalization and knowledge diffusion I will distance myself from the traditional monocausal “stimulus-response-approach” and will further deconstruct the “rational-choice-approach” postulating that actors behave in most cases rationally and aim primarily to maximize their profits through their social conduct. In contrast to these two approaches I will depict the interaction between the Chinese elite and other experts in other part of the world and seek to elaborate the distinctive character of this bilateral interaction and reveal its theoretical implications. The major sociological discovery is that interaction between China and the world society has changed the cognitive perception of the Chinese elite towards social security. This in turn has triggered off further reforms as a chain reaction. Drawing on empirical data which I have collected in my two empirical studies in 2011 in several Chinese cities I will argue that the majority of the Chinese elite has constructed a undoubted myth in the public cognitive space that has been deeply shaped by a common sense structure in the global epistemic community, and this form of epistemological space favors the emergence of a new state-run social assistance scheme in China. The successful action of actors (in this case related mostly to social scientists and bureaucrats) depends on how and to what extent the actors rely on the new symbolic characters and how far they can transfer them to the dominant discourses in a national context. Under the framework of an emerging world society experts can “borrow” symbolic characters from the outside world and rely on shared generalized ideas and values to create a strong and legitimate basis for reform. The following section will focus on the cognitive changes amongst the Chinese scientific community linking this to sociological theories of knowledge diffusion.

¹ “Five-Guarantees-System” was adopted by the Communist government in the Mao-era which granted food, clothing, medical treatment, housing and burial expenses merely for the old people without any income and family members. Basically this system is a residual system which doesn’t transfer any cash; it remains an allowance in kind and targets some special categories of needy people (Sun and Dong 2000).

² “One hundred flowers blossom” is a Chinese idiom which portrays the cultural and speech freedom and the competition between different philosophical thoughts like Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism, Legalism in the Spring and Autumn Period (From 771 to 476 BC).

The Minimum Living Standards Scheme (MLSS) in urban China - emergence and development

In 1992 the former top Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping travelled to Southern China and in a famous speech announced that China should leave the orthodox planned economy and bravely embrace the market economy. This speech in his travel in Southern China by Deng has encouraged the termination of the conservative line in the party and sped up the economic reform towards a market economy. The adoption of the market economy in a socialist country has led to a conspicuous economic expansion with an annual growth rate of GDP by 12% to 19%, but simultaneously the great economic transformation has given rise to some social and ecological problems as well as social unrest (Cannon 2000).

The economic transformation was accompanied by the rationalization of many of the existing enterprises in the economically advanced regions in China, which means, that millions of surplus labor forces in the state-run enterprises were dismissed. In the pre-reform epoch more labour force had been employed than one enterprise really needed³. Indeed, more than 30 million Chinese workers were dismissed or temporarily laid off by state enterprises in the 1990s (Chen and Rösner 2000). This radical system transformation was then overwhelmed by a large influx of dismissed Chinese workers. In the former epoch of communism the welfare needs of a Chinese worker were fundamentally linked with his/her status in a Danwei⁴ which proffered salary, child care allowance, health insurance, labor security, work incident insurance, old age pension etc. Now as soon as one worker was dismissed, he/she might lose permanent life protection from the paternalistic state as well as his/her cognitive expectation of life stability and social security for the long term. Since in China a comprehensive social insurance system had not yet been set up and unemployment insurance in China was residual at this stage, there was no institution at that time which could cover the millions of unemployed people dismissed and laid off in the tide of great economic reform. This new social vacuum triggered off social unrest and organized protests by unemployed workers which threatened essential social and political stability. In the economically more advanced regions the government encountered more social troubles and conflicts because more employees were laid off in response to the rationalization of enterprises than in economically backward regions (Chen and Rösner 2000).

Under these conditions some local governments engaged in policy innovation to prevent the social turmoil caused by the absence of an effective unemployment social insurance system. The Shanghai city government made this breakthrough by establishing an innovative system to cover the massive number of dismissed workers. In 1993 the Shanghai government initiated a pilot project to protect vul-

³ The communist ideology declares that in a socialist and communist country the problem of unemployment is already eradicated, as the new society had overcome the deficit of the capitalist system. For this reason the communist states kept up full employment artificially by assigning work to each person. This policy of full employment contradicts the principium of economic rationalization usually (Ascher 1976).

⁴ Danwei means in Chinese "units" which are differentiated into enterprise units and public institutions in Communist China. In the urban areas everyone belonged to one Danwei which marked the symbolic status of a citizen.

nerable people who lost their jobs temporarily and permanently in the market economic reforms. This system was called the Minimum Living Standard Guarantee Program (MLSGP) which was financed by the fiscal revenues of the Shanghai government. Originally this system was aimed at the people who were dismissed or laid off by their state-run enterprises, however, with the emergence of new urban poverty problem in the transformation towards a market economy the policymakers in Shanghai decided to stretch this system to cover all Shanghai residents. This local MLSGP was based on a means-tested method which accounted for not only individual income and property but also the income of the household. Simultaneously the Shanghai government decided to set a poverty line which was based on the basis of social and economic conditions and local living standards. That means that all Shanghai residents theoretically could apply for a MLSGP allowance if their incomes slid under the locally defined poverty line.

This innovative action to address the social vacuum created by economic reform by the Shanghai government firstly triggered the attention of other neighbor regions and then of some other economically advanced regions. Firstly the city governments of Xiamen, Qingdao, Dalian, Guangzhou, Fuzhou etc. sent their researchers to Shanghai to investigate the Shanghai-model for social assistance scheme and when possible, they looked to emulate the successful experiences there and transfer the Shanghai model to their own regions. The feedback from local politicians and researchers seemed quite positive, and so local city governments decided to adopt similar social assistance schemes in their own regions. Until 1995 about six cities adopted the social assistance schemes which were all financed by local fiscal revenues. The acquisition of the allowance was related to local poverty lines stipulated by local governments (Tang 2003b). The Shanghai pilot project has been disseminated to other cities and provinces in China, and local governments were inclined to adopt some new measures into their own systems. This domestic knowledge diffusion rapidly led to more and more local regions learning from each other and, until May 1997, 206 cities adopted the new cash transfer schemes, and several different models of social assistance have appeared in China (Tang 2003b).

At the same time as local regions were learning from each other, the central government attempted to send some research fellows to Shanghai in order to learn more about the Shanghai model of social assistance scheme. The particularly innovative way in which the scheme had developed in Shanghai mean that the local government in Shanghai didn't want to let the central government know what they had done as they were the first to attempt a scheme of this kind. One MLSS-expert told me the following story in an interview: Due to the neo-liberal environment since the introduction of the market economy into China in 1990s the economic agenda was the dominant issue at all levels of government in China. The Shanghai policymakers were concerned about causing trouble for other regions because they thought that if a new social assistance scheme was implemented it could increase social expenditures for them and aggravate the financial burden in those regions. Considering that a new social policy programme might be unpopular the Shanghai government didn't want to let research fellows from central government know much about the new policy. Moreover the local administration in

Shanghai attempted to prevent the research fellows from central government from obtaining any details about the MLSGP in Shanghai; they even created obstacles to hinder the central government officials from getting access to empirical data and concrete information about this new experiment in Shanghai. But as soon as the Shanghai pilot project had spread across the country and was interpreted as a successful experiment by other regions, the Shanghai administration became more open and confident in its own decision, and officials cooperated more and more with central government. Since more than a hundred cities, counties and districts nation-wide had introduced the new cash transfer schemes, the central government decided to intervene in this area. In 1999 the State Council has adopted a “Minimum Living Standards Scheme Regulation” for urban residents (MLSS) (Tang 2003a), and the central government sought to make a termination to the regionalization and fragmentation of local experiments in order to unify the urban social assistance scheme. Because the State Council sought to regulate the scheme, the MLSS became a national rather a regional priority. According to the new regulation, all Chinese cities had to introduce this new social assistance scheme which was confined to urban areas at that time.

Before the intervention by the State Council the MLSS scheme was a highly fragmented local issue, and the different local schemes were financed predominantly by local governments. At this stage of the policy-experiment (1993-1999) the system of social assistance to protect vulnerable urban people was ultimately created as a response to local unemployment problems and had a very strong volunteer rather than mandatory flavor. There was no any legal obligation for local government to introduce this new welfare provision. A vast variety of social assistance schemes had arisen. In economically advanced regions like Shanghai and Sunan⁵ there were comparatively generous social benefits for urban citizens, in contrast to some economically backward regions where the development of a modern social institution to protect the urban poor was in its early stages or did not exist at all. In 2001 the central government started to invest some 460 millions Yuan into the MLSS scheme (Zhang and Tang 2010). Since then central government revenues soared dramatically. Until 2009 75% of the costs for the MLSS were subsidized by the central government, the rest of the costs for the MLSS scheme were financed by governments at different levels including provinces, cities and counties,⁶ up until then the MLSS became a national social policy. However, the emergence of the MLSS scheme as a national issue does not mean that vaudeville forms of MLSS in different regions have vanished completely, on the contrary the MLSS even today has a very strong federal character with respect to the heterogeneity and geographic complexity in China. Local governments have maintained the capacity to decide their own poverty line locally and grant the beneficiaries different social allowances related to local living standards. Accordingly there were very heterogeneous methods of selecting needy people in different regions⁷.

⁵ Sunan refers geographically to the southern part of Jiangsu province which belongs to the one of the most economically advanced regions in China. In this region the thriving township and village enterprises have contributed to the high GDP per capita in this region.

⁶ See the data published on the homepage of MOC <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/zwgk/tjsj/>.

⁷ For instance, in some regions the local civil affairs offices cooperate with resident committees and regularly

The urban MLSS at the interface of multiple streams of knowledge diffusion

A latent global knowledge framework: constructing social assistance as rationalized “common knowledge”

In the beginning of 1990s the Chinese bureaucrats and scholars started to look for solutions from outside China to new urban poverty problems. The emergence of the Chinese social assistance scheme is closely linked to comparable schemes elsewhere in the world. One of the famous experts in the field of social assistance and social relief from Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) who worked in the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOC) and participated in each important policy-making-process told me in interview that the pilot-project in Shanghai was strongly shaped by the knowledge structure of the former Shanghai mayor – Mr. Xu, Kuangdi who had studied and worked in Sweden. He had been personally strongly influenced by the Scandinavian model of the welfare state. As he had thoroughly studied the Swedish model of a state-organized social assistance system to cover the citizens who had no income and no sources of subsistence, and in which the appropriate state authorities would transfer the cash to people in need to guarantee their basic needs, the Shanghai government followed this example of how to solve the new social problems of urban poverty. This personal preference for a welfare state model by the former mayor of Shanghai influenced the implementation of this pilot-project in Shanghai.

However, the great social and political transformation that China has undergone cannot only be attributed to the personal inclination of one local politician; indeed the Chinese epistemic community with its scientific, political and social elites has benefited substantially from a worldwide cosmopolitan cognitive and knowledge framework which has not been explicated by any authorized international organization or any standardized literature, as yet. Clearly in almost every western country there is a social assistance scheme covering needy people and based on means-testing (Leisering et al. 2006; Leisering 2009), and even though nobody in social science circles had introduced social assistance schemes abroad systematically, at the time that China began the process of a government sponsored scheme, the existence of such systems was widely known inside Chinese society and had become a “common knowledge” amongst the social policy community. One social policy expert from Beijing University who had studied at Leiden University in the Netherlands explained to me the cognitive transformation of the perception of Chinese public towards social relief and social assistance. In the initial time of reform policy generally nobody knew anything about state-organized cash transfer schemes. Only if people were destitute which was the case for some unfortunate people (for example if old or disabled people had no income, no children and no any sources for their basic living needs), they were then eligi-

conduct income and property tests. Local street committees have an obligation to check the income of needy people by conducting house visits. In some cities the local civil affairs administrations use average household expenditures as the indicator to measure social need. In some regions local governments organize public hearings and listen to public opinion and then decide which people are in need.

ble to receive a residual allowance from the state. Otherwise it would be unimaginable that somebody who was of working age and with working ability could receive any kind of cash transfer from the state. The Chinese belief system of Confucianism and Sino-communism (which together heavily influence modern Chinese culture) don't encourage a system of state organized cash transfer to needy individuals. Chinese history shows the existence of residual social relief to the poor, but never institutional social assistance. The values of Confucianism favour the transfer of cash amongst family members, and Sino-communism favours a productivity- and work-oriented welfare policy which looks down upon indolence and absenteeism.

The above mentioned professor from Beijing University told me a story, from which more generalized conclusion can be drawn: as the first generation of Chinese started to study, work and live abroad, and as the first generation of Chinese migrated to western countries in the 1980s (after the adoption of open-door and reform policy by the Chinese reformists), some Chinese migrants told their friends and relatives that there was a social assistance system abroad, and that when the income of one citizen dropped below the poverty line, then he was automatically eligible for a state granted cash allowance. The Chinese audience could hardly believe what they were hearing, and doubted the reliability of these words. But when some of the Chinese migrants told their friends and relatives that they had personally received this allowance already, the listeners finally believed this narrative. That is a typical example of one of the ways in which the Chinese public first heard about social assistance schemes from abroad. Even though at the outset very few people knew about them, with the extension of the open-door-policy and the intensification of international communication more and more Chinese people have gradually become informed about these systems abroad. Until the mid-1990s this system of social assistance scheme was well-known amongst Chinese social policy experts (Interview 6).

The information available about social assistance schemes in the West has created a general cognitive perception about them. The diffusion of a latent global knowledge framework has changed the perception of Chinese elite and public towards a state organized social assistance scheme. This ideational evolution which is linked closely with the abrupt integration of China into global society has created a new "naturalness" inside Chinese society, at least in the social policy community. The cognitive perception of Chinese scholars is essentially coupled with a global knowledge structure. This new form of "naturalness" has reversed the traditional idea that able bodied people should earn money to sustain their lives by themselves and even in adversity they should only be supported by their family members and relatives. The construction of a so called "common sense" belief represents what John Meyer called the "unquestionable truth" in world-polity theory. Since some ideas and values are deeply embedded in the public's cognitive perception, they are not questioned, doubted and discussed any more. Moreover, the actors take them for granted. The semantic structure of common sense engenders a strengthened awareness from the whole of society as to the necessity of state intervention to solve social problems; it has strengthened the legitimacy of state institutional action as well. The major question is not if China should establish a so-

cial cash transfer scheme any more, the central question is rather how and to what extent. The adaptation of institutional myths (in the form of generalized common knowledge) verifies the existence of reality at a global level which constitutes exogenous forces beyond the boundary of national states.

Go west and go to Hong Kong: Diffusion between two Chinese societies

One very well-known Chinese novel called “Journey to the West”⁸ narrates a famous story about a Buddhist monk in the Tang-Dynasty who traveled to India to pick up the Buddhist canons in order to spread Buddhist ideas and doctrines into China. The concept of the “West” in ancient China related to India, but this geographical understanding with a focus on India has been replaced in modern times by the Occidental world inclusive of the United States of America and Western Europe. Since the Opium War in 1840 Chinese intellectuals were increasingly inclined to look towards the West. They sought to introduce progressive knowledge and ideas to China in order to make their homeland powerful and prosperous. This trend known as “Turning in the direction of the West” was suspended in the Cultural Revolution in the Mao-era; however, since the reform and the open-door policy of 1978 close ties between East and West have been rebuilt, and the Chinese elite have been keen to absorb advanced ideas from the West to change the backward conditions of China.

Learning from the West was not only confined to the fields of economy, education and science and technology, this learning has also extended to the field of social policy. In the reform of old age pensions, in the recalibration of the health insurance system, and in the process of the creation of an industrial injury insurance scheme researchers have noticed a massive transfer of policy between China and the West, and the Chinese epistemic community has attempted to learn from overseas experiences to modernize systems in China (see Leisering and Liu 2010; Liu 2005). Knowledge diffusion plays an essential role in the rationalization of Chinese social security systems. As I have mentioned the Chinese science community in the field of social assistance and social relief has benefited tremendously from a global comparison horizon even if they can not clearly say which country has shaped the MLSS scheme in China mostly. Since the existence of a state-financed social assistance scheme is now generally considered as latent common sense more and more Chinese scholars, since the 1990s, have attempted to learn from Western countries with respect to the operational details of social assistance schemes. Due to the barriers of language and culture many of them could not communicate with scholars from Western countries directly. They had to make a circuitous route to firstly make contact with academic circles from Hong Kong, and then through that connection with Hong Kong they aimed to attract as many ideas and as much knowledge from the rest of the modern world as possible.

In modern Chinese history the city society of Hong Kong has played a special role in the modernization of China, in fact it has acted as bridgehead from mainland China to the modern Western world. Due to its special status as carrier of

⁸ This well-known novel was composed by Wu, Chengen (1504-1582) in the Ming Dynasty.

Chinese culture and as a crown colony Hong Kong has always had a special function linking China with the western world. Since the Opium War in 1840 Hong Kong has taken unusual responsibility for bringing the East and West together and attempting to integrate these two different cultures into one whole. In the era of Late-Qing-Dynasty and Republic of China (1911-1949), many famous political rebels and revolutionaries had fled to Hong Kong to avoid political repression and attempted to seek refuge there⁹. In many cases Hong Kong acted as a vanguard of new thinking and revolutionary ideas. After World War II Hong Kong evolved into a modern society by creating a transparent system of law and a civil service system which has guaranteed an independent and free space for civil society. Since the era of reform and the open door policy more and more scholars and bureaucrats from mainland China have travelled to Hong Kong to learn from the more advanced experiences of Hong Kong.

Since the written language between Hong Kong and mainland China is the same, this homogenized cultural and linguistic context substantially facilitates communication between scholars from Mainland China and Hong Kong, even if the spoken languages of Mandarin and Cantonese differentiate considerably¹⁰. Hong Kong scholars treat the English language as their mother tongue because Hong Kong students are trained with English regularly from primary school. Understanding this language benefits the scholars from Hong Kong as they are able to read and learn directly from Western social science literature without depending on any second-hand-transfer of knowledge. Hong Kong scholars have introduced Western literature to the Chinese social science community, moreover they have also translated some English literature into Chinese. That has been very important and useful for the scholars of the “Cultural- Revolution-Generation” from mainland China who lost the chance of formal education for ten years during their education age. During this period they were also unable to learn English. Thus many of them have a strong language barrier, even if they wish to learn from the West it can prove difficult to do so. But if they travel to Hong Kong, they can on the one hand learn from the experiences of Hong Kong, and on the other hand they can learn values and ideas from the West through Hong Kong. In this case the city state Hong Kong acts as an intermediary station between mainland China and the West.

In the 1990s it was fashionable for Chinese scholars and bureaucrats to move to Hong Kong to absorb advanced knowledge. This social trend affected the field of social assistance and social relief in China. Several scholars and bureaucrats from the MOC studied in Hong Kong. The key man in the field of social assistance, Tang Jun, who considerably shaped the MLSS scheme, studied in the Department of Applied Social Science in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in the 1990s; his close friend Zhang Shifei – the another leading figure in the urban MLSS, who is now working as a research fellow at the MOC, studied at the Chinese University

⁹ For instance “the father of nation” of the Republic of China, Dr. Sun Yat-sen had fled from Canton to Hong Kong avoiding the suppression of the Qing-government, and there he collected funds and assistance of public to support the bourgeois revolution in China.

¹⁰ Cantonese is a Chinese dialect in the Province Canton, Hong Kong and Macau SAR, and it is practiced by most of overseas Chinese in South East Asian countries additionally.

of Hong Kong and received a Doctorate degree for social welfare in 2001.

Scholars from these two different Chinese societies have woven a dense network by interacting consistently in institutional contexts. Scholars from mainland China have studied at Hong Kong universities or undertaken practice in civil society associations there in order to introduce knowledge from Hong Kong to mainland China. Scholars from Hong Kong are regularly invited to symposiums, conferences, meetings and workshops in mainland China in which they attempt to transfer advanced ideas to mainland China. Increasingly more and more Hong Kong scholars have been invited to Beijing to participate in the People's Congress and the People's Political Consultative Conference where they could give advice on social development in China based on their experiences in Hong Kong. These close interactions have fostered the transformation of ideas with respect to the social assistance scheme. However, this didn't take the form of a mechanical copy, rather the Hong Kong model of social assistance acts as a reference framework for policy orientation for mainland China¹¹. Even if scholars from both sides have built an institutional communication channel, Chinese scholars and bureaucrats never had the intention to imitate the Hong Kong scheme directly because the social structure and social political background of both societies are totally heterogeneous. But Hong Kong does offer a remarkable series of institutional ideas about a modern social assistance scheme from the West to mainland China. The contribution of Hong Kong to the urban MLSS scheme in China should not be underestimated.

Influences from the USA and Europe: "social investment" and "universal entitlement"

The close ties between Hong Kong and Mainland China constitute only a small part of international communication by the Chinese social assistance community. Moreover, different kinds of communication networks between China and world society with respect to social cash transfer were built up during the 1990s. Some scholars went firstly to Hong Kong and created new networks of personal relations, with these new resources they then established and extended further contacts with Anglo-Saxon countries, particularly with the United States, but also with the United Kingdom and Australia. Some scholars who mastered the English language well travelled directly to the United States and studied there. Some other

¹¹ In Hong Kong there is a system „The Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA)“ scheme which was set up in the 1970s under the Hong Kong governor Sir Murray MacLehose and was given this name in 1990s under the Hong Kong governor Sir Chris Patten. The Hong Kong social security system is particularly shaped by the British Beveridge-Model and has only a private and mandatory provident fund system being equivalent to the social insurance system in Bismarck-countries. The major focus of the Hong Kong social security system concentrates on a comprehensive social assistance scheme which provides allowances for very different social groups like children, youth, old people, the disabled person, the low-income-household etc. The CSSA is divided in numerous heterogeneous subsystems which grant transfers of cash to different categories of social groups. The social security system of Hong Kong is formed clearly by the British Model, while the Northeast Asian countries like China and South Korea are elementarily shaped by the Bismarck-Model and these nations place great emphasis on the social insurance system, and the social assistance scheme acts really as last resort to cover people who are not eligible for the social insurance allowances (see Chow 1981; Hong Kong Government, Social Welfare Development 1978; Committee on Social Security, Hong Kong Council of Social Services 2000).

Chinese scholars like Professor Guan Xinping maintained regular contacts with European countries. Different arguments may be used to elaborate on why the Chinese epistemic community created unusually close ties with the United States. Firstly after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc the United States remained the sole world superpower, and under these circumstances the US model of economic and social policy could easily be regarded as a single successful model worldwide. A strong leaning towards the Washington Consensus appeared almost in all post-communist countries during the 1990s and this document was interpreted as a single short cut to a successful modern society at that time (Bhaduri and Nayyar 1997). The powerful and prosperous United States made the Chinese scholars easily construct an American “myth” which was based on their subjective judgment. Secondly in the 1990s China extended its reform and open-door policy towards the Western world, and the most important way for China to improve integration into the international community was through improving their relationship with United States. Since China adopted the market economy in the 1990s and left the inefficient state-run planned economy, fundamentalist ideas about the market liberalism spread quickly. As market liberalism originated in the United States, some Chinese scholars therefore favoured the American liberal model. Even in the field of social policy more scholars looked forward to a market-oriented social policy and many of them had reservations about the welfare state model (Lin 2001). Thirdly a few Chinese scholars had also woven comprehensive networks with Hong Kong scholars. Hong Kong was strongly shaped by the British model of economic and social policy and this distinctive Anglo-Saxon model created a pro Anglo-American culture in the former crown colony. The Chinese scholars who have studied there are also influenced by this culture and are inclined to learn more about relevant policies in English-speaking countries.

The full name of the Chinese social assistance scheme is the *Minimum Living Standards Scheme*. Semantically speaking, we could split up this term into two major linguistic units, namely an institutional system attempting to secure the livelihood of the citizens, where this system should be as a “minimum”. This semantic unit “minimum” has the following implication in the Chinese context: the benefit level of a cash transfer in the social assistance scheme should be minimized, and it amounts to 10–35% of local average incomes, the poverty lines have been stipulated by different levels of local governments (Zhang and Tang 2010). The federal system and character of the American welfare system is especially popular amongst Chinese social assistance circles since the lowest level of government in China has administrative discretionary power to decide the benefit level. This affinity between USA and China has to do with the large scale of land areas of both two countries. The consciousness of a very low level of benefit provided by the MLSS is deeply shaped by the American thinking of restricted social welfare and the idea of “workfare”. The liberal wing of Chinese scholars in the field of social assistance relates directly to the American experience. One professor of Beijing Normal University who had studied in United States and was involved in different kinds of cooperation programs organized by the Ford Foundation argues in interview:

At the outset we sought to learn from experiences from the United States,

Great Britain and Australia etc, well, mainly in the English-speaking countries where we had travelled around. And we have seen that in the United States there was a system: If one's income slides below the poverty line, then some certain benefits will be paid, so that is a system of difference compensation, which is basically what we have adopted. The United States do really have an immense influence on China. At the time as we started the reform and open-door-policy, we felt that all countries attempted to learn from the United States, even European countries as well, and such an idea of workfare has spread worldwide. Consequently our country has a very good understanding of the system in United States. The MOC (Ministry of Civil Affairs) has translated a lot of books from English into Chinese; some books have introduced the American system in detail. In some cases when the officials of the MOC visited the United States, and they have received a lot of data about American counties provided by American county governments. As a result of frequent exchanges we have been very well informed about social assistance schemes outside China¹².

Interview Nr. 2 (Professor of School of Social Development and Public Policy at Beijing Normal University)

One of the scholars at CASS (The Chinese Academy of Social Science) who had studied and received a Diploma Degree in Hong Kong was a former researcher at the MOC in 1990s, and he was regarded as the one of the most influential scholars to work on the urban MLSS scheme. He told me in an interview:

Even if some scholars advised us to upgrade the benefit level of the MLSS scheme, we do really insist that this system should be at the minimum level... International experiences have proved that a high level of benefit will not provide an incentive to work and make the beneficiaries dependent on social welfare. Welfare reform in America has given us important motivation to maintain a low level of benefits.

Interview Nr. 3 (The Deputy Director and Research Fellow of Institute of Sociology, CASS)

Strong liberal-oriented statements are very popular in Chinese academic circles and are often mentioned by different interview partners in my empirical study. Some interviewees use terms like "self-responsibility", "deserving poor", "workfare" and fear "moral hazards" and "negative incentives". However, it would probably be precipitate to claim that the US-Model of workfare is dominant in China. Instead it is usually noted that ideas from both the United States and Europe have interwoven and integrated into one cognitive structure which cannot be explicitly differentiated, and both European and American ideas are widely spread in China. In this case there are very few scholars who can be clearly classified as either neoliberal or social democratic discourse coalition. Since the West and Northern Europe are the cradle of modern social policy and modern social insurance, the continental European countries are other important originators of ideas with respect to social policy besides United States, therefore their significant

¹² He means mainly the United States of America.

role in the change in social policy in China should not be underestimated. The most interesting empirical findings are that some scholars simultaneously use American and European ideas as a frame of reference for their own understandings. Chinese scholars are open to the world society knowledge structures and pragmatically seek to combine different ideas from different regions into a new analytical structure. That means, that European and American ideas could be mentioned by a single expert without any contradictions. In some cases different ideas from United States and Europe compete with each other, in some cases they play a complementary role, in some cases ideas from these two world society centers are integrated in a new semantic and cognitive structure, and in some cases these original ideas are recombined and reinterpreted by Chinese actors.

One professor from Renmin University who has joined in the policy network to promote the urban social assistance schemes outlines the multiple levels of knowledge diffusion in interview:

In the architecture of the MLSS scheme, there is surely an international comparison. For instance, how the benefit level of the MLSS is defined, how the viability of this scheme is decided, and how this system targets the beneficiary group? To answer those questions we need international experience. That means, in the field of methods and concrete implementation we were influenced by the outside world. At the outset we were strongly influenced by Hong Kong, because initially Tang Jun and Zhang Shifei were both staying in Hong Kong. Afterwards during the phase of rethinking this system, we have used the experiences of the United States and Europe as reference. The focus was on: Is it better to set a high benefit level? Is it better to set broad spectrums benefits? How is this system linked with other systems? After this system has been set up, there is really a kind of policy learning at the global normative level.

Interview Nr. 7 (Deputy Director and Professor of Social Science and Demographic Institute at Renmin University of China)

This interview partner is personally involved in different kinds of international cooperation with different countries and highlights the influential role of the knowledge transfer and policy learning. In addition, he himself is particularly aware of the process of ideas spreading between China and Western countries. He makes a personal judgment about the role of knowledge and values from two world regions across the Atlantic. He also made the following statements:

We look forward to introducing knowledge from European countries and the United States. Europe encompasses the United Kingdom and Northern European countries, from cited literature in China you can see the origin of the ideas, and between colleagues we have often argued about the systems in European countries¹³. For instance, in some literature we have used the traditional poor law, the new poor law and the social security system after the World War II from the United Kingdom as a reference. And the British model is the origin of the Hong Kong's Comprehensive Social Security Assis-

¹³ Sometimes Chinese scholars classify the UK as an Anglo-Saxon country; sometimes as a European country - Great Britain fits both conditions.

tance, Great Britain has influence on Hong Kong, and Hong Kong has influence on mainland China. Besides these models the Northern European welfare state model has been researched and discussed by Chinese scholars as well. During this process of the exchange of international experience we became aware that the United States are comparatively economically dynamic, and they seek an integration of rights and duties, and they look forward to a restricted and low level of social welfare benefits. These ideas have given us inspiration.

Interview Nr. 7 (Deputy Director and Professor of Social Science and Demographic Institute at Renmin University of China)

Since he personally has created comprehensive networks with the international epistemic communities within Great Britain, Northern Europe and the United States, he can personally provide a systematic comparison between different models from different world regions. He analyzes why the US-model is more popular in China and why the US-model is more rational in his opinion. The following statements by him may reflect the attitude of many Chinese scholars.

Inspired by the American ideas, we have a clear policy orientation. The MLSS program is a restricted system of public assistance; it can only ensure basic livelihood. The receipt of assistance should not be long-term, since long-term reception of assistance will not encourage social participation. In this manner we have been affected by several American theories like the theory of asset building and capacity building. Relying on these theories we have also used some concepts such as promotion of exit mechanism, the reinforcement of dynamic administration, strengthening work incentives and a combination of social assistance and reemployment. Particularly the American reforms from 1996 onwards have had a fairly great impact on us.

Interview Nr. 7 (Deputy Director and Professor of Social Science and Demographic Institute at Renmin University of China)

This statement is representative of the Chinese epistemic community and exhibits main-stream opinion in the academic world. Even if multiple levels of knowledge diffusion takes place between the West and the East and even if many different ideas spread into China, basically the American ideas are fairly attractive and popular. Most Chinese scholars attempt to balance economic, social (or sometimes ecological) development. They favour a model of social assistance which ensures on the one hand the basic livelihood and wellbeing of citizens, but on the other hand they clearly distance themselves from the conception of the social-cultural minimum as it is practiced in many European countries, since they fear that a high benefit level and a relaxed definition will give the wrong incentives to the beneficiaries and may discourage them from re-entering into the labour market. That means that they generally disfavour a model of “high welfare” and “few incentives”. A rational model for their opinions should be on the one hand the “social investment state”, but on the other side this state-run scheme should not grant too generous benefits without considering the duties of citizen. In this vein Chinese scholars turn away from a pure neoliberal ideology by emphasizing the responsibility of the state, and simultaneously they keep their distance from a broad defini-

tion of social assistance as well.

This pragmatic attitude toward international ideas facilitates subjective interpretation and an active selectivity of the values and models disseminated by the Western world. The different symbols which have been “borrowed” from the world society are given a social meaning only if these symbolic notations are analyzed and elaborated on by the Chinese epistemic community. The spreading and reception of these borrowed ideas is decided by the social construction of mainstream opinions. Another relevant factor is how closely scholars are linked to bureaucrats and how frequently these actors interact each other. The close interconnection between scholars and bureaucrats will shore up the adoption of the new symbols constructed by actors in the academic world. Otherwise the opinions and ideas of the academic world will not be valued by decision-makers intensively, and remaining buncombes. The above mentioned scholar from CASS told me that a Hong Kong scholar had undertaken an investigation into the position of the MOC in the 1980s and come to the conclusion that the MOC had been somehow marginalized since this ministry was only responsible for natural disaster relief, poverty aid and social relief like Wubao (“Five Guarantees”) which were peripheral issues compared to labour security and social insurance. His investigation suggested that the marginalization of these agendas led inexorably to the marginalization of the ministry itself. Since the MLSS in urban areas was established the MOC has taken full responsibility for the scheme. The status of the MOC has been very much enhanced since the scheme dominated China’s new agenda. One research fellow from the MOC told me that the emergence and extension of the MLSS scheme has created a new social assistance community which was separate from other old social policy fields such as the pension, health insurance and social relief communities and has become a new and independent community with its own power of discourse in social policy circles in China (Interview Nr. 5.).

Obviously, knowledge diffusion and reception does not only function in a unilinear way, on the contrary one can see the overlap of different ideas from a bipolar world society with two centres, and even sometimes through the paradoxical statements made by actors. This high selectivity and active elaboration of borrowed ideas enables not only the diffusion of American ideas but also the transfer of European values. Most of the leading individuals in the field of social assistance in China confirm the impact of Europe on the MLSS in China, although the weight of the influences by the United States and Europe is quite different. The most important borrowed idea from Western Europe is the semantic of “inclusion” and “universalism” which is known as “universal coverage” by Chinese scholars, and this introduced semantic from Europe has fundamentally shaped the Chinese MLSS, as one professor from Nankai University who was a researcher at the MOC has highlighted in an interview:

In the social field: firstly we had the need internally, then we wanted to see how other countries act, therefore we have made many expeditions and investigations into the systems of other countries. At that time we had a strong impulse to study abroad, not only in the economic field, but also in the social field. Our researchers went abroad to conduct investigations. The direction of learning and investigation was towards Europe and the United States. The

system of the United States is a little bit inferior to that of European countries. One common concept within a universal social assistance system is known as so called “universal entitlement” in English, and this concept comes from Europe and it has had a comparatively big impact on China. In the past we didn’t do it in that way, we granted only benefits to some special needy groups, but later under the influence of the Europe we have attempted to frame a more comprehensive and universal system which covers all citizens.

Interview Nr. 8 (Professor of Sociology Department at Nankai University)

The “universal entitlement” in the interview means here the population wide system which differs from former category system covering only special groups like the old or disabled people, orphans and widows. Now through the semantic of “inclusion”, the behaviours and perception of the science elite towards the cash transfer scheme has fundamentally changed. The above mentioned CASS expert has illustrated further:

We differentiate the current social assistance scheme in the form of the MLSS from the social relief system, the former social relief system like the “Five guarantees” which covered only some special needs groups, and which means that only a very small portion of the population can really receive a social relief allowance. Now the social assistance scheme covers all people in urban areas irrespective of any divided categories and irrespective of the reasons for poverty, that means, it covers the whole urban population...Additionally this system benefits each person and everyone should has an entitlement to a state allowance. So today if anyone is plunged into poverty, he/she can apply for the MLSS allowance.

Interview Nr. 3 (The Deputy Director and Research Fellow of Institute of Sociology, CASS)

The leaning towards a low level of MLSS benefits by this scholar doesn’t hinder him from making statements to stress the idea of “universalism”. The new MLSS is a social assistance scheme, not a social relief system anymore, as the scholar from CASS has explored in interview. The new semantic of “inclusion” means that all urban residents are covered by the scheme, including able bodied people. Social assistance allowance is granted for needy residents irrespective of the causes of poverty, and the ideas of “universal entitlement” and the “socialization of the causes of the poverty” have become the hallmark of the new urban social assistance scheme. The internalized value of “universalism” is reflected in his terms “all” and “whole”. In parallel this semantic of “universalism” is linked with “individualism”, since in his opinion each person and everyone is covered by this scheme and each individual ought to be endowed with the entitlement to a state allowance. The above mentioned professor from Nankai University stresses the term “universal entitlement” as well, and he attributes the origin of this idea to Europe.

When talking about the European model, the interviewees mostly referred examples from the United Kingdom. As this essay has suggested the United Kingdom includes two main features. Liberal thinkers stress the Angelo-Saxon features

of the UK. The social democratic and centre-left wing place emphasis on the European features of the UK which are characterized by the welfare state model and social rights as well as discourses around human dignity. Some influential thinkers from the most important social think tanks like CASS have quoted from a great deal of literature from British sociologists, social policy researchers, welfare state scholars and economists aiming to construct a modern social assistance scheme which differs essentially from the classical poor law and new poor law. They are informed about every stage of social policy development from British history and have internalized the value of human rights and human dignity. Additionally they admit to the idea of the “socialization of poverty”. The frequently mentioned names of British scientists are for instance Peter Alcock, Peter Townsend, Carey Oppenheim, Anthony Atkinson, Charles Booth, Seebom Rowntree etc. and their oeuvres. From a very famous oeuvre from Kathleen Johns, John Brown and Jonathan Bradshaw “Issues in Social Policy” (1983) the famous scholar Tang Jun from social policy think tank CASS has induced eight basic principles for a modern social assistance scheme: (1) protection of basic human rights; (2) universalism of targeting group; (3) safeguarding the entitlements of social assistance; (4) the responsibility of state; (5) positive social effects; (6) alleviation of poverty; (7) mobilization of social resources; (8) making full use of human potential. They regard these eight basic principles as the theoretical resources for the basic income security system in China (Tang 2003a).

Since Chinese scholars are actively seeking ideas and experiences from world society to influence the setting up of a modern social assistance scheme, they interpret ideas and models from abroad in the light of their own cognitive constructs. The subjective processing of knowledge means not only learning about policy, but also drawing lessons from it and critiquing ideas. Many Chinese scholars think that the European welfare state model goes too far and cannot sustain an overexpanded system because the financial capacity cannot match up to welfare expenditure. They fear that an over excessive welfare state could create a moral hazard which would deter beneficiaries from joining the job market. This does not mean a total denial of the social assistance scheme in Europe, on the contrary, the notion of “universal inclusion” instead of a particularistic system has had a far-reaching impact on the evolution of the Chinese system. The shift from a category to a universal system covering all Chinese (urban) citizens is direct proof of the European influence. The Chinese epistemic community has a self determined, independent understanding of the American model of social assistance, which means, Chinese scholars don’t have a wholly positive assessment of the American welfare system, and they investigate ideas and models from the United States carefully and process these ideas according to their own cognitive ideational structure. Generally the Chinese elite favour a low benefit level of social assistance and argue for a strong link between incentives to work and the receipt of benefits. However, they have also made a systematic reflection on the American system and critique its obvious deficiencies. Most of the criticisms concentrate on restriction of access to social welfare benefits and the difficulties associated with arbitrary judgments by local government officials towards claimants. After investigating social welfare systems in different American federal states more and more

Chinese scholars are skeptical about the current American system. They reference some of the negative outcomes from recent welfare reform in United States since 1996 and mention that the current system is too “tight” and too “stringent” towards beneficiaries and claimants, leading to the possible exclusion of some poor people in the USA. Even the most pro-US social policy researchers do not agree with the increasingly tough social welfare system in United States. The above mentioned professor from Beijing Normal University who has been in long term cooperation with the Ford Foundation expressed in interview his impression of the current American welfare system. After visiting some social welfare projects and local social welfare administrations in 2008 and 2009 he said that he felt that personal factors have a stronger impact on the payment of the benefits than statutory regulations and in his opinion the American system is becoming harsher towards vulnerable groups than before, and moreover, benefits for the family and children are becoming more restricted than in the past. The scholar from CASS who has also visited the United States several times expressed his criticism of the US system:

I suggest American colleagues could consider getting to know more about Chinese system. The American system is too harsh, for instance, in the federal state of California it stipulates that one person can only receive minimum living security benefits for three to five years in his/her whole life, and one person can only receive welfare benefits for the maximum of half of a year each time. I argue that in this realm of social assistance access should be more open and tolerant. While the Americans have tightened up their system for almost all social groups, the Chinese MLSS has relaxed access for elderly people and children.

Interview Nr. 3 (The Deputy Director and Research Fellow of Institute of Sociology, CASS)

This statement demonstrates that the Chinese epistemic community does not follow the American model blindly, since Chinese scholars have always processed adopted knowledge according to their own analysis and assessment. The outcome is that the Chinese elite and decision-makers do not copy any region of the world, neither the United States, nor Europe. The curious thing is that the Chinese MLSS is shaped by these two models simultaneously through the selected reception of some ideas from these two world regions. The outcome is: the Chinese social assistance scheme influenced by EU countries is more universal and inclusive than that of the United States, the access for the applicants is more open; but its level of benefits under US-influence is much lower than that of the European nations, and the determination of eligibility under the US-influence is more federal and localized than EU-countries.

The role of international organizations

The direct intervention of international organizations including governmental and non-governmental organizations into the MLSS in urban China is not very remarkable. Although international organizations aren't directly involved in the planning and implementation of social cash transfer schemes in China, that is not

to say that they don't have any impact on the MLSS. On the contrary, from the inception of the MLSS several different international actors have had an impact on the development of the scheme. Even if they haven't intended passing on some institutional values and models, they have provided technical assistance and consultation to their Chinese counterparts.

These actors include international governmental organizations like the World Bank, UNDP, UNICEF, and some development organizations in Western countries like DFID, British Council and the Ford Foundation etc. These international actors have indeed passed on technical knowledge (and in very few cases norms and mature rationalized models) to China. The major form of knowledge diffusion has been the provision of expertise, advice and recommendations about the technical aspects of some local pilot projects. Sometimes international institutions have organized transnational conferences, symposiums and workshops and have invited internationally famous experts who were asked to pass on technical knowledge to Chinese experts. In some cases international organizations, for instance, the World Bank arranged some cooperation projects with respect to anti-poverty policy with the Chinese local authorities¹⁴. Additionally some international experiences were related to a Chinese context and some advice was given by international actors to their Chinese counterparts aimed at improving the social cash transfer scheme in urban areas. Several interview partners have mentioned their attendance in joint research projects organized by international organizations (Interview Nr 2, 3, 6, 7.).

Since a national social assistance scheme has been introduced in China, Chinese scholars have looked forward to attracting knowledge from the outside world, to help to make the urban social cash transfer scheme more rational. This pragmatic way of thinking means that receiving technical knowledge is the type of knowledge transfer preferred by Chinese experts. For instance, some interview partners told me that they have worked with UNDP experts investigating the poverty measurement indicator raised by the World Bank director Martin Ravallion, preparing to combine this international indicator with urban MLSS schemes and hence create a rational poverty measurement criterion according to heterogeneity in Chinese territory (Interview Nr 7.). The Chinese scholars focused on some areas of difficulty in the creation of social assistance schemes, namely the set up of a rational poverty line, the upgrading of the benefits level regarding raising living conditions, the selection of really needy people, targeting groups and the method of means-testing. Apart from the above mentioned technical areas the British development organization DFID has promoted various pilot projects relating to health assistance in some metropolises in Northwest provinces of China. Health assistance has been increasingly integrated into the urban MLSS which now offers both cash transfers and benefits in kind (mainly medical treatment) to

¹⁴ For instance the World Bank in 2009 advised the government of Canto province to raise the absolute poverty line, since in the economically advanced area of Canton province the absolute poverty line with 785 Yuan annually was even lower than that of very poor countries like Vietnam, Laos and Mongolia (World Bank 2009, see report "World Bank: the poverty line of Canton is far below that of Vietnam" of "Southern Metropolis Daily" on June 12th, 2009).

low income patients or patients without incomes.¹⁵ UNICEF is another international actor which places emphasis on the normative idea of child protection and children's rights and has provided some assistance to children in natural disaster zone (for instance after the earth quake in Sichuan province in the year 2008 the UNICEF organized some projects to support the orphans). Besides this intervention UNICEF has co-organized a symposium aiming to improvement of the MLSS schemes in Nanjing in May 2011.

Extending the MLSS to rural China

After the urban MLSS system had been set up in rural areas a few pilot projects were fostered by local governments with the expert assistance of some international organizations like the Asian Development Bank (ADB)¹⁶. CASS has also cooperated with the ADB and sent its research staff to the local field to investigate the viability of a new state organized cash transfer scheme in rural areas. The major barrier which hinders the establishment of a rural social cash transfer scheme is that amongst the social policy community in China an awareness of a state welfare institution in solving the problem of rural poverty has not yet taken shape. The existing system of "Five Guarantees" from the pre-reform stage is a highly rudimentary social relief system which works by targeting certain needy people with stringent access control. General opinion amongst social policy experts has been that since farmers have their land as a basic livelihood resource, there is no reason why there is an additional obligation to set up a new rural social cash transfer scheme. Generally speaking, due to the absence of consciousness of the problem, there has therefore been no strong incitement to build up a new social assistance scheme in rural areas. However, since 2000 the problem of the rural poverty has increasingly come onto the horizon, so the absence of a modern social assistance scheme in rural areas has been closely followed by Chinese scholars. In 2007 the State Council took on board recommendations by experts from the ADB and CASS and decided to extend the MLSS from urban areas to rural areas. After that time, central government promoted the creation of a universal cash transfer scheme in rural areas which is called the "Rural Minimum Living Standards Scheme". Since 2010 the rural MLSS scheme covers all rural citizens, and in the year 2010 some 52.14 million needy farmers received the benefits from this scheme (MOC 2010). Like the urban social cash transfer scheme, the rural MLSS is an all-inclusive system which covers all rural citizens and is based on means-testing. The poverty line is stipulated by local governments with respect to local living standards, and the

¹⁵ Since 2001 DFID has funded some pilot projects regarding health assistance in four cities in North West China and North East China: Shenyang, Yinchuan, Chengdu and Xining. These promoted programs are called UHPP (Urban Health and Poverty Project), and they have adopted a gate-keeper model by prescribing that the patients go first to the nearest community health centre to be treated by community doctors, and in case of need they are then transferred to the city hospitals (Gu 2008).

¹⁶ For instance from December 2005 to January 2006 the ADB and MOC jointly promoted pilot projects in several counties and districts in the province of Liaoning and Hebei to explore the feasibility of a rural minimum living standards scheme. The outcomes of the investigations seemed positive and the conclusion was drawn that a small amount of fiscal investment can alleviate the rate of poverty remarkably (Zhang and Tang 2010).

poverty-line as well as the benefit level of the rural MLSS is much lower than that of the urban MLSS, in some very poor regions the local authorities use 700 Yuan annually as the poverty line below which the claimants have entitlement to rural MLSS benefits (MOC 2010). The rural MLSS is financed by the governments of different levels through village collectives, the county, the township and provincial governments. However, the central government remains the largest financier of the scheme by subsidizing the rural MLSS from the central state budget, its subsidization accounts for nearly 50 % of the total expenditure of the rural cash transfer scheme (MOC 2010)¹⁷.

The role of the Asian Development Bank

Unlike the emergence and the evolution of the urban MLSS, the development of the rural MLSS was strongly shaped and promoted by one international and world regional organization – the Asian Development Bank (ADB) from its inception. The Deputy County Director and Chief Economist Tang Min has been the leading person in promoting the shift of focus in rural policy development.

The emergence of the MLSS scheme in rural areas has been connected with anti-poverty-policy. In the 1990s, the Chinese government cooperated with several international organizations such as the World Bank and the ADB, and they initiated numerous local programs and pilot projects to reduce poverty in rural areas. The outputs of this were quite positive as the number of Chinese farmers who encountered absolute poverty decreased from 85 million to 32.09 million in the 1990s (Wei and Wu 2007). However, after the Millennium, some social experts from China and international organizations noticed in their empirical research that the effects of the anti-poverty-policy had actually shrunk and the rate by which the poverty had been reduced was in decline. This was a contentious discovery (Fu 2009). More than 20 million farmers living in absolute poverty were located in outlying areas near the mountain areas in South West and North West of China. These were regarded as peripheral regions of Chinese territory, and the difficulties of the geographical environment and the absence of infrastructure in those regions made them difficult to reach from the outside world. The diminishing and the marginal effects of an organized anti-poverty-policy in these regions have led to a rethink about the issues of social security in rural areas (Miao and Zhong 2006; Xu, Liu and Zhang 2007).

In more than three thousand years of Chinese history the idea that farmers lived off their land was firmly rooted in Chinese consciousness. In ancient China history was strongly shaped by conflicts between landowners and landless farmers over land. After the Communist revolution in 1949 the Chinese authorities distributed land to landless farmers. After that a new social contract between the ruling party and the farmers came into being although this was not explicit: The farmers had access to a piece of land and they lived off it, and for this reason the government paid very little attention to the livelihood of the farmers. The only exception was the social relief system called as “Five Guarantees” which targeted

¹⁷ See the annual statistic report of MOC on the development of rural MLSS in 2010 which is available on the homepage of MOC: <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/zwgk/tjsj/>.

the old farmers and widows who had no working capacity, no living resources for subsistence and no dependant family members. The “Five Guarantees” were financed by the People’s Commune before reform and the start of the open-door policy. Since 2000 this system has been increasingly financed by central government, and governments at different levels subsidize this scheme mutually (Yan 2011). However, up until 2000 the major idea remained the same: rural social security was dependent on land security and the residual social relief system, and the government particularly the central government therefore avoided its social responsibility to protect rural residents. An additional measure to improve the well-being of the rural residents was the anti-poverty-policy which had been promoted by the Chinese government and international organizations in the 1990s and afterwards, but this policy was confined to pilot projects and short term experiments in local areas and the basic idea was economically oriented (Xu, Liu and Zhang 2007).

As soon as the experts from the ADB and scholars from CASS and other institutions in China came to the conclusion that the role of the anti-poverty-policy was diminishing, they changed their ideas about the ultimate solution to the problem of rural poverty. The new discourse was quite innovative in the Chinese context: instead of a rural land policy a new rural social policy was to be promoted. A social cash transfer system for the long term should be established which went beyond a periodical anti-poverty policy and an institutionalized form of social assistance was to be created instead of the social relief system that existed until then. The former Deputy Country Director of the ADB has admitted in interview that he started to explore a new social cash transfer system in rural areas from 2000 onwards, and he explored the feasibility of a cash transfer system in rural areas with the leading social experts in China at this point. In this phase the ADB experts undertook numerous independent investigations about the new social cash transfer scheme in rural areas of China, and simultaneously an ADB organized cooperative conducted research in which some Chinese and international rural social development experts were intensively involved: The ADB and some Chinese social institutions like CASS have also supported pilot projects in townships and some villages in order to look for a new model to solve the problem of rural poverty.

One of the rural social experts at CASS who has made a remarkable contribution to the creation of a rural social cash transfer system told me that he was originally a researcher in the field of anti-poverty-policy, but due to the diminishing effect of the anti-poverty-projects he switched over to a new investigation area namely the institutional social cash transfer scheme. In other interviews in my field research it was confirmed that almost all researchers in the rural MLSS scheme were originally from the rural anti-poverty research realm. The recalibration and reorientation of the research emphasis of numerous Chinese scholars verifies the shift in focus of rural development policy. As the provisional and temporary schemes have gradually lost their function a new institutional functional equivalent will be needed to cover the problem of rising poverty in the rural areas. The new focus points to a consensual solution: an institutional cash transfer system in rural areas which will cover all rural residents should be constructed. Since a Minimum Living Standards Scheme has been effectively set up in urban China

and it has offset the immense risks of urban poverty since the market economic reform, it is now logical that the successful story of the scheme in urban areas should be transferred to rural areas. According to the opinion of experts who have shifted their focus from an anti-poverty-policy to a social assistance scheme in rural areas there is no other choice but to set up a new rural minimum living standards scheme. This consensus triggered off ideational changes amongst Chinese scholars and bureaucrats. The traditional passive ideas about rural social security rooted in land policy and the rudimentary system of “Five Guarantees” have now been replaced by more active ideas of state intervention and responsibility resulting in the establishment of a new social cash transfer scheme.

After years of exploration, investigation and local experiments the ADB published a document with the title “Setting up a Minimum Living Standards Scheme in rural areas” in the year 2004 under the leadership of the Chief Economist of the ADB Tang Min. According to this research there were four main arguments proving the necessity, urgency and viability of a rural MLSS scheme: first of all the old system of temporary anti-poverty-projects which concentrated on the promotion of infrastructure, irrigation and school building were having less and less effect. The solution to absolute and relative poverty in rural areas required new thinking and new methods. Secondly the experience of the urban MLSS scheme suggested that only state intervention can mitigate social problems effectively. Thirdly during the economic boom the Chinese government had the institutional and fiscal capacity absolutely to set up a new rural social assistance scheme. The subsidies required for a rural MLSS scheme make up only 0.12 % of the GDP of China. Fourth the ADB linked the rural MLSS issue strongly with the equality approach. Since urban residents have an entitlement to a state granted cash allowance, rural residents should have the same right. Otherwise it goes against the principle of equality and equalized citizen rights. This non-discriminatory approach constitutes the normative basis for the rural MLSS scheme. Hence this was exactly the right time for the Chinese government to face up to social challenges and attempt to establish a new cash transfer system in rural areas. If the government did not act immediately, the consequences would be serious, and then more conflict would appear in the rural areas. And if the government did act in a timely manner, this new social assistance scheme would benefit a smooth transformation for China from a rural nation to an urban nation (ADB 2004).

This suggestion of the ADB reverberated positively amongst the pertinent political actors from the MOC. The Department of the Minimum Living Security Scheme from the MOC has followed the views and comments by ADB closely and then given them political consideration and made them a part of the policy decision process. This document by the ADB illuminated the implications and the viability of a rural MLSS scheme, and is widely regarded as a strategic document for rural social development by Chinese decision makers. Only three years after the appeal document was created by the ADB, in the year 2007 the MOC decided to set up a separate social cash transfer scheme in rural areas which was aimed at including farmers in need. The ADB social development experts together with rural social development experts from CASS have successfully pushed a formerly peripheral issue onto the central political agenda and have transformed their in-

novative ideas into political praxis. Since 2007 the major emphasis of rural social development has been on the institutional social cash transfer scheme while the significance of development policies with a focus on anti-poverty-projects has gradually diminished. The former land social security schemes such as land policy or the social relief system based on “Five Guarantees” have become peripheral and now play only a subsidiary role. The new core issue is the MLSS scheme in the rural areas.

Domestic knowledge transfer

Although the ADB is one of the most important advocators for a new social assistance scheme in rural areas in China, scholars have observed that there is less international knowledge diffusion than in urban areas. The ADB could be perceived as the organizer, coordinator and advocate for a rural social cash transfer scheme, and the ADB has indeed invited international experts from Western countries to assist with introducing the social assistance model into China. However, the major communication form or diffusion canal in the rural MLSS scheme is the diffusion of knowledge domestically. Since urban China is on the frontline of establishing a social cash transfer scheme and has accumulated wide-ranging experiences, and since the MLSS scheme in urban China has been regarded as a successful model, rural social development experts looked forward to learning much of what they needed to know from the MLSS scheme in urban China. Hence a form of urban-rural knowledge diffusion inside China appeared in which the rural and urban social experts exchanged their ideas on an institutional platform.

Since 2006 several influential conferences nationwide have been held in which the issues of the MLSS in urban and rural areas have been embedded in one united cognitive space. The sharing of experiences and information about the two MLSS schemes has contributed greatly to the constructing of framework of the rural MLSS scheme. Some of the leading experts in the urban MLSS scheme (like Tang Jun from CASS, Zhang Sheifei from MOC and Guan Xinping from Nankai University) have been involved in the establishment and the subsequent extension of the MLSS scheme in rural areas. The institutional design of the rural MLSS scheme has been closely coupled with the architecture of the urban MLSS scheme and the former system has emulated the structural framework of the latter. That means that a rural social cash transfer scheme has come into being which covers all rural residents and targets needy people through means-testing, and this social assistance scheme aims to set up a broad social security net covering all rural residents without the exclusion of any social group¹⁸, simultaneously the Chinese authorities seek to maintain a low level of benefit in rural areas in order to avoid the possible negative influence on the job motivation. Compared with urban areas, the benefit level of the rural MLSS scheme is even much lower. Some districts and townships have stipulated a subsistence line below the international indicator of absolute poverty, which means, if the income of a farmer falls below 700 Yuan annually, then he is eligible for applying for the rural MLSS allowance. However, most of the districts and townships have used a subsistence line of the relative

¹⁸ Especially the residents with working capability are included in as well.

poverty which is set up by weighting the level of local living standard and household expenditures. Like the co-financial structure in urban areas, the MLSS scheme in the countryside is financed by government bodies at different levels, and the scheme is financed by central government, provincial government, and the governments of districts, townships, communities and the villages. In this co-finance-structure the central government takes over the main responsibility for finance by subsidizing nearly 50 % of the social cash transfer schemes in the rural areas (MOC 2010).

The development of the two MLSS schemes in China could be explained through this explanation model: The urban MLSS scheme was shaped by experience and knowledge from Hong Kong and the West with Western Europe and Anglo-Saxon countries both also being major influences. The rural MLSS scheme was formed through the diffusion of knowledge internally between urban and rural areas. This means therefore that experience and knowledge gained from the global community has also indirectly been disseminated to the rural MLSS scheme through a second transmitter - urban China.

Policy learning reversed: Chinese social assistance as model for developing countries

Since the start of reform and the introduction of the open-door policy, China has systematically learned from the experiences of the West in almost all areas. The diffusion of knowledge between the West and China is tremendous, but this form of communication implies the following idea that the West is situated in a leading position and China in a backward position, and this form of communication is merely diffusion of knowledge that flows only one way. This in turn means, that the West is the sender of knowledge, while China remains the recipient of knowledge from the Western world. But this one-way-communication has been gradually changed through the great transformation of China from a poor nation dominated by agriculture to an industrial and high-tech nation. Now, this trend of one way policy-learning has been reversed and it seems that a more equal and reciprocal means of communicating policy has appeared. This cognitive change is reflected in the document by the ADB from 2006 in which the ADB organized a survey about the rural MLSS scheme and its implementation in rural areas (Zhang and Gu 2006 from ADB report). In this document Chinese scholars investigated social assistance schemes in Southeast Asia and made an intensive comparison between China and Southeast Asian nations (Zhang and Gu 2006 from ADB report). The result of this international comparison was remarkable: although the Chinese scholars admitted that China could benefit from some of the Southeast Asian examples for instance, the investment in charge free medical assistance (in Malaysia and Thailand) and future-orientated educational assistance (in Thailand), their opinion was that the scheme of social assistance in China was basically more advanced and progressive than in most of the Southeast Asian nations, because none of the other territories they studied had a national and institutional social transfer scheme which includes all residents like MLSS in China. Their research shows that the conglomeration of heterogeneous systems in this world re-

gion means that the schemes there are highly fragmented and often disorganized. Thus the Chinese researchers held the view that the Southeast Asian nations could learn from experiences of China (Zhang and Gu 2006 from ADB report). This unusual discovery shows a great cognitive change because since the start of reform and the introduction of the open-door policy China's description of itself has always been that China is a backward developing country, and that China should learn from other countries, but now it would seem that other countries can learn from China as well. Besides the investigation about social relief systems in other Asian countries a new form of South-South knowledge exchange has also been developing. Some Chinese scholars have showed their strong interest in conditional cash transfer in Latin American countries. Several scholars started to investigate this form of social cash transfer as well the successful experiences and lessons from Brazil and Mexico (Xu and Han 2010). The World Bank also helped the Chinese scholars to learn about this conditional cash transfer scheme by publishing a report "Conditional cash transfer: Reducing present and future poverty" in Chinese (Fiszbein and Shady by World Bank 2009). Some experts from Mexico were invited by the CASS and the State Council to visit China aiming to introduce the conditional cash transfer from Latin America. A professor from Beijing Normal University expressed in an interview his strong intention to cooperate with some universities from Mexico in the future which will facilitate the exchange of experiences between China and Mexico. It seems that the transfer of knowledge between the South and South within the world society will become more important and more normal as time goes on.

This comparative change between China and the outside world has also been projected on to the relationship between China and the West. Although China has greatly benefited from Western knowledge, some Chinese scholars are currently critical of more recent welfare reforms in the United States from 1996 onwards, and the development of increasingly complicated social assistance schemes there where access is too restricted for beneficiaries. Additionally they criticize the arbitrary decision making of local governments which in some cases in the United States hinders the reception of benefits. Because of these circumstances they suggested in my interviews that American colleagues could also now learn from the Chinese experience.

The impact of international human rights: claiming MLSS as a citizenship right

It is not difficult for a self-proclaimed socialist state to allow social rights because the genesis of social rights after the World War II was strongly promoted by the Soviet Union and the former Eastern Bloc Countries (see Kaufmann 2003). In contrast to Western nations' emphasis on civil and political rights former socialist countries stressed the rights of citizens to subsistence and development. Due to their ideological persuasion, former socialist countries prefer restricting the comprehensive concept of the human rights merely to social rights while the United States stresses civil and political human rights and refuses to acknowledge social rights as fundamental human rights.

In the Chinese judicial praxis a right to social assistance for each Chinese citizen may be derived from the Chinese constitution of 2007. Article 45 of the Chinese constitution encompasses the following statements: “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China have the right to material assistance from the state and society when they are old, ill or disabled. The state develops the social insurance, social relief and medical and health services that are required to enable citizens to enjoy this right”. Besides this declaration of the constitution there was not any special social law related to social relief and social assistance schemes until 2010¹⁹. However this statement in the constitution remains merely a general comment and is somewhat vague regarding actual content. The discrepancy between social rights in the former socialist countries and in a modern legislative system is that social rights in a modern legal system are basically legal and enforceable rights and this category of rights aims at the protection of the each citizen (the individualization of human rights). According to this understanding social human rights in former socialist countries deviate from the modern legal understanding of those rights considerably because social rights in former socialist countries refer generally merely to the program of services but not to the individual entitlements which are granted by legal proceedings. The citizens are not granted rights to accuse the state administrations of violating his/her basic social rights if they act unlawfully.

In my field research in the year 2011 one of the fresh issues for debate relates to a draft of a legal document on social relief and social assistance scheme in China. Some bureaucrats from the Department for the MLSS of the MOC are hesitant about adopting an article of social rights in the new legislation because they fear that after the passing of the law, the state would be open to more accusations of the infringements of rights and legal repercussions from that than it currently. But in academic circles more and more social policy experts and legal experts are very strong advocating for the legislation and firmly believe that the entitlement to social relief and social assistance is a basic human right. They believe this article with respect to the rights of citizen should be included in the new social relief and social assistance legislation. Many of them insist that this entitlement should be an accusable and legally enforceable right protected by both the law and the constitution. The strengthened awareness of legal and enforceable social rights to social relief and social assistance verifies dramatic changes in the relationship between state, society and individual in China since the state is not omnipotent any more. Since the time of reform and the beginning of the open door policy the state has gradually retreated from the area of public space and society, while the citizens have increasingly strengthened their consciousness of their rights and now regard social entitlements as part of their basic human rights. The minister of the MOC Li, Liguo elaborated this change in idea in an interview on December 23rd 2010 with the famous intellectual newspaper “Guangming Daily”:

The MLSS scheme relates not only to protection of the poor people; moreover it aims to ensure that the beneficiary of the MLSS can live a more decent and dignified life. We have a fundamental change in the ideas, the implementation of the MLSS is not a mercy, and these allowances (from the MLSS scheme) are the legal

¹⁹ The social insurance law has been adopted by the People’s Congress in the year of 2010.

entitlement of people who are plunged into difficulty.

The discourse about social rights and citizen rights is projected onto the discussion of the *juridification* of the social assistance agenda. Currently more and more legal experts, social policy experts and social development professionals in China advocate strict conformity with *procedural due process* with respect to the social assistance scheme. Issues about legislation and judicial practice were the central focus of the symposium about the urban and rural social assistance schemes in Nanjing (2011) which was co-organized by the MOC, The School of Government of Nanjing University and UNICEF.

Many scholars from interdisciplinary backgrounds have explored the significance of substantive due process and procedural due process. The first notion involves the limitation of the administrative power of the government by judicial review through special courts which can keep watch on whether the acts of the state are compatible with basic norms and the constitution. The state administration must provide legitimate arguments for their acts. Since allowances for the security of basic income are granted by local authorities and finance for the scheme is provided by the government bodies at different levels, the state is required to act under the law and constitution, otherwise the state would expand its powers beyond its jurisdiction and could theoretically abuse this power and violate citizen's human rights (see Zhu 2011; Yang 2008, 2009). The second notion – procedural due process – refers to the administration and procedure of law. In the modern constitutional state, the executive power holder is required to comply with rules, laws and regulations. It is only if the state administration conforms to legal procedure and submits to the power of the judiciary, that their acts will then be perceived as legal and legitimate. The procedural due process is based on the idea of the separation of powers and limiting the arbitrary decisions of holder of executive power. If state power harms a person and this is inconsistent with the law and constitution, this act constitutes then a violation of due-process. The individual whose right is violated should have the power to accuse the state administration and prosecute this power. Yang S.B, an expert in social law pleaded for a comprehensive specification of the judicial procedure, and argued that in the social assistance law which is currently being prepared, the article of initialization procedure, examination/investigation procedure, the explanation procedure, the procedure of public hearing and the surveillance procedure should all be included (Yang 2011, s. additional Zhu 2011; Wang and Wang 2011).²⁰ The wide ranging discus-

²⁰ The initialization procedure stipulates the application process which includes the submission of an application to the local social administration through written application or verbal application. Every applicant is endowed with the right to make a statement and the right to a defence as well as the right to protect his/her human dignity (Yang 2011, 110). The examination/investigation procedure encompasses all of the provisions regarding means testing, income and asset investigation through a house visit and the examination of bank accounts of the claimants by the local administration. The state administration should make final decisions public by openly showing who is eligible for MLSS benefits. In the process of public exhibition of the outcomes (showing who the beneficiaries are) a stigmatizing effect should be avoided (ibid, 110-111). The explanation procedure stresses the compliance of the state to rules and the laws as well as the basic value of protecting human rights. The social administration is required to undertake judgment according to the law, if they make a decision disfavoring the claimants they are required to make a detailed explanation according to the law, in this way subjective, personal and arbitrary decisions ought to be prevented (ibid: 111). The procedure of a public hearing includes the transparent public information process by which the public is able to be

sion of the juridification of the rights of social assistance and acts of the state under the law is based on the value of individual rights. According to the judicial exegesis of legal experts the individual encompasses an ontological status which is not an object of mercy by those in power any more, he or she (in singularity instead of plurality) is a subject in law who is endowed with his/her natural and unalienable human rights. The irreducibility of individual rights in current juridical debates in China shows a most remarkable change in the understanding of social rights in comparison with former Communist countries as well as with the legacy of Chinese socialism. Social rights are not defined as the rights of an abstract collective (either as the right of the people or the right of the working class) anymore, now they are increasingly entwined with legal practice, judicial procedure and the noticeable enhancement of individual status which represents a basic societal entity.

While the issues of social rights and human rights have become increasingly important, in parallel with these debates, there are other agendas which are also being discussed and which are of great concern to many social assistance experts. These include for instance the enhancement of the benefits level of the MLSS scheme both in urban and rural areas²¹ and the extension of the allowance spectrums to include health assistance, education assistance, housing assistance and legal aid in the MLSS schemes²².

Besides the current discourse on human rights, exploring the viability of integrating the rural and urban MLSS schemes in one unified system remains a matter of great concern to many experts. The two MLSS schemes engendered in the social background of the urban-rural division and are deeply intertwined with the household register system in China (Hukou) which has been in place since the Communist revolution. After 30 years of high-speed industrialization and continuous urbanization since 1978 the dual structure has been gradually weakened. The latest data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics of China shows that the urban population now makes up 51% of the whole population, and has overtaken the rural population for the first time in Chinese history²³, and in some advanced

informed about every detail of investigation, discussion and decision made by a local administration. In the case of an application being refused claimants are given the right to participate in a public hearing. A public hearing may be organized by local bureaus of civil affairs, and the staff of other local administrations including the ministry of finance, the ministry of human resources and social security and the staff of resident- and street committees may also join in the public hearing jointly, the applicants are furnished with the right to read the written documents made by the local social administration and check the decision process, they have defence and appeal rights as well (ibid: 112). The surveillance procedure refers to the monitoring and assessment of granted allowances, the local social administrations are responsible for tracing the alteration of income and assets of the beneficiaries as well (ibid:112)

²¹ The Chinese government has considered abandoning the old means of measuring absolute poverty at national level in which the subsistence line was set up at an every low level with about 1196 Yuan - being equivalent merely to 190 dollar annually. In the future, in conformity with the international criterion of an absolute poverty line of 1.25 dollar per day the new subsistence line will be set up at about 2874 Yuan annually. With the new poverty line the rural population encountering absolute poverty will be then enhanced from 35.97 millions to 150 millions; this absolute amount of rural poor people will increase by almost 4.5 times after the adoption of the international mean (s. Annual Report on China's Human Rights by Li, J.R. 2011).

²² Actually comprehensive social assistance schemes including health, housing, educational assistance and so on are widely implemented by lots of local regions already. But this falls short of national regulation by the central government which would make these local experiments a unified national scheme.

²³ This data is provided by the National Bureau of Statistics of China on January 17th 2012.

regions, for instance in the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta the urban population employed in the industrial sector has become dominant. This rapid social transformation has made some scholars wish to start to explore the idea of the integration of the urban and rural MLSS schemes. Some scholars connect with the human rights and equality approach and sharply criticize social segregation according to birth place in the urban or rural areas. Where a person has been born has conferred different social and political rights onto the individual in China, and according to scholarly opinion this institutional inequality promoted by state policy is unjust, unconstitutional and should be abolished in the near future (Yang 2009; Lin and Lin 2011). For this reason they have advocated for a single national MLSS scheme which would put an end to the two schemes running in both urban and rural area and would be based only on a persons status as citizen and his/her national citizenship rights. One professor from Beijing University told me in an interview he advocates strongly for a single national MLSS scheme, and additionally he advocates for a non-contributory old age pension for all Chinese citizens. “In the future every Chinese resident should receive the MLSS allowance and the old age pension irrespective of his birth place, only because he is Chinese”, he said in an interview (Interview 4).

China is clearly on the way to a rights-based social assistance scheme which step by step is moving towards the European welfare state model even if China does not advertise itself as a welfare state.

Summary

There are three central research questions which need to be answered: The primary focus of my research has been to discover whether global knowledge diffusion plays a role in the establishment and further extension of the MLSS in China. Secondly, this research has explored the communication channels and diffusion modes through which ideas have been transferred to China and finally, what kind of knowledge (norms, values, core beliefs and social rationalized models) has been spread to China. Furthermore the research has considered what the special theoretical implications of China as a case study are for the theories of knowledge diffusion.

This study has verified that global knowledge diffusion in the field of social assistance (MLSS) exists. The empirical findings don't undermine the part that internal factors have also played; rather they support the approach of syncretization which combines variety of different internal and external causalities. It is clear that there were some internal problems within China that also played a part in the development of the MLSS, for instance, high employment rates in urban areas and massive poverty in rural areas. These issues had to be urgently resolved as China moved closer to becoming a market economy. For both the Chinese government and scientific community sources of knowledge were in short supply. Thus both were looking to absorb “advanced” knowledge from advanced Western nations. Through this process of turning to world society as a source of advanced knowledge, the Chinese epistemic community has been strongly influenced by Western nations, especially by European countries (the United Kingdom being

most influential) and by Anglo-Saxon countries (the United States of America being most influential). Through drawing on the theoretical resources from British sociologists and social policy scholars the leading figures in the domain of social cash transfer in China have admitted and internalized the core beliefs and theoretical foundations for a modern social assistance scheme which includes the notion of universal human rights, the aspect of universal coverage and the value of inclusion. By drawing on these theoretical resources from West European countries (particularly from UK) China has laid the basic foundations for a modern social assistance scheme which transcends the traditional social relief systems like “Five Guarantees” and the temporary anti-poverty aid policy. Simultaneously, by basing the scheme on the general experiences of OECD countries the Chinese science community has constructed a “common knowledge structure” which regards the social assistance scheme as a central rationalized model amongst a great variety of social cash transfer schemes in the world society. Moreover, the architecture of the social assistance scheme (MLSS) has been strongly influenced by social welfare reform in the United States which has been spurred since 1996 by American Democrats. The United States’ major influence on the Chinese scheme are the ideas of the social-investment and a restricted level of social assistance benefit, but the punitive welfare system of the United States has been rebutted by almost all Chinese scholars. However, the United States’ model of a low level of social assistance tends to be undermined by the European approach which favours social rights. China is moving increasingly towards an extended welfare state by taking on board theories from West Europe.

Comparing the traditional horizontal and vertical forms of knowledge diffusion this essay come to the conclusion that multilevel, multidimensional and network-shaped knowledge diffusion has taken place with regard to social cash transfer system in China. “Multilevel” diffusion means that the knowledge transfer does not only relate to learning on a policy level between two national states or otherwise only to a top-down transference of knowledge driven by international organizations. Multiple actors including multiple world regions, multiple international organizations, multiple international epistemic communities and multiple Chinese societies including the Chinese diaspora, have all played a part in the diffusion of knowledge, and they have had enormous influence over the creation of the social cash transfer scheme in China. “Multidimensional” means that the knowledge diffusion has been made up not only of learning and internalizing new and innovative ideas, but also through drawing on lessons learned through the experiences of others - so called negative learning. The Chinese scientific community has drawn lessons from both European nations and the United States. Chinese scholars keep a distance from a broad definition of the social cash transfer scheme and fear for a “free ride problem” caused by a high benefit level of social assistance, at the same time they are critical of stringent access control and exclusion of poor people in recent American welfare reform. Through being orientated towards the global south, Chinese scholars and bureaucrats have been informed about the success and deficits of social cash transfer schemes in Southeast Asia and Latin America as well. The knowledge diffusion in the Chinese case has transcended more typical patterns of knowledge diffusion from north to south. It has also included the

knowledge diffusion from the south to the south. The network-shaped diffusion transcends the unilinear diffusion form between development organization and national state or between nation state and nation state, it relates to multilateral links between international, supranational, world-regional, national, sub-national, science-community-based and diaspora-based actors (see Table I).

The case study with respect to the social cash transfer in China may yield new theoretical insights for the theory of the “world-polity” and the knowledge diffusion. The major conclusion for future research into knowledge diffusion is through classification of the different communication forms of ideas in the world society. In the case study of China different forms of knowledge diffusion can be differentiated which all contribute to the knowledge transfer. The most usual form for the transfer of the knowledge is through communication and interaction which includes meetings in specialized fields of communication for instance at the international conferences, symposiums and workshops. Another form of interaction takes place when international organizations send their staff to the local field and by doing so, transfer their knowledge to local residents, or when the national scientific community organizes international exchanges with international scholars. The second major form of the diffusion is through the observation of foreign models by the recipient actors. This is very usual in China. After the adoption of the open-door-policy more than one million Chinese students and scholars have studied abroad, and annually more thousands of Chinese delegations have visited Western countries to learn in different social, ecological and economical fields. In the domain of social cash transfer particularly, the key figures and most influential bureaucrats have all visited many Western nations, some of them have studied in Western countries or in Hong Kong which links China with Western world. Officials at the national and sub-national level have regularly visited Western countries to observe how the social cash transfer schemes in Western countries function. The third important form of knowledge diffusion is through inquiry into and investigation of written literature. Through connecting with existing and abridged written documentation actors can easily absorb knowledge from around the globe without face-to-face interaction in the world society. If foreign-language literature is translated into the mother tongue of the recipients it can have a huge influence on the recipient actors and can change the ideas of recipients in a subtle way. For this reason translation should be perceived as the fourth diffusion form to make ideas flow through continents and countries overcoming geographical distance. Obviously there is a “knowledge gap” between global north and south in the world society, but the ways in which knowledge fills the gap and mitigates global knowledge inequality are not only decided by the global sender actors, but the case of the Chinese MLSS scheme, it would be true to say that the autonomous and self-directed “knowledge absorption” by recipients is much more important than the top-down diffusion preferred by global senders, Using the form of bilateral and multilateral exchange, visiting study, inquiry and reading of literatures, observation and translation the recipient actors have altered their own cognitive structure and the public perception which causes further profound change in the relationship between state and society in China.

Table 1: The multilevel of ideas diffusion in establishment of the social cash transfer scheme in China

* = according to geography; ** = visiting, studying, observation and examination in the local field; *** = literature research

Links to world regions*	Major communication forms	Concerned models and policies by Chinese elite	Major ideas and values spread to China	Lesson drawing	Special influence of this region on China's MLSS
NORTH-SOUTH COMMUNICATION					
United States	Face to Face and verbal communication** Written communication*** about US welfare system	The American welfare systems, particularly welfare reform since 1996	Workfare and re-entry into labour market, low level of benefits, model of social investment, maintaining the discretionary power of local administrations	Restriction of access to the welfare allowance, stigmatizing effects, the problem of exclusion	The MLSS should maintain a "minimum" of security, the disincentive to labour market ought to be avoided
Western and Northern Europe	Face to Face and verbal communication** Written communication*** about European social assistance schemes	The social assistance schemes in Western and Northern Europe	Universal coverage, inclusion of all people, social rights and the semantic of equalization	A high level of social assistance benefits can aggravate the fiscal burden of the state and probably makes the system unsustainable	The MLSS ought to cover all citizens and the entitlement to MLSS benefits should be perceived as an individual social right, the urban and rural MLSS schemes should be integrated into one national scheme
SOUTH-SOUTH COMMUNICATION					
South East Asian nations	Written communication*** about heterogeneous social assistance schemes	Fragmented social assistance schemes like health, education and housing assistance	Rare	Lack of a universal and standardized system covering all citizens	Scarce influence
Latin American (chiefly Mexico and Brazil)	Written communication*** about special schemes in Latin America Face to Face and verbal communication	Conditional social assistance	Rare	Problems of targeting and exclusion	Scarce influence

	tion (Inviting experts to visit China to talk about their experiences)				
INTER-CHINESE COMMUNICATION					
Hong Kong	Face to Face and verbal communication**	Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) in Hong Kong	General ideas about social assistance from the West	Rarely discussed by the Chinese science community	Acting as a bridge-head/transmitter between the West and China
Links to international organizations		Major communication forms		Transferred models	Knowledge spread to China
Asian Development Bank		Promotion of pilot projects, co-investigation with Chinese scholars, publication of reports		Fostering the rural MLSS scheme following the urban example	Normative knowledge: equality approach Technical (instrumental) knowledge: Viability of the rural MLSS scheme
World Bank		Promotion of pilot projects, support of international exchange, publication of reports		Relating mainly to the poverty and anti-poverty research, partly advising China to set up poverty lines according to different statistic models	Technical (instrumental) knowledge: Measurement of poverty
DFID		Promotion of pilot projects		UHPP (Urban Health Poverty Project)	Technical (instrumental) knowledge: Promotion of a community based health assistance with gatekeeper model
UNICEF		Sponsoring of pilot projects		Assistance to children	Normative knowledge: the human rights of children

In summary this essay comes to the conclusion that an independent level of global reality has dramatically shaped the development of the social cash transfer scheme in China. Hitherto the role of global social policy on development in China has almost been neglected by scientific research. Different kinds of global communication and interaction have led to the traveling of ideas from North to South, but communication inside Southern hemisphere has also taken place as the Chinese scientific community endeavored to gather information about the heterogeneous social assistance schemes in the global South (from Mexico and Brazil). Communication inside the world society is based not only on face to face interaction through visits and study by Chinese scholars to foreign countries, but also through written communication including research into and reading literature. This plays an im-

portant role in the knowledge diffusion. The scope of this kind of knowledge diffusion is decided by the extent to which reception countries are able to transform ideas from the international community into their own reserve of knowledge and how this imported knowledge is then understood and interpreted by the recipients. The design of the Chinese social cash transfer scheme shows that its actors are profoundly shaped by thoughts from outside, but this is not a static process deciding by forces outside, on the contrary, the recipient actors are actively engaged in the process of constructing social reality. They select a variety of different ideas from different knowledge centers within the world society, and filter out some other elements which they dislike. This active construction of social meaning and social reality rather than through passive emulation of an existing model means the knowledge diffusion insider the frame of world society is dynamic and pluralistic. That means at last, the trajectories of the MLSS scheme in China have therefore been determined through a multi level diffusion of knowledge and through the active selection, interpretation and reconstruction of adopted knowledge by scholars and members of the elite. China has creatively absorbed knowledge outside its borders and combined as well as internalized different valued and thoughts (universal inclusion and workfare, social rights approach and social investment model) so that a new Chinese model may emerge in the near future.

List of interviewees

1. Research Fellow, Rural Development Institute of Chinese Academy of Social Science, on March 15th, 2011
2. Professor of School of Social Development and Public Policy at Beijing Normal University, on March 17th, 2011
3. Deputy Director and Research Fellow, Institute of Sociology at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, on March 22nd, 2011
4. Vice Minister, Social Development Department of Development Research Centre of State Council, on March 24th, 2011
5. Policy Researcher, Department of Policy Reforms at Ministry of Civil Affairs, on March 25th, 2011
6. Professor of School of Government at Beijing University, on March 28th, 2011
7. Deputy Director, Social Science and Demographic Institute at Renmin University, on March 29th, 2011
8. Professor of Sociology Department at Nankai University, on March 30th, 2011
9. Researcher of School of Labor and Human Resources at Renmin University, on March 31st, 2011 (A informal talk)
10. Policy Researcher of Bureau of Civil Affairs, Province Shandong, on May 27th, 2011
11. Associate Professor of School of Government at Nanjing University, on June 1st, 2011
12. Deputy Director, School of Government at Nanjing University, on June 2nd, 2011
13. Professor of Department of Government and Public Administration at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, on September 5th, 2011
14. Professor of Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong, on September 8th, 2011
15. Professor of Social Work Department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, on September 8th, 2011
16. Professor of Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong, on September 9th, 2011
17. Junior Researcher of Qianjing College at Hangzhou Normal University, on September 17th, 2011
18. Junior Researcher of Centre for Labor Economics and Public Policy Studies at Zhejiang University, on September 19th, 2011
19. Associate Professor of School of Public Affairs at Xiamen University, on September 21st, 2011
20. Professor of School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development at Renmin University, on September 26th, 2011
21. Ex-Deputy Representative and Chief Economist of Asian Development Bank Resident Mission in PRC, on September 28th, 2011
22. Social Expert of World Bank Office in Beijing (Former Programme Manager of UNDP Office in Beijing), on September 30th, 2011

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