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

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Summary

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

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

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