

## The Chinese Strategy for Actively Responding to Population Ageing

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### Abstract

The course of population ageing in China has unique features, and the country's fundamental national conditions, development path and governance model impose special requirements on the country's response. A path with Chinese characteristics that actively addresses this issue is urgently needed. The Chinese strategy is built on solid foundations, comprising the governance paradigm advantage of "one core and multiple components"; the structural advantage of "state-family-society" governance arrangements; the national endowment of being a major country with a rich culture; and the late-mover advantage conferred by the scientific and technological innovations of our changing times. It is necessary to clarify the relationship between the national strategy of actively responding to a population ageing and the population development strategy; on this basis, a positive view of ageing need to be cultivated to provide a better environment for the implementation of the national strategy; and to establish a holistic governance framework in which individuals, families, communities, the state, and the world are interconnected by integrating Chinese advantages in the governance of an ageing society. Thus, a systemic Chinese strategy for actively responding to population ageing can be continuously refined.

**Keywords:** population ageing, the governance of an ageing society, Chinese strategy, family, population governance

Living a long and healthy life is an eternal desire in human development. The global population's health level and life expectancy have made relatively widespread breakthroughs in the last century or so, which are regarded by international society as among the most important developmental achievements in the 20th century. This is manifest in the fact that population ageing has become the normal state of the human community following the acceleration of demographic change. As a sustained demographic phenomenon, the evolution of population ageing is characterized both by its reality and its constructive nature. It is irreversible; all we can do is adapt to it and possibly gain a deferment. Population ageing has brought immediate challenges to social and economic development, reflecting the inadequacy

of existing development mechanisms and institutional models to adapt to the changing age structure of the population. However, at the same time, the way we define ageing and our models for handling it have directly stoked the intensity and even the nature of this challenge, creating room for a governance spiral. Thus, taking the initiative in the innovation of our governance model and the dynamic adjustment of public policy should undoubtedly be employed. How to actively respond to population ageing has become a completely new governance issue with global significance.

In this context, the Chinese government made a timely decision to “implement a national strategy to actively respond to the ageing of the population,”<sup>1</sup> and indicated the need “to find a path with Chinese characteristics to actively respond to the ageing of the population,” showing the resolve and development orientation of the topmost levels of the state and highlighting the epoch-making significance of the governance of an ageing society.<sup>2</sup> This not only implies a sense of urgency in exploring the country’s own approach to ageing, but also implies China’s responsibility for participating in the global dialogue and contributing its own experience and wisdom to the governance of an ageing society.

## **I. The Necessity of Refining the Chinese Strategy for Responding to Population Ageing**

### *1. The uniqueness of the ageing process of China’s population*

The size of the elderly population in China has risen from 126 million in 2000 to 262 million in 2020 and will approach 500 million by 2050,<sup>3</sup> accounting for more than 30 percent of the total Chinese population and more than 20 percent of the elderly population worldwide. China has the highest number of elderly people, ultra-fast acceleration of ageing and huge regional heterogeneity, making the task of governing China’s ageing society the most onerous, relatively speaking.

In terms of the factors involved, population ageing is the combined result of an increase in life expectancy and a decrease in the fertility rate. From 1950 to 2020, the life expectancy of the global population rose from 46 to 73, and the total fertility rate fell from over 5.0 to about 2.4. Over the same period, the life expectancy of the Chinese population soared from 35 to 77 and the total fertility rate fell from about 6.0 to 1.3. This change far exceeds the average world level both in speed and dimensions. We foresee (Figure 1A) a rapid shrinkage in the number of women entering the prime childbearing-age cohort, with the growth of the increased postponement of marriage and childbearing affecting the potential release of fertility. It is almost certain that the number of annual births will hover around a decline or remain low for

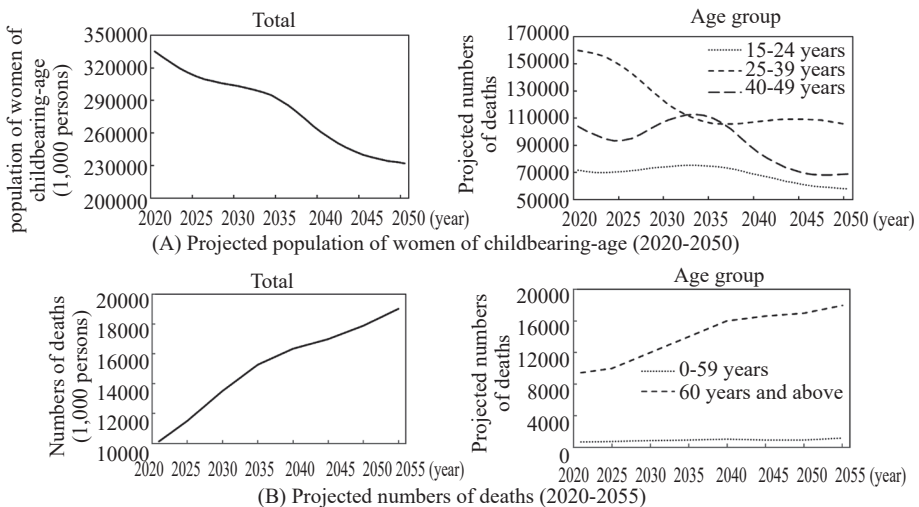
1 *Communique of Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China*, p. 17.

2 *Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Strengthening Work on Ageing in the New Era*, pp. 1-2.

3 Du Peng and Li Long, “Projection of Long-Term Trends of China’s Population Ageing in the New Era.”

a long time to come. At the same time, China's net population growth has kept on shrinking since it fell below 10 million in 2000, even falling to 480,000 in 2021. In the same year, the number of deaths exceeded 10 million for the first time since 1960 and is expected to surpass the number of births in 2025-2030 (Figure 1B). In a country as populous as China, it is necessary to form a comprehensive judgement on the developmental laws governing ageing and the means of influencing it against the background of a multiplicity of factors: continued low birth rates, marked ageing and an impending peak in deaths. We need to provide a robust explanation that will lay a solid scientific foundation for the implementation of the national strategy.

Figure 1 Projection of the Size of the Population of Women of Childbearing-age and of Deaths<sup>4</sup>



## 2. Specific requirements of China's national conditions and development model

Population ageing and the laws of population development evolve and play their part under the joint influence of specific historical and cultural traditions, social and political systems, stages of economic development and the ecological and geographical environment. In recent years, Chinese scholars have tried to summarize the phased features of population ageing given China's national conditions, such as "getting old before getting rich," "getting old while unprepared," "getting old fast but getting ready slowly," "getting old early and getting rich late," "getting older as we get richer," etc. These features are not necessarily in competition, but appear to be interwoven and interstructural or to be evolving a local character. We should develop an indigenous interpretation of these complexities. At the same time, we should be aware of governance challenges, especially in those areas where research is unprepared or

<sup>4</sup> Data source: China Population Prospects Database, Fudan University (CPP 2017). The median 80 percent confidence interval was selected as data in Figure 1.

even a blank. There is an urgent need to develop Chinese theories and discourse system in this regard.

In the past, two main approaches were adopted to improve the governance of the ageing society. One was “crossing the river by feeling for the stones,” and the other was extensive learning from Western experience. When the Chinese government and academia first encountered issues such as pension reform, postponing retirement, etc., they drew on Western models. However, governance models show marked national characteristics. Changes in the current world situation and the acceleration of the scientific and technological revolution have induced governance practice to break free of traditional experience and develop its own strategy. In the course of its active response to population ageing, China undoubtedly needs to summarize the experience and lessons of countries that encountered ageing earlier, but more importantly, it needs to combine the uniqueness of China’s national conditions with the universal experience of the international community in dealing with an ageing population, so that this coheres into an approach with Chinese characteristics that actively addresses population ageing in step with China’s development status. Against the background of the new era and in accord with the development situation, an active response to population ageing should aim to realize high-quality development that should have as its foundation an active response to population ageing. This approach raises specific governance requirements for the development of the ageing society.

### *3. The internal requirements of China’s systemic modernization and governance capacity*

Starting in the 1980s-90s, governance issues were endowed with an advanced character associated with sustainable development and maximization of public benefit. After more than three decades of evolution, Western governance research has entered a period of reflection. Francis Fukuyama readjusted his praise for specific governance paths in the 1990s, criticizing the overemphasis on national governance in existing studies for overlooking the question of whether a state or government possessed such governance capacity.<sup>5</sup> The nature of governance was independent of a particular approach or ideology, being more about a state or government’s “ability to make and enforce rules and deliver services.”<sup>6</sup> The Chinese government first launched the concept of “the modernization of China’s system of and capacity for governance” in 2013, encouraging and deepening it thereafter. In 2020, “the modernization of China’s system and governance capacity will be basically achieved by 2035” was upgraded into Vision 2035 as a strategic goal. This is an important expansion of the governance of China discourse system: “governance” is an organic integration of “governance system” and “governance capacity,” but at the same time, the latter should also be made an evaluation criterion for the governance system.

With population ageing becoming a normal state in the global community, the governance of an ageing society is not only an important and central governance theme confronting

5 Francis Fukuyama, “What Is Governance?”

6 Wang Shaoguang, “A Study of Governance: From the Perspective of Its Origin.”

every country across the world, but also the projection and focus of the modernization of the national governance system and capacity with regard to ageing. Chinese scholars' research has extensively explored the issue, paving the way for confronting population ageing squarely and consolidating the foundation for the governance of an ageing society. However, since ageing has only been with us for a short time, China's governance research is often limited to the tactical level and mainly focuses on local policy; moreover, the negative tendency of problematizing ageing exists to some extent in a number of studies. Along with the elevation of the active response to an ageing population to the status of a national strategy, China keeps empathizing the issue from a positive point of view, looking squarely at normalizing and de-problematizing population ageing. The country has comprehensively handled the governance situation of the ageing society on the basis of integrating challenges and opportunities and has formulated the China strategy to actively respond to population ageing through an approach oriented toward the improvement of governance. This will enrich China's discourse system by improving the level of good governance in an ageing society, thus is of great practical significance and strategic value.

## II. Clarifying Chinese Advantages in Actively Responding to Population Ageing

At present, the global social and economic situation is not the same as it was when the Western developed countries first encountered ageing. This situation offers China an opportunity to actively respond to population ageing. China's basic national conditions and cultural endowments are more likely to serve as governance resources and instrumental innovation. It is necessary to explore a possible approach for the China strategy on the basis of identifying Chinese advantages.

### *1. The paradigmatic advantage of governance with one core and multiple components*

In order to maximize the institutional advantages of the Party and government in commanding the overall situation, gathering resources for major projects and effectively balancing short-term goals with medium- and long-term development strategy, we have explored and formed a unique governance paradigm with Chinese characteristics based on practice, i.e., joint governance with multiple subjects under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Its achievement in promoting contemporary China's high-speed, high-quality development is widely recognized, displaying clear advantages in integrity, flexibility and mobilization. This is especially so in dealing with issues concerning the overall situation and long-term development. This paradigm is the institutional foundation for implementation of the national strategy of actively responding to China's population ageing.

Western governance research started early and at one time enjoyed theoretical leadership. Its recent studies show an interest in discussion of the paradigm shift in governance around the key topics of changing the role of the state, strengthening society's self-governance, etc.

Some Western scholars even see governance as “public management minus government.”<sup>7</sup> To correct this view, Lynn has argued for “...government as an aspect of societal governance in every country in the world except failed states.”<sup>8</sup> Unlike the Western system, the socialist system with Chinese characteristics places strong emphasis on the centralized and unified leadership of the CPC and the responsibility of the state, and on this basis adheres to the improvement of a governance system that is jointly built, governed and shared. Obviously, in China’s governance core, there is no room for implicit assumptions rejecting the role of the government. Although the CPC and the government continually adjust the relationship between state and society to achieve localized “good governance” and give full emphasis to “joint governance” within the framework of the modernization of national governance, in the course of implementing the national strategy on actively responding to population ageing. Unlike the Western system of joint governance or decentralization, China has centralized or nucleate diversification, interpreted as joint governance forces with “one core and multiple components,” under the leadership of the CPC and guidance of the government, highlighting the systemic and holistic advantages of our governance paradigm.

The implementation of the national strategy for actively responding to population ageing will have the following governance advantages: 1) A holistic governance network with powerful synergy will be set up through the integration of organizational and resource allocation capabilities in the governance community. It will include not only the collaboration and participation of multiple subjects including the government, the market, the community and the family, but also the development in the administrative network of vertical collaboration from the center to local governments as well as horizontal collaboration among multiple sectors.<sup>9</sup> 2) The coordination between short-term goals and medium- and long-term strategies will balance urgency and sustainability and maintain the unity of the core of governance. 3) It will offer greater possibilities for flexibility and innovation in dealing with old-age pensions and other longstanding complex issues. In addition, China’s governance system, under the leadership of the CPC and the government, still retains a strong impulse for self-reform. Over the years, it has followed the development path of “identifying problems, solving problems, and perfecting the system.” A series of unique governance experiences suited to China’s national conditions have come into being.

## *2. Structure advantage of a “state-family-society” governance arrangement*

Appreciation of and support for the family should be the focus and special character of China’s active response to its ageing population. The family has always been rooted in tradition with Chinese characteristics, and has always been the main resource for looking after the old in China. Traditional Chinese family ethics and culture have a strong cohesion, and the

7 Wang Shaoguang, *A Study of Governance: From the Perspective of Its Origin*.

8 Laurence E. Lynn Jr., “Has Governance Eclipsed Government?” p. 684.

9 Du Peng and Wang Yongmei, “Social Governance of China’s Ageing in the 40 Years of Reform and Opening Up: Achievements, Problems and Modernization Paths.”

traditional network of mutual assistance among family members continues to exist in a new form. For example, when parents live with or next to their children, this not only improves the health of the elderly and enriches aged care resources, but also strengthens their assistance to their children's families and improves women's employment, thereby realizing Chinese families' intergenerational "win-win." This interactive pattern of family with Chinese features is rooted in its traditional cultural ethics, which is an indispensable pillar of Chinese pattern in its handling of the population ageing.

From the macro perspective, the governance pattern of China presents a balanced ternary structure of "state-family-society,"<sup>10</sup> unlike the state-society (or government-market) dichotomies of the West.<sup>11</sup> The division between state and society is a theoretical construct in the context of Western economic systems and religions, and its underlying logic rests on individualism.<sup>12</sup> However, individualism, with its deconstruction of the family, never emerged in Chinese history; the genes of Chinese culture emphasize the close connections and natural concern of the living community.<sup>13</sup> The traditional isomorphic model of *jiaguo tonggou* (family is a reduction of the state and the state is an amplification of the family) emphasizes the connection between national governance and familial autonomy on the basis of *shenjia yiti* (individuals and families are one). The family is a bridge between the mechanisms of national governance and the functions of social organizations. Here too, China is different from Western countries. Traditional China was an agrarian civilization for thousands of years, so state and family lie at the heart of its governance structure, and "society" in the sense of Western civilization does not exist.<sup>14</sup> In terms of the understanding of "family," Chinese and Western countries again have different views. In Western languages "family" usually means the nuclear family, while, for the Chinese, family signifies not only husband and wife and their marriage, but parent and child and their ties of blood. In the 1930s, Fei Hsiao-tung proposed that "expanded family" was a relatively close translation of the Chinese *jia*.<sup>15</sup> In the Western system, individuals and communities are strong but family and state are weak; In China, "state" is the strongest, followed by "family." They are not mutually independent or co-existing; family is subordinate to the state. The governance of the family is applied to the state by means of simulating expansion, and similarly, people's affection for family came from and was projected on to the state. This was one of the cultural cornerstones in the continuance of Chinese civilization over thousands of years.

The modern system constructed and developed after the founding of the PRC rearranged the relationship between the state, family and society. It not only regarded the family as a

10 Hu Zhan and Peng Xiche, "China's Population Governance Pattern in the Context of Governance Transition."

11 Li Peilin, "Chinese-style Modernization and New Developments in Sociology."

12 Wu Xiaoming, "Did 'Civil Society' Emerge in China after 1978?"

13 Liu Jianjun, *China's Community*, pp. 41-47.

14 Liu Yi, "Family Tradition and Governance Transformation."

15 Fei Hsiao-Tung, *Peasant Life in China*.

governance unit, but also stressed its traditional function and its responsibility to protect individuals. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that “No matter how dramatically the times and the pattern of life have changed, we must attach importance to the construction of the family,”<sup>16</sup> highlighting the dialectical relationship of national development and family construction and endowing the family with completely new governance connotations. In contemporary governance practice, the implementation of public policies often needs the help of the family, and moreover the traditional model of the family and the state is in a constant process of deconstruction, reconstruction and expansion. The prominent structural advantage of this ternary mode is that it leaves national governance more room to maneuver and right wrongs, freeing state, society and even individuals from direct friction. The interaction of government and society are mainly driven by state power and generally take the family as a medium or buffer. The Chinese family as a whole protects and regulates individuals internally and externally ascends to institutional rules and ethical values through *raison d'état* and social tradition.<sup>17</sup> This will not only become a distinct feature and important focus of the active response to the ageing of China's population, but will also develop a lasting advantages rooted in history and culture.

### *3. The advantage of national endowment of being a vast nation with rich cultural resources*

China's character as a vast nation with a variety of regions provides a stage for the implementation of macro-strategies to actively cope with population ageing and offers time and space for governance maneuvers. The degree of regional difference in China's ageing process is evident in an “east to west developmental sequence, high in the north and low in the south, showing urban-rural inversion.” Although the complexity of responding to ageing has increased at the national level, orderly population migration has effectively provided an extended demographic window of opportunity for rural areas (especially China's southeast coastal regions), creating a policy buffer that allows the exchange of time for space.

China also benefits from the effect of its population size, which gives it further room to maneuver.<sup>18</sup> Compared to countries with smaller populations, China has more options and more leeway for economic development in terms of its driving force, approaches and methods. In the context of the ageing population, a huge population is conducive to the deepening of the division of labor, industrial diversification, the improvement of the industrial system and the diffusion of knowledge innovation. The optimization of resource configuration, increased human capital, and the technological advances brought by labor flows may also substantially improve the efficiency of labor production. Full participation in the international division of

16 Research Institute of Party History and Literature of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, “Abstracts of Xi Jinping's Discussion of the Construction of Family Education and Family Spirit,” pp. 1-6.

17 Zhang Yan, “On People and Population Governance: The Normative Interpretation and Reconstruction of Article 25 of the 1982 Constitution.”

18 Wang Jinying and Liu Yanhua, “The Population Cushion in Economic Development: Existence and Theoretical Framework.”



labor will give us room to maneuver due to the size of the international population, which may further boost the expansion of innovation. The advantages with which China is endowed will greatly improve the flexibility of resource allocation and effectively safeguard the stability and diversification of resources for aged care, as well as encouraging untrammelled domestic circulation through the flourishing consumer demand that arises from a huge population and improving China's major country advantages through participation in international circulation, thus shaping the pattern of globalized governance resources.

In addition, China has the time-honored tradition of looking after the old and showing them filial piety and respect. Chinese families' demands for intergenerational responsibility maintain social stability while absorbing social costs. The culture of harmony among neighbors and the tradition of living in one's hometown have also helped with the smooth development of projects such as the "time bank," an elder support mechanism involving mutual assistance. These longstanding cultural endowments are important treasures of Chinese civilization. Upon them lies the foundation of ethical values for Chinese-style aged care and extension of the resource pattern of social governance in an ageing society. At the same time as we delve into the resources of traditional culture, we have to inject it with new vitality while at the same time leaving room for adjustments to the rational and effective inheritance of tradition. The china strategy for actively responding to population ageing emphasizes effective protection of human rights and the allocation of public benefits, but it must also pay greater attention to the effective promotion of public spirit.

#### *4. The relative late-comer advantage conferred by the scientific and technological innovations of the changing times*

As a late-comer, China's comparative advantage in globalization varies from region to region. Western developed countries experienced ageing in the industrial or post-industrial age, but China entered the ageing society in the era of networks and informatization, providing room for innovation in China's active response to the ageing population. The scientific and technological revolution represented by the internet and artificial intelligence has profoundly changed existing modes of production and ways of life, industrial structure, social patterns and political forms, but has also brought new resources and approaches to the governance of the ageing society. The transformation of the traditional model of employment has expanded human resources and improved labor productivity, thus maintaining sustained economic growth and laying a solid foundation of social wealth for the active response to an ageing society. On the other hand, old people and the development of the ageing society demand technological progress and service upgrading, developments which will be transmitted to the industrial sector alongside new calls on resource allocation and policy arrangements. The increased savings effected by population ageing have led to the acceleration of capital accumulation, forming a "second demographic dividend." The entry into old age of a cohort of people better endowed economically will contribute to a "silver economy" of consumption growth, industrial innovation and employment generation. Making these objective possibilities

feasible in practice will provide sustainable energy for the development of China's ageing society.

### III. Exploring the Possible Approaches of the Chinese Strategy for Actively Responding to Population Ageing

Structural tensions still exist despite the governance advantages of the active response to China's population ageing. China not only has the national realities of a large population of old people, rapid ageing, and complex regional conditions, but also faces the governance tasks of an ageing society with the conditions of an underdeveloped economy, inadequate employment, imperfect social security, and unfinished industrial transformation. Therefore, implementing a national strategy of actively responding to population ageing has become a complex, lengthy and holistic systemic project that will not be concluded in the short term. The building of a consensus and the ascertaining of priorities are urgent requirements for continuously consolidating, integrating and extending the advantages of an active response to population ageing in the new era, and for ultimately marching down a road with Chinese characteristics.

#### *1. Clarifying the relationship between the national ageing strategy and the population development strategy in the overall national development framework*

Population ageing is primarily a demographic phenomenon that tends to be evaluated in the framework of the population development strategy. China's population constitutes its fundamental national condition. Any major socioeconomic development strategy must first identify the main contradictions and risks in current population development and then form a population development target that takes these into account. The acceleration of demographic transition and its cumulative effect of negative growth inertia means that the main contradictions in China's current population development are now its low birth rate and ageing population. These factors will be the background of our population development strategy in the coming decades.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, "ageing" also covers a decline in the birth rate. No country or region can have an ageing society plus a rising birth rate. At present, the present emphasis on a "falling birthrate and ageing population" mainly reflects concerns about the decline in births, which will be a decisive factor influencing future population trends in China. An effective improvement therein will lessen the degree and pace of population ageing and build a foundation for a sustainable social security system. "Formulating a long-term population development strategy and optimizing fertility policy" was initially made explicit in "Implementing a National Strategy for Actively Responding to the Ageing Population," in the CPC Central Committee's "Proposals for Formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for National Economic and

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19 Guo Zhigang and Wang Jun, "Divergence and Evolution in the Study of China's Population Development Strategy."

Social Development and Long-Range Objectives Through to the Year 2035.” This does not mean that the national strategy for actively responding to the ageing population is subordinate to or duplicates the “population development strategy.” However, their relationship should be clarified within the framework of the national overall development strategy.

Although population ageing is primarily a demographic phenomenon, the national strategy for actively responding to the ageing population should not be equated to or embedded within the strategy of population development, and still less should it be degraded into coping with the problems of the elderly population and aged care. Setting up a population development strategy that will achieve a long-term balance in the population is the cornerstone of the national strategy for actively responding to the ageing population and constitutes one of the foundations of the strategic system of the whole nation. However, relying solely on regulation to curb population ageing is like trying to get blood out of a stone. Ageing has become a basic national condition that is long-lasting and irreversible; all approaches will involve overall adjustment and long-term adaptation of the national governance system, as the influence of ageing permeates through the multifarious channels of economic, social and cultural development. As a national strategy, actively responding to population ageing has been raised to the status of the national strategies of “rejuvenating the country through science and education,” “rural revitalization,” and “a healthy China” and is a key project of the CPC and the government. This is a major strategic deployment achieved by virtue of the consideration and evaluation of the CPC Central Committee. Its implementation not only affects national development and people’s wellbeing, but is also an important measure for achieving high-quality development and safeguarding national security and social stability. The active response to ageing is not an isolated strategic outline or an assemblage of policies; rather, it is an organic component of China’s comprehensive development strategy. We should integrate it into the national overall development framework for consideration and deployment.

## *2. Optimizing the environment for the implementation of the national ageing strategy on the basis of carrying forward the innovation of Chinese culture*

General Secretary Xi Jinping has pointed out that “We should focus on strengthening the idea of an active response to population ageing across the society with a positive view of the ageing society, the elderly and their lives.”<sup>20</sup> “Positive” here defines the value orientation of dealing with the ageing population. We urgently need to cultivate a positive attitude toward ageing to optimize the environment for implementing the national strategy. We can understand this on three levels.

First, a “positive view of the ageing society” means “ageing is not just a problem.” Population ageing is by no means all good or all bad. The operation of the existing social and

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20 Xi Jinping, “A National Action under the Leadership of the Party Committee and Guidance from the Government with the Participation of Society to Promote the Comprehensive, Coordinated and Sustainable Development of Ageing Work,” p. 1.

economic system centers on the young and middle-aged, and has not responded and adapted to the changing age structure of the population in a timely way. This lag has caused the so-called “problems.” Their source is not entirely due to population ageing itself; rather, it derives from the adjustment and restructuring of development arrangements and the governance mode. In terms of global practice, ageing does not necessarily pose “insurmountable challenges” to national development. China’s high-speed growth in the last two decades has been synchronous with the process of ageing, and in some countries ageing does show a positive correlation with macroeconomic growth.<sup>21</sup> Underlying this is the imposition of higher demands on national governance capacity.

Second, a “positive view of the elderly” means “old people are not just a problem.” In the mid-1950s, the United Nations put forward a definition of the elderly based solely on biological age; this was accepted throughout the global system as a significant institutional requirement, reflecting the health conditions of the population and what each country’s social security could accommodate at the time. At present, “redefining old age” has become a hot topic in academic circles. How we define the elderly will cause great changes in the intensity and even the nature of ageing. If, on this basis, we reappraise institutional arrangements involving employment and social security, we may see utterly different prospects for the social governance of an ageing society. The definition of “elderly” naturally includes a biological basis, but it also exhibits a constructive character and has a more intricate and complex internal structure. Taking the elderly as a simple whole and problematizing them not only damages their interests, but, more probably, will lead to a great waste of the human capital they represent.

Third, a “positive view of elderly life” means “growing old is not just a problem.” The course of individual development is continuous, but one’s interrelated capacities are not in a steady equilibrium at different stages of the life cycle. There is no age at which one’s abilities are all high or all low, nor do particular abilities wax or wane without cease over the life course. Moreover, huge differences divide individuals. We cannot think about today’s ageing problems in terms of isolating the basic presuppositions of “aged.” In addition, traditional ideas tend to equate “old” with “weak.” Not only does this represent the lack of a modern interpretation of bioethics, it is also detrimental to the establishment of the concept of self-improvement of the aged and their ability to use their talents, and may even give rise to pessimistic tendencies like “regarding old age and death as taboo subjects.”

China’s construction of a positive view of ageing undoubtedly gives it a cultural advantage. The understanding of life in Chinese culture presupposes *shengsheng bu xi* (the circle of life). Confucianism, for example, placed particular emphasis on childbearing and child-rearing. Mencius said, “There are three ways to be unfilial; having no sons is the worst.” Given this

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21 Ronald Lee, Andrew Mason and members of the NTA Network, “Is Low Fertility Really a Problem? Population Ageing, Dependency, and Consumption”; The National Academy of Sciences, *Ageing and the Macroeconomy: Long-Term Implications of an Older Population*.

idea of the order of life, the Chinese take “family love” especially seriously. This is primarily the bond between father and son—“love begins with filial piety,” which develops into the basic virtues of “filial piety and fraternity” and a rich family culture. Mencius said, “Respect your own elders and extend such respect to those of others.”<sup>22</sup> The culture of filial piety, respecting the elderly, cherishing the family and caring for the young has been deeply rooted in the hearts of Chinese people for thousands of years on a solid ethical basis with continuous institutional support. The elderly possess a relatively high status in the family and in society, “They are as important and precious to the family as a treasure.” The young often need support from their parents to marry and buy a home and to raise grandchildren, and the elderly even participate actively as volunteers in many services in society. Of course, sublation and renewal are necessary with traditional cultural resources such as filial piety. This is the essence of Chinese ethics, but the behavior advocated in the *Twenty-four Paragons of Filial Piety* obviously clashes with modern values and urgently needs to be reconstructed. The traditional idea that “human life is the most precious” made death a taboo subject in indigenous cultural discourse; we have not given enough prominence to stocks of theory and immediate experience that would enable us to face up to the topics of death and dying.

3. *Conjoining the governance advantages of an ageing society to form a holistic governance framework that integrates individuals, families, communities, the state, and the world*

Chinese culture stresses pursuit of the ideal of *xiushen, qijia, zhiguo, pingtianxia* (cultivating oneself, ordering one’s family, governing the country, and bringing peace to all under Heaven). This developmental sequence progresses from self-cultivation to the governance of a country. Its operating mechanisms vary in different fields but are inherently logically connected, unlike Western society’s emphasis on a clear distinction between private and public and between society and state.<sup>23</sup> We are now striving to achieve the modernization of national governance, bearing in mind that “modernization is not only a product of technology and the market, but also the outcome of history and culture.”<sup>24</sup> Building a governance model that respects Chinese traditional culture but also adapts to the demands of modernization is an urgent necessity. The extended framework of the governance of the ageing society integrates China’s advantages, giving more room for implementing the national ageing strategy. The key logic of the strategy’s active response to the ageing population (see Figure 2) should comprise the following components: taking heed of social group embedment and community construction while maintaining the structural advantages of governance; expanding social autonomy and realizing “the all-round development of individuals” so as to fully liberate the development potential of the ageing society while easing family pressures and shouldering family construction; bringing along the joint advance of individuals, families and society

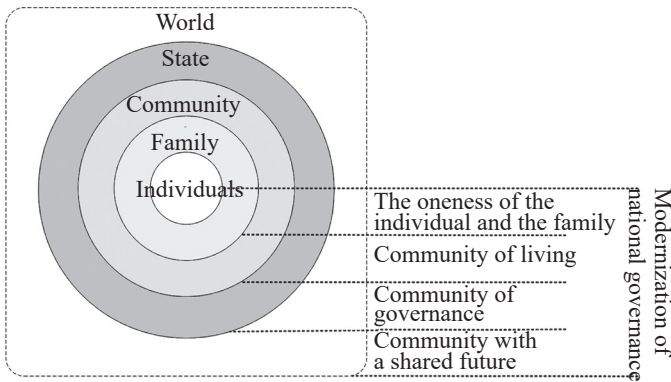
22 Sun Xiangchen, “Philosophy of the Family and the Problems of Ageing.”

23 Liu Jianjun, *China’s Community*, pp. 3-4.

24 Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*.

under the leadership of the CPC and the guidance of the government and in the context of globalization for its continuous improvement. What we need to understand is that “conjoining” is not the same as “synthesizing” or “combining,” but means faithfully preserving governance logic and governance resources on the basis of interaction and integration, so the one-way path from managing the family to ruling the country will be transformed into the reciprocal co-governance of the family and the state.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 2 Exploring a Chinese Approach to Actively Addressing Population Ageing through a Holistic Governance Pattern



(1) Individuals: moving from elderly people’s “worries and their pressing unsolved problems” to the “all-round development of individuals”

The elderly’s “worries and their pressing unsolved problems” are given due weight everywhere. Although there are still some weaknesses in aged care, the sense of betterment and happiness of the majority of old people has undoubtedly steadily improved. The contemporary elderly population already exhibits a number of brand-new features. In their old age, the elderly is certainly in need of aged care and support and something to rely on; on the other hand, their developmental demands have undergone unprecedented expansion, with the need to enjoy life creating a huge leisure dividend. This is not all; the elderly population does not live in isolation, nor does the ageing society consist solely of the old. Therefore, we need to further strengthen the whole life cycle concept of governance. The capacity for life of the old depends on the cumulative effect of their health behavior when young, and the pension balance relies on the labor output of the current labor force. At the same time, an improved health situation among the elderly population will raise the working-age group’s economic participation and improve their work/family balance, and the young people of the future will have effective employment and can look forward to a flourishing “silver economy.” Against this background, existing age-related policies have shown a transition from “special benefits”

25 Yang Juhua, “Research on the Relationship between Family Transformation and Social Governance in the Primary Level.”

to “universal benefits” and from “ensuring the basics” to “high-quality development.”<sup>26</sup> This advances the all-round development of man by strengthening support over the entire life cycle for the whole population.

(2) Family: from “responsibility for the family” to the “construction of the family”

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes “the oneness of the individual and the family,” as in “The root of the family is the individual,”<sup>27</sup> i.e., the individual and the family have an inseparable relationship. The isomorphism of the family and the state is formed by analogy on this basis. Unlike other human civilizations, the Chinese family not only serves as a basic unit of childbearing, production and livelihood, but also has ontological status. It connects to Chinese civilization,<sup>28</sup> and is even an “important foundation for the development of the state, national progress and social harmony.”<sup>29</sup> The family’s responsibility of providing for the elderly and caring for the young has been repeatedly stressed in a public context, but is this not the aspiration and voluntary responsibility of Chinese families? After all, supporting the elderly and passing on the blood line is their inherent disposition. Against the background of declining fertility and a rise in the ageing population, the functions of the modern family have eroded to some extent, but strong ties remain in the traditional family network (especially between parents and children).

The family not only plays a unique and irreplaceable role, but also acts as an intermediary in state-society interaction on immediate aged care issues and the sustainable development of the ageing society. China has made timely efforts to strengthen the construction of the family at the institutional level and emphasize its institutional empowerment. During this process, making the construction of family capacity the key feature of an active response to the ageing population will not only shape the institutional innovation of governance, but also lay a solid foundation for personal happiness, social progress and national development.

(3) Community: from a “community of living” to a “community of governance”

In 1897, Yan Fu translated and introduced Herbert Spencer’s *The Study of Sociology*, published in Chinese as *Qunxue Yiyuan (Observations on the Study of Social Groups)*, a translation that conforms to the temperament of Chinese culture. The way the Chinese understand society is different from the mandatory social structure of Western sociology; instead, social communities connect to individual lives. In Western individualism, public life is dispersed, whereas in Chinese communities it is all-weather. Chinese culture has always stressed that people in society should “join the group, do well for the group and find

26 Du Peng, Xie Lili and Wang Yufei, “Evolution of the Thought and Policies of the Communist Party of China on Ageing Work: A Review of and Reflection on Its Centennial Course.”

27 *Mencius: Lilou I*.

28 Sun Xiangchen, *On Family: Individuals and Kinship Ties*, pp. 1-2.

29 Research Institute of Party History and Literature of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, “Abstracts of Xi Jinping’s Discussion on the Construction of Family Education and Family Spirit,” pp. 1-2.

happiness in the group.<sup>30</sup> With the dissolution of the work unit and the beginning of large-scale migration, more and more strangers have appeared in social communities that had traditionally been connected by ties of place, clan and trade. The neighborhood, as a domain of individual life and a basic unit of society, has accordingly assumed responsibility for governance and service.<sup>31</sup>

The social group and the neighborhood are both extensions of the family. The latter in particular is an administrative product, a community of living and community of governance made up of social groups that aggregates a number of families but goes beyond the family.<sup>32</sup> This is why contemporary social governance emphasizes community construction. The state has proposed “strengthening the construction of the neighborhood governance system and encouraging social governance to focus downward to the grassroots level,” together with creating “a framework of social governance that is jointly built, governed and shared by all.”<sup>33</sup> Many innovative practices have originated from the neighborhood in the course of the development and improvement of the system of aged care services. Recently, the government has required that aged care resources be introduced into the neighborhood as a supplement to family support. This not only sets up a social governance approach for the new era, but also gives macro-guidance to work on ageing. How to implement top-level design and ensure that superior resources get down to the populace at the grassroots will be the top priority in future ageing work. In the West, state and society are regarded as incompatible governance domains, but China has been exploring the areas and mechanisms in which they intersect. The interaction and cooperation between national and social governance being promoted by the state has become a prominent feature of the Chinese strategy for actively responding to an ageing population.

(4) The state: from the undertaking of ageing to the national strategy on ageing

The development of China’s ageing undertaking is a practical example of the modernization of CPC governance. For a long time after reform and opening up, and especially since the 1990s, the Chinese government has been implementing a phased and institutional strategic approach and developmental plans for ageing. China’s ageing orientation has undergone a historic transformation. It has leapfrogged from “ageing’s no problem” to “ageing’s become a problem” and thence to the national ageing strategy. The orientation of ageing work has also moved from ageing being “a problem for old people” to being “a developmental problem”

30 Jing Ti ankui, “On the Renewal of *Qunxue*: Starting from a Sigh of Yan Fu.”

31 Xiang Deping and Hua Xunzi, “The Progress, Evolution and Prospect of Community Construction in China.”

32 Liu Jianjun, *China’s Community*, p. 15.

33 Xi Jinping, *Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era: A Work Report Delivered at the Opening Session of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, p. 49.



and thence to being “a problem of all-round importance.”<sup>34</sup> For a country in the primary stage of socialism with a huge population, China has fully demonstrated the superiority of its national governance system and capacity. At present, the country has explicitly broken new ground, pointing to its “active response to population ageing with Chinese characteristics.” Against the background of the new era, this implies that other countries do not yet have any systematic experience of actively handling an ageing population that China can draw on. Upholding the overall leadership of the CPC and standing on our realistic national conditions and development needs, we are integrating Chinese advantages in the governance of an ageing society in order to extract a Chinese strategy for the new era and make specific notes for promoting the modernization of national governance.

(5) The world: from active participation in globalization to promoting the building of a community with a shared future for mankind

As China enters a new era, the world is also presenting new prospects. Despite the increasing possibility of a long-term global downturn, economic globalization remains a prevailing trend worldwide, and is still an important option for countries addressing their own governance issues. As China’s population ageing progresses, the transition in demographic structure will continuously reshape the industrial structure and pattern of capital as well as the demand for upgrading. Its ageing response is not only related to our own development, but also affects the global pattern of population development and the course of governance. The Chinese strategy for actively handling an ageing population should be developed with an international vision, and its global influence should even be considered in making domestic regional policies. During this process, we will not only accelerate the formation of a Chinese solution but also explore the way the Chinese nation contributes great Chinese wisdom to the governance of the global ageing society. This places higher demands on innovation in China’s ageing research in terms of theory and practice.

#### IV. Conclusions

Humankind’s worries about population ageing essentially stem from a concern for development. Historically, the relationship between “population” and “development” has been in constant flux. Every transformation has reconstructed or even overturned situations that had been stable for hundreds or even thousands of years, with “population issues” that once demanded solutions often becoming normal states or the starting point for new developments to which we have to adapt. Population ageing is the new normal in contemporary society, as well as the information age, the Internet age and the age of artificial intelligence. Although it presents primarily as a demographic phenomenon, it is by no means confined to the category of population. The realities we must take into account are a large population base

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34 Du Peng, Xie Lili and Wang Yufei, “Evolution of the Thought and Policies of the Communist Party of China’s Ageing Work: A Review of and Reflection on Its Centennial Course.”

with population growth verging on the negative; a large elderly population that yet has an increasing economic endowment; a labor force trending downwards yet with continuous quality improvement; increasing pressure in providing for the aged coupled with endless responsibilities for the family and the state; huge regional differences but striking advantages as a major country; the emergence of a technological dividend coupled with potential uncertainty; and so forth. What China needs to take into account is how to continually explore the Chinese strategy of an active response to population ageing.

As a rapidly developing country with a huge population, China's share of the world's elderly population exceeds the country's share of the total world population. How to achieve good governance for an ageing population in the midst of change is a touchstone for the modernization of national governance, and also relates to the well-being of the global elderly and the efficacy of the governance of ageing societies across the world. An active response to the ageing of the population has been elevated to the status of a long-term and holistic national strategy. The Chinese strategy for actively responding to population ageing cannot be achieved overnight. It is by no means a matter of simply bringing together a collection of policies or governance tools; rather, it should present as a dynamic self-consistent system. It requires not only the long-term interaction of researchers and practitioners in building China's independent knowledge system, but also sustained dialogue between China and other countries to respond to the issues of the day, such as "What's wrong with the world?" and "Where is mankind going?" Such research includes scientific questions and governance issues at every level in a variety of fields.

This paper simply provides inspiration for the theme of this strategy, laying the necessary foundation for its theoretical basis, governance connotations and possible approaches. It aims to refine a consensus on the national strategy for actively responding to population ageing and to provide the grounding work for a preliminary logical framework for its implementation. In the future, we will need more researchers and practitioners to join in and to make their contributions.

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