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From "Survival Welfare" to "Developmental Welfare": A Multidimensional Examination of China's Social Policy Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This paper systematically discusses the internal logic, practical path and practical challenges of China's social policy transformation from the "survival-oriented welfare" model with the core of ensuring basic survival to the "development-oriented welfare" model with the goal of promoting the all-round development and social integration of people. This study constructs a five-dimensional analysis framework including policy objectives, intervention methods, coverage objects, policy tools and time orientation, and uses a mixed research method combining policy text analysis, statistical trend description and comparison of typical cases to deeply analyze the transformation practices in key areas such as social assistance, elderly services and employment support. The study finds that China's social policies have shown obvious developmental shifts at the conceptual, institutional and operational levels, which is reflected in the systematic evolution from "maintaining the bottom line" to "investing in the future", from "passive remediation" to "active empowerment". However, this transformation still faces multiple structural difficulties, such as financial constraints, poor departmental coordination, insufficient service accuracy, and lack of long-term evaluation mechanisms. This paper argues that to build a development-oriented welfare system with Chinese characteristics in the future, it is necessary to establish social investment priorities at the strategic level, promote cross-departmental collaboration and digital empowerment at the governance level, and establish an evidence-based decision-making mechanism oriented by capacity development and well-being improvement at the evaluation level.

KEYWORDS

Social policy transformation; Survival welfare; Developmental benefits; Social investment; Multidimensional analysis; Common prosperity

1 Introduction

Since the reform and opening up, profound changes in China's economic and social structure have continued to promote the evolution of the social policy system. At a specific stage of development, in order to cope with the social risks brought about by economic transition, social policy mainly plays the role of "social stabilizer", and its function is to provide the most basic survival security for the disadvantaged groups, forming a model dominated by "survival welfare". However, as the main social contradictions have been transformed into the contradictions between the people's growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and inadequate development, especially the strategic goals of high-quality development, demographic transformation and common prosperity, the traditional welfare model with material survival security as the core has been difficult to adapt to the requirements of the new development stage. Promoting the transformation of social policies to a more forward-looking, investment-oriented and enabling "development-oriented welfare" paradigm has become an important issue in promoting the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity. There is a lack of a mid-level analysis framework that can systematically describe the overall transformation of the welfare paradigm, and there is little integrated analysis of transformation practice based on multi-source evidence. The localized connotation of developmental welfare theory, its practical form in specific policy fields, and its institutional tensions still need to be deeply analyzed. To this end, this paper attempts to answer the following three questions: First, how to systematically construct an analytical dimension that depicts the transformation from survival welfare to developmental welfare from the theoretical level? Second, what are the specific practical characteristics and data support for this transformation in China's major social policy areas? Third, what are the structural factors that drive and constrain this transformation? The contribution of this paper is to construct an integrated five-dimensional analysis framework to analyze the welfare paradigm shift; adopt a mixed research method that combines policy texts, statistical descriptions and case comparisons to enhance the systematization and credibility of the argument; By designing a comparison table, the key characteristics and practical progress of the transformation are visually presented.

2 Literature Review, Analytical Framework and Research Methods

2.1 Theoretical Sources: from Survival Welfare to Developmental Welfare

Western welfare state theory has undergone an evolution from the "remedial" paradigm emphasizing income redistribution and risk compensation to the "developmental" paradigm represented by the "social investment state" proposed by Giddens (2000) and the concept of "social development" advocated by Mickey (2009). The core proposition of developmental welfare theory is that social policy should not only be an after-the-fact consumption expenditure, but should be regarded as a productive investment in human capital and social capital. Its policy interventions are forward-looking, preventive and empowering, aiming to achieve a benign mutual promotion of economic growth and social well-being by improving individual capabilities and promoting social integration. This theoretical perspective provides an important conceptual tool for understanding the contemporary transformation of social policy in China.

2.2 Review of Local Research and Positioning of this Paper

The domestic academic community has maintained continuous attention to China's social policy transformation. Early research focused on anti-poverty and social safety net construction (Guan Xinping, 2008). In recent years, the research horizon has gradually expanded to the fields of public service equalization, active aging, community development and child welfare, reflecting the continuous enrichment of policy practice connotations. Wang Sibin (2019), Zheng Gongcheng (2022) and other scholars discussed the development shift of social policy and its relationship with the goal of common prosperity from the macro level. However, most of the existing studies show the characteristics of "separate narration", or there is a disconnect between theoretical introduction and local practice, and there is a lack of a middle-level analysis framework that can integrate multiple policy fields and systematically compare the differences between the old and new paradigms. This paper aims to bridge this gap by constructing a multi-dimensional analytical framework and combining multi-source evidence to systematically examine China's social policy transformation.

2.3 Construction of Five-dimensional Analysis Framework

In order to systematically distinguish and characterize the essential differences between the two paradigms of "survival welfare" and "developmental welfare", this paper constructs an analytical framework containing five core dimensions (Table 1). This framework will serve as the theoretical basis for the overall full-text analysis.

Table 1 Comparison of the five-dimensional characteristics of survival welfare and developmental welfare

Analytical dimensions	Survival welfare paradigm	Developmental welfare paradigm
1. Policy objectives	Maintain the basic bottom line of survival and resist immediate survival risks.	Expand development opportunities and capacities to promote social integration and long-term well-being.
2. Intervention modalities	Post-remediation and passive response to solve the problem of "has already occurred".	Prevent and empower in advance, and actively intervene to "prevent problems from occurring" or "improve resilience".
3. Override objects	It mainly targets the absolute poor and the most vulnerable groups.	Coverage is wider, including diverse groups who are relatively poor, have limited developmental capacity, and are at risk of social exclusion.
4. Policy tools	Direct cash or in-kind transfers are used as the main instruments.	The tool portfolio is diversified, including cash payments, public services, skills training, rights support, environmental creation, etc.
5. Time orientation	Short-term orientation and focus on solving current urgent difficulties.	Long-term orientation, investing in the development of the whole life cycle of people, focusing on future returns.

2.4 Research Methods and Data Sources

In order to ensure the systematization and reliability of the research, this paper adopts a mixed research design based on qualitative and supplemented by quantitative description, and gathers evidence through triangular verification of policy text analysis, statistical trend description and comparison with typical cases.

2.4.1 Policy Text Analysis

The key social policy documents issued at the national level from 2012 to 2023 are systematically collected and analyzed, such as the "14th Five-Year Plan" public service plan and relevant laws and policies such as social assistance, elderly care services, and employment promotion. Through the interpretation of policy objectives, strategic expressions and tool innovation, the macro policy context of transformation is outlined.

2.4.2 Description of Statistical Trends

Comprehensively use the annual data released by the China Statistical Yearbook, the China Civil Affairs Statistical Yearbook, the Statistical Bulletin on the Development of Human Resources and Social Security, and other official annual data to analyze the financial investment, service supply scale, population coverage and other indicators in key areas to provide data support for transformation practice. This section aims to present trends and patterns, without causal inference.

2.4.3 Comparison of Typical Cases

Select representative local practice cases such as the pilot of comprehensive reform of social assistance, the construction of community home-based elderly care networks, and large-scale vocational skills improvement actions for in-depth analysis, and reveal the implementation mechanism, specific results and practical obstacles encountered at the operational level of transformation.

3 Analysis of Transformation Practices and Trends in Key Policy Areas

This chapter will use the above-mentioned five-dimensional framework, combined with trend data and tables, to analyze the transformation practices in the three major areas of social assistance, elderly services and employment support.

3.1 Social Assistance: The Paradigm Expansion from "Sustaining Survival" to "Promoting Development"

The traditional social assistance system focuses on minimum living security, and its characteristics are shown in the left column of Table 2. In recent years, its transformation practice has profoundly reflected the integration of development-oriented orientation.

Table 2 Comparison of paradigm transformation in the field of social assistance

Contrast dimensions	Characteristics of traditional survival assistance	Current developmental transformation practices and trends
Goals and methods	The goal is single (to ensure basic life), and the method is passive (application and distribution).	Goal compounding: "material assistance + service guarantee + capacity improvement" combined. For example, the 2022 policy clearly requires strengthening the linkage between social assistance and promoting employment.
Policy tools	Cash payments such as subsistence allowance and special hardship pension are the main ones.	Diversification of tools: Expand to educational assistance, medical assistance, employment assistance, psychological counseling and other services and developmental support.
Override object	Focus on households with incomes below the absolute poverty line.	Target extension: Gradually include expenditure-oriented poor families, low-income marginal families, minors with special needs, and the disabled into the comprehensive support system.
The results are reflected	Ensure basic food, clothing, housing and transportation.	Expansion of results: It not only prevents existential crises, but also helps some people with the ability to work return to the labor market or improve the quality of employment.

3.2 Elderly Services: The System Reconstruction from "The Elderly Have Support" to "The Elderly Have Care"

The transformation of the elderly care service sector clearly reflects the paradigm upgrade from meeting the needs of survival to supporting an active old age.

Table 3 Comparison of paradigm transformation in the field of elderly services

Contrast dimensions	Characteristics of traditional survival pension	Current developmental transformation practices and trends
Goals and Concepts	Ensure basic living care and meet survival needs.	Practice "active aging", pursue the comprehensive goals of health, participation and security, and improve the quality and dignity of life.
Service system	Focus on the construction of institutional elderly care beds, and home community services are weak.	System reconstruction: Build a multi-collaborative system of "home-based, community-based, institution-supplemented, and medical and nursing combined".
Policy intervention orientation	Deal with disability, illness and other problems afterwards.	Shifting the center of gravity forward: Investing in health maintenance, disease prevention, and early intervention to increase healthy life expectancy.

3.3 Employment Support: Strategic Improvement from "Job Placement" to "Human Capital Investment"

The evolution of employment policies intuitively reflects the paradigm shift from providing "survival opportunities" to investing in "development capabilities".

Table 4 Comparison of paradigm shifts in the field of employment support

Contrast dimensions	Traditional survival employment support characteristics	Current developmental transformation practices and trends
Core objectives	Solve the re-employment of laid-off unemployed people and maintain basic livelihoods.	Improve the overall vocational skills and adaptability of workers, serve industrial upgrading and high-quality development, and achieve fuller and higher quality employment.
Intervention modalities	Mainly to provide public welfare jobs and pay unemployment benefits.	Large-scale preventive and promotional interventions: Implement national vocational skills improvement actions. According to statistics, from 2019 to 2021, more than 83 million people have been trained in subsidized vocational skills across the country.
Policy tools	The tools are relatively simple, mainly administrative placement and cash subsidies.	Enrichment of toolkits: including training subsidies (unemployment insurance skills improvement subsidies will benefit 7.87 million people in 2022), entrepreneurship support (more than 170 billion yuan of new entrepreneurship guarantee loans will be issued in 2022), accurate personnel and job matching services, etc.
Target group	laid-off employees of state-owned enterprises and other specific unemployed groups.	Group expansion: covering various key groups such as college graduates, migrant workers, retired soldiers, poor labor, and flexible employment personnel.
Time orientation	Address the current unemployment crisis.	Long-term investment: Vocational skills education is regarded as a strategic investment to improve the quality of national human capital.

4 The Deep Logic, Main Results and Structural Dilemmas of Transformation

4.1 The Deep Logic and Comprehensive Results of Transformation

Based on the above analysis, the transformation logic of China's social policy is clearly reflected in all levels of the five-dimensional framework. This systematic transformation has achieved many results: in poverty control, it has achieved a leap from single income support to multi-dimensional intervention such as industry, education, and health; in terms of public services, it has promoted the quality upgrade from "existence" to "superiority and inferiority", from coverage to equality; In terms of social governance, it has promoted the formation of a pattern from government coverage to multi-subject co-construction, co-governance and sharing. In terms of development concept, the strategic consensus on human capital and social capital investment has been strengthened.

4.2 Structural Dilemmas and Challenges

However, the transformation process is still constrained by the following structural difficulties: (1) Fiscal sustainability

and responsibility sharing mechanism are ambiguous: developmental welfare involves long-term, high-investment services and capacity building, which puts continuous pressure on public finances. The cost-sharing mechanism between the government, the market, society and households has not been clearly defined, affecting the sustainability of the system. (2) Cross-departmental collaborative governance and policy integration problems: development-oriented policies naturally require cross-border collaboration. However, the administrative system of "block segmentation" leads to different goals between departments, scattered resources, high information barriers, and huge coordination costs, making it difficult to form policy synergy. (3) Insufficient supply capacity for accurate identification and personalized services: Compared with standardized cash distribution, developmental services require accurate identification of diverse and dynamic personalized needs. Weak grassroots service capabilities, shortage of professional talents, and insufficient data sharing restrict the effectiveness and accuracy of services. (4) Lack of long-term performance evaluation and evidence-based decision-making mechanisms: The effectiveness of developmental interventions (such as capacity improvement and social integration) is lagging behind and difficult to quantify. At present, there is a lack of a scientific, multi-dimensional and long-term performance evaluation system, which makes policy optimization lack a solid evidence base and easy to fall into the trap of "heavy investment and light effect".

5 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

5.1 Research Conclusions

This paper constructs a five-dimensional analysis framework and uses mixed methods analysis to show that China's social policy is in a deepening period of transformation from "survival welfare" to "developmental welfare". This transformation takes "social investment" and "active empowerment" as the core in concept, and presents a systematic paradigm reconstruction in many key areas such as social assistance, elderly services, and employment support in practice, supported by tangible trend data. However, the depth and effectiveness of transformation are constrained by structural dilemmas such as finance, collaboration, precision, and evaluation, reflecting the complex tension between concept renewal, institutional innovation, and governance capacity improvement.

5.2 Integrated Suggestions for Promoting the Construction of a Development-oriented Welfare System

In order to break through the dilemma and further promote the transformation, this paper puts forward the following integrated policy suggestions: (1) Establish strategic priorities and stable financing mechanisms for social investment: In national and local development plans, areas with high social returns such as education, early childhood development, lifelong vocational skills training, and preventive health services are clearly listed as priority investment items. Explore the establishment of a diversified and sustainable welfare financing system and clarify the responsibilities of each subject. (2) Build a high-level collaborative "big social policy" governance pattern: rely on high-level cross-departmental coordination mechanisms to effectively break down departmental barriers. Take the construction of digital government as an opportunity to promote cross-departmental data sharing, policy integration and project packaging, and promote the "one-stop" comprehensive service center model at the grassroots level. (3) Develop a professional and precise social service system: Greatly strengthen the training and incentive of professionals in social work, rehabilitation nursing, career counseling, etc. Make full use of big data, artificial intelligence and other technologies to build a smart service platform of "intelligent assessment of needs, accurate matching of resources, and dynamic feedback of effects", so as to realize the transformation from "people looking for policies" to "policies looking for people". (4) Innovate evidence-based evaluation and decision-making models with development effectiveness as the core: Take the lead in developing a comprehensive evaluation index system covering multiple dimensions such as capacity development, social participation, and subjective well-being. Vigorously promote methods such as third-party evaluation and long-term follow-up surveys, and build a complete evidence-based closed loop of "policy formulation, implementation monitoring, effect evaluation, and dynamic optimization" to improve the scientificity and effectiveness of policies.

Building a modern welfare system that can not only support basic people's livelihood but also empower the development of the whole people is a solid foundation for China to achieve common prosperity and long-term peace and stability. The research in this paper aims to provide useful theoretical perspectives and practical references for understanding and promoting this historic transformation process.

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