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## What Shapes Policy Formation in China? A Study of National Student Nutrition Policies

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# What Shapes Policy Formation in China? A Study of National Student Nutrition Policies

## **Abstract**

This article juxtaposes *world culture* and *policy borrowing and lending* literatures to understand policy formation in China. Through reviewing China's student nutrition policy evolution since the International Conference on Nutrition in 1992 to the launch of China's landmark national rural student nutrition program in 2011, I examine what the key explanations to the policy developments in China were. This paper analyzes both quantitative and qualitative data from the MOE, State Council, and media sources, and draws on policy documents, scholarly publications, civil society activities, and international aid flows. Findings show that although neither *world culture* nor *policy borrowing and lending* frameworks could fully explain the case in China, local actors became increasingly active in student nutrition, as suggested by *world culture theory*, even when local conditions such as rural-urban poverty gaps were decreasing. In addition, the lack of international aid alignment and domestic politics may have led to the decoupling in policy and practice for China's student nutrition agenda.

## **Keywords**

Policy Formation, Nutrition, Public Policy, Chinese, Education Policy

## **Cover Page Footnote**

I thank Professors Gita Steiner-Khamsi and Oren Pizmony-Levy (Teachers College) for their advice and guidance, and also Professors John Kennedy (University of Kansas) and Yaojiang Shi (Shaanxi Normal University) for their feedback. All errors are my own.

# **WHAT SHAPES POLICY FORMATION IN CHINA? A STUDY OF NATIONAL STUDENT NUTRITION POLICIES**

**Ji Liu<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

Malnutrition has long been an issue critically affecting women and children, particularly in impoverished areas, and is identified as one of the main concerns of the new millennium (United Nations, 2000). China, as the world's most populous and largest developing country, was of special concern in the global malnutrition challenge (United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition, 1992). Since the China State Council's full-scale implementation of the Rural Compulsory Education Nutrition Improvement Plan (RCENIP) in late 2011, the program has received a total of 52 Billion RMB (US\$8.39Billion) in government finance and reached over 22.4 million school-aged children (MOE, 2014). Interests in RCENIP in the academic and policy circles have sprouted as scholars and analysts try to identify the key drivers that have led to the largest nationwide student nutrition initiative to date.

The current literature on RCENIP can be categorized into the following three aspects: impact evaluation, policy formation, and program administration. Almost all current impact evaluation research studies have been carried out by large or government-related agencies and are based on post-2011 implementation results (21st Century Education Research Institute, 2012; China Center for Disease Prevention and Control, 2013; China Development Research Foundation, 2013). In the policy formation literature on RCENIP, researchers have mostly focused on the role of civil society, particularly the influence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and public opinion, in the immediate timeframe prior to RCENIP's 2011 implementation (Zhang, 2013; Peng, Li, Zheng, & Zheng, 2013). Last but not least, a very limited amount of articles discusses the program administration and execution in the duration of the program lifespan thus far (Wu, 2013). Few existing literature discusses the nutrition policies in China in relation to the global policy diffusion context.

A majority of these scholars have investigated student nutrition as a solely domestic issue leaving out any discussion on cross-border policy transfers. The rise of global attention to child nutrition, like that of China (see Figure 1) has been steadily growing especially after the new

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millennium, and international influence and globalization processes cannot be overlooked. Thus, topics on policy formation in student nutrition policies have to be examined through an international and comparative lens, which has been previously neglected. In order to understand various dynamics that influenced the eventual adoption, I aim to complement current literature and situate RCENIP in a larger timeframe of global nutrition policy diffusion.

In order to investigate the policy-making processes in the field of education and public policy, I intend to build from two key bodies of research in educational globalization, *world culture* and *policy borrowing and lending* theories, to analyze the various motivations behind this student nutrition movement in China. *World culture's* normative view and *policy borrowing and lending's* prescriptive view on policy diffusion will help draw implications for the current theoretical frameworks in the study of educational globalization.

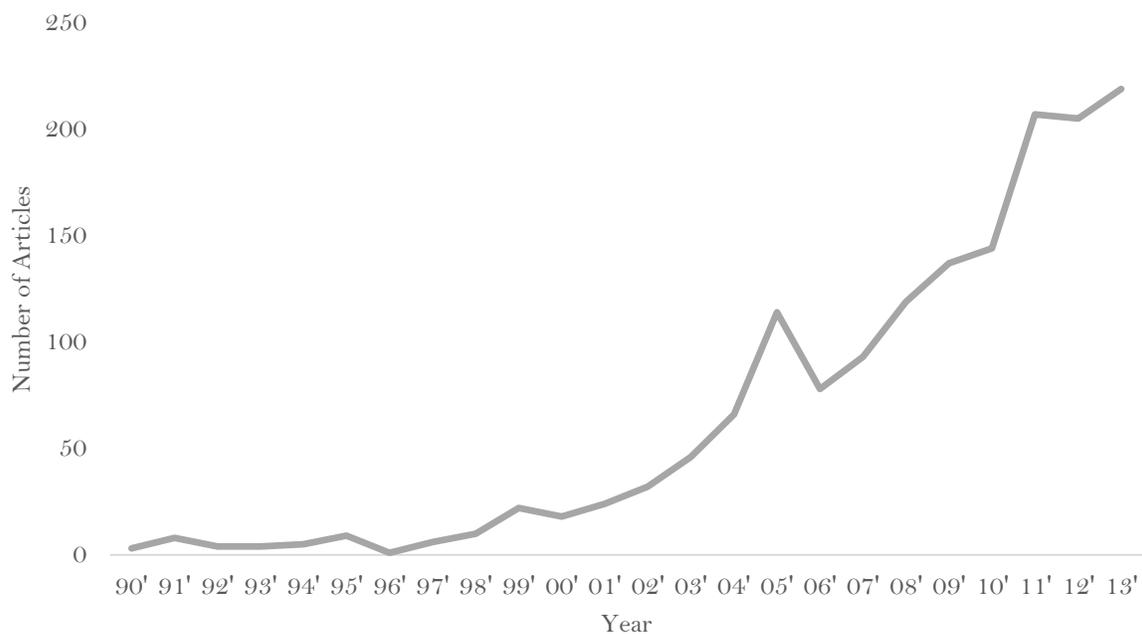


Figure 1. Global Discourse on Student Nutrition as measured by Number of Student Nutrition Related Articles in Factiva Database; SOURCE: (Factiva, 2014)

### Theoretical Frameworks

As I intend to contribute to the current literature in cross-border educational globalization, and am concerned only with the expansion of student nutrition policies to China, two key clusters of research that focuses on the policy diffusion process form the main theoretical frameworks in this paper. The first key research cluster, *world culture* as represented by Meyer and his associates (1997), describes a phenomenon in which education policies in different systems are converging because of various expanded and diffused ideas regarding the responsibilities of nation-states in world society. Countries adopt these ideas and policies because they are crafted and legitimized through a network of international actors (Meyer et al., 1997). Travelling ideas and policies are often diffused through various non-state channels, such as international conferences, international best practices, and epistemic organizations (Pizmony-Levy, 2011).

The second key research cluster can be identified as the *policy borrowing and lending* discussion, in which scholars are concerned with local conditions that borrow or adopt these travelling global ideas and policies (Schriewer & Martinez, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). *Policy borrowing and lending* is also interested in examining educational globalization but begins the discussion from the local perspective. *Policy borrowing and lending* scholars, such as Steiner-Khamsi (2004), Silova (2004), and Takayama (2007), discuss how local political and economic conditions may complicate how various actors interact in the shaping and implementation of educational policies. Travelling ideas and policies are often given very different interpretations and meaning when they reach the ground, and it is important to understand the motivations behind these phenomena.

The *world culture* literature addresses the notion that narratives for nation-states are formulated and legitimized by a system of various transnational actors (Meyer et al., 1997). These narratives are generated by actors unbounded by borders and are disseminated through various mechanisms, and thus make policies at the nation-state level increasingly convergent (Meyer, 2010). Nation-states often adopt these travelling ideas and policies as a result of activities in global discourse and by non-state actors. Thus, it is important to adopt this lens in understanding the influence of non-state actors on policy formation, especially within discourse surrounding the role of NGOs in the agenda setting process (Peng et al., 2012). It is important to situate RCENIP within the *world culture's* normative discussion as I investigate the interactions of various levels of state and non-state actors for the purpose of understanding driving forces that led to the eventual implementation.

In *policy borrowing and lending*, emphasis on local policy context as the unit of analysis involving the actors, process, impact, and timing of travelling reforms has been common. According to Steiner-Khamsi (2010), the analytical dimensions of educational globalization can be grouped in two categories: political and economic. In the political dimension, policy makers borrow international experiences or best practices when there is a longstanding policy conflict or when a policy agreement is unreachable (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010). Politicians often refer to a more neutral third policy reference frame, so that parties with divergent opinions can consolidate resources and form alliances to support it. In this process, Luhmann and Schorr (1979) consider the theory of externalization as a critical component in the analysis of educational theory formation. As suggested by Appadurai (1996), media holds a significant weight as the source in this formation of social imagination using ideas and imageries of instances abroad; also supported by Takayama (2007), whom illustrated how politicians in Japan used the *Finnish Success* story to shape policy discourse in favor of either the neoliberal or progressive agenda. Economically, the act of global policy transfusion often disappears once exterior financial resources become dry and appears to be created by the requirements imposed as a condition of these grants; policy borrowing in developing countries is often coercive and unidirectional (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010). The theoretical framing of *policy borrowing and lending* suggests a more prescriptive approach in global policy diffusion, which is useful in identifying the drivers for the adoption of policies in Chinese context.

*World culture* and *policy borrowing and lending* theories have three key characteristics which make them ideal candidates for producing valuable discussion and explanation of educational globalization. First, for commonality, both theoretical dimensions approach the same “episode” in the process of educational globalization. Both world culture and policy borrowing and lending scholars are interested in the diffusion and expansion of ideas and policies that travel from country to country. It is important to differentiate this discussion from existing literature on the *world culture – local culture* dialogue, as the later exchange holds distinct focuses, with the *world culture's* attention on policy diffusion and *local culture's* on policy implementation (Pizmony-Levy,

2011). It is essential that the two bodies of research are relevant to the same timeframe, policy diffusion, to formulate explanations of what exactly produced student nutrition policies in China.

Second, as a key difference, although both *world culture* and *policy borrowing and lending* researchers recognize the likelihood of systemic decoupling, in which case the policy posture in a country may not match its policy activities (Meyer, 1977; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012), a majority of world culture scholars do not explore occurrences of decoupling and merely acknowledge that they exist (Pizmony-Levy, 2011). Responding to the instance of decoupling from both perspectives is important in order to better understand the key drivers behind the complexities of student nutrition policies in China.

Third, *world culture* is based on quantitative studies and high levels of abstraction, whereas *policy borrowing and lending* research often puts itself within a small number of cases and uses detailed case studies. Each approach has its own limitations in bearing the whole explanation of a case, but when they are brought together, they may bring an innovative approach to address intriguing issues in educational globalization.

### Propositions

Drawing on the two theoretical frameworks, I developed two propositions regarding the formation of student nutrition policies in China, to be examined in this paper. Taking the stance of the *world culture* framework, the role of non-state actors, essentially transnational agencies, helped formulate and legitimize national decisions, while local actors became receptors of this international attention on student nutrition policy.

**Proposition 1:** Transnational and local actors' involvement in student nutrition has corresponded with global movements rather than local needs and influenced student nutrition policy diffusion in China.

In addition, under the *policy borrowing and lending* framework which focuses on domestic political conflict and external financial resources, I expect to find that the timing of implementation for the RCENIP program was affected by external funding and domestic political factors.

**Proposition 2:** Decoupling between policy posture and policy activity is associated with international aid alignment and domestic political factors.

### Methodology

The theoretical approach described in the prior sections requires detailed analysis of various aspects including policy and program, politics and economy, public opinion and civil society in order to facilitate a "multifaceted and holistic analyses of education phenomena" (Bray et al., 2006, p. 8). In the following analysis of the development of student nutrition policies, I incorporate the vertical case study design introduced by Vavrus and Bartlett (2006), in order to understand and compare the impact among actors, namely the Ministry of Education (MOE), local governments, NGOs, and citizens, as an attempt to reconstruct an interpretation of the development through a broader cultural, historical, and political analysis. Due to the difficulty of obtaining primary data in the central government's decision making process, as appropriate, I situate various secondary source data through a thorough and descriptive quantitative approach (Hopkins, 2008). The research design used in this study is consistent with prior research, both in the field of comparative education and policy studies.

**Understanding the Case.** First, I examine the development of national student nutritional policies, by studying data from three official sources<sup>i</sup>: the *Ministry of Education Policy Directory*<sup>ii</sup>, the *Ministry of Education Public Information Directory*<sup>iii</sup>, and also the Ministry of Education's dedicated website for the national Rural Compulsory Education Nutrition Improvement Plan<sup>iv</sup>. The *MOE's Policy Directory* contains all education-related legislative documents published by both the Central Government and the MOE between the years 2008-2014. *MOE's Public Information Directory* discloses policy documents organized by office, sector, and document type, and the directory includes documents between the years 2009-2014. The RCENIP website, established in 2011, is a digital library of all publications, notices, policy, and conference minutes concerning RCENIP, and it also serves as a gateway for the MOE to disseminate important information to various local agencies.

Second, due to the possibility of inconsistency of MOE's website data, various foundation and agency reports<sup>v</sup> were utilized to triangulate MOE's entries. References and bibliographies in these reports were used to supply additional data. Third, a similar advanced search<sup>vi</sup> was conducted on three major website search engines: Peoples' Daily, Google.com, and Baidu.com, using the keywords *Xue Sheng Ying Yang* (student nutrition). In order to present a holistic view of the development of student nutrition policies, the data entries were first categorized by three levels of actor: *National Government*, *Local Government*, and *NGOs*. Within each category, the entries were further organized into the following types: Policy Documents, Implemented Programs, Monitor and Evaluation Activities, Events, Meetings, and General News. A total of 183 entries were deemed useful for this analysis, among which 103 were at the *National Government* level, 60 at the *Local Government* level, and 23 by NGOs. By entry type, there were 63 *Policy Documents*, 35 *Implemented Programs*, 26 *Monitor and Evaluation Activities*, 23 *Events*, 21 *Meetings*, and 15 *General News*.

**Data Collection for Propositions 1 & 2.** First, domestic political and economy indicators were drawn from the online database made available by the National Bureau of Statistics<sup>vii</sup>. Economic indicators such as the Engel Curve for both rural and urban households was drawn from this database for the years 1990-2012.

Second, as I go in depth in this paper discussing the public discourse and non-state actors in the policy formation phase, it was important to find accurate representations of the media outlets and arenas for public discourse. Public Opinion and Civil Society data was collected from three aspects: social media, published media, and academic sources. It was important to capture the discussion on social media outlets, such as Weibo, regarding student nutrition not only because various studies have pointed out that the influence of social media cannot be overlooked in policy agenda setting (Peng et al., 2013), but also due to the fact that various traditional media have also opened accounts and releases reports (Sina Weibo Corporation, 2013). Weibo discourse was measured by year from 2009-2013<sup>viii</sup>, during which Weibo was active on the official Weibo search engine<sup>ix</sup>.

Third, published media data were retrieved from an online database, Factiva, organized and maintained by Dow Jones group<sup>x</sup>. The database holds published news data for the past 35 years in 30 different languages in 200 regions. For the specific purpose of this paper, data was captured by using the search engine for articles published in Mandarin Chinese in Mainland China for the years 1990-2013. In order to account for the rapid growth in digitalization of media articles, original *Xue Sheng Ying Yang* (student nutrition) related news articles were expressed as a percentage of total original *Ying Yang* (nutrition) related news articles, and identical, reposts or replicated posts were removed from the data. A similar search was conducted for all languages in all regions as a measure of global discourse on student nutrition.

Fourth, published and peer-reviewed academic articles that related to the national student nutrition discourse were captured through the online database offered by the *China National Knowledge Infrastructure* (CNKI)<sup>xi</sup>, which is considered the largest academic resource network in China. For the specific purpose of this paper, data was captured by using *Xue Sheng Ying Yang* (student nutrition) as keywords in the search engine for articles published in peer-reviewed journals in Mandarin Chinese in Mainland China for the years 1990-2013.

Fifth, multilateral aid statistics were drawn from project level databases and summary reports published by the major actors in nutrition development, namely the World Bank, UNICEF, World Health Organization (WHO), and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), whereas data on bilateral development aid or government assistance was retrieved from the Center for Global Development's online data center. In the World Bank Project & Operations database<sup>xii</sup>, using the keyword *nutrition* and filter for "Health" sector and "China," the results returned a total of 11 projects between the years 1986-2002. After searching the UNICEF China country-level website<sup>xiii</sup> and UNICEF Statistical webpage<sup>xiv</sup>, limited project-level data was available. FAO (2011) offers a detailed project summary report<sup>xv</sup> regarding its past projects and development work in China. The Center for Global Development's online dataset<sup>xvi</sup>, contains entries for bilateral development aid to China between the years 1990-2009, during which there were 12 projects classified under "Basic Nutrition," totaling to an amount of US\$ 8,691,698 (Strange et al., 2013).

### **The Case: Student Nutrition in China**

The upswing of global attention in nutrition policies initially started at the 1990 Millennium Development Goal (MDG) conference. Because nutrition significantly affects other development sectors such as education, gender and poverty, nutrition is often cited as the foundation for development (United Nations, 2009). After the MDG Conference in 1990, international attention focused on the attainment of these goals in malnutrition, disease, poverty, and poor maternal health, amongst other development concerns. This global interest spurred the first world conference on nutrition, the 1992 International Conference on Nutrition (ICN) in Rome, bringing together 159 countries, including China, with the aim of strategizing the nutritional betterment of the world's people (Gopalan, n.d.; FAO & WHO, 1992).

The ICN identified the need for broader inter-sectoral coordination and drew publicity to the role of poverty and lack of education as major factors undermining nutrition in several parts of the world and created an action plan to address issues in nutritional betterment such as safe water, sanitation and education (Gopalan, n.d.). As an initial step toward meaningful nutrition policies, the ICN produced the first International World Declaration on Nutrition and Plan of Action. The conference espoused the view that nutritional well-being is a pre-condition for the development of societies and is also a "key objective of progress in human development" (FAO & WHO, 1992, Item 11). Since the ICN Treaty of 1992, a flurry of nutrition programs has developed around the world through NGOs, private institutions, and partnerships through the United Nations, local governments, and donors. (WHO, 2013; UNICEF, 2013).

Before the ICN in 1992, child nutrition in China was equated with infant nutrition, and this responsibility was largely left to each individual household (China Center for Disease Prevention and Control, 2013). The UN Standing Committee for Nutrition (1992) reported that although the percentage of underweight preschool children in China was not among the highest regions, its large base number and stagnant trend presented an immense challenge for the country. Since ratifying the importance of nutrition at the ICN in Rome, China entered the ICN Treaty as a newcomer in addressing student malnutrition, and the development in the policy arena has taken various stages.

Summarizing from the list of policy documents generated by various central government agencies, three periods of development can be identified (see Figure 2). Figure 2 captures the total amount of student nutrition policy activity by year, defined as an aggregate number of policy documents, implemented programs, monitoring and evaluation activities, events, meetings, and general news published. The first period was the Era of Policy Symbols during the years 1992-2000, the second was the Era of Increased Attention during the years 2001-2010, and the most recent period started in 2011 (China Center for Disease Prevention and Control, 2013).

The first emergence of student nutrition activity appeared after the 1992 ICN Treaty, while a small increase can be observed immediately after the transition of the century, and several small policy activity bumps occurred before the big spike happened closer to the implementation of RCENIP in 2011. The first increase in the late 90s and early 00s was mainly due to the fact that the initial policy documents signed and published after the 1992 ICN Treaty had expired towards the end of the millennium, and a new range of policies and programs replaced the original ones that ended. The dip or decrease in policy activity in 2013 is mainly due to the fact that after over a year of full implementation, the RCENIP was entering a relatively smooth operational phase, when a majority of the founding documents and programs had been published or implemented in 2011 and 2012. This, however, does not imply any decrease in the investment or scale in the operation of RCENIP in 2013.

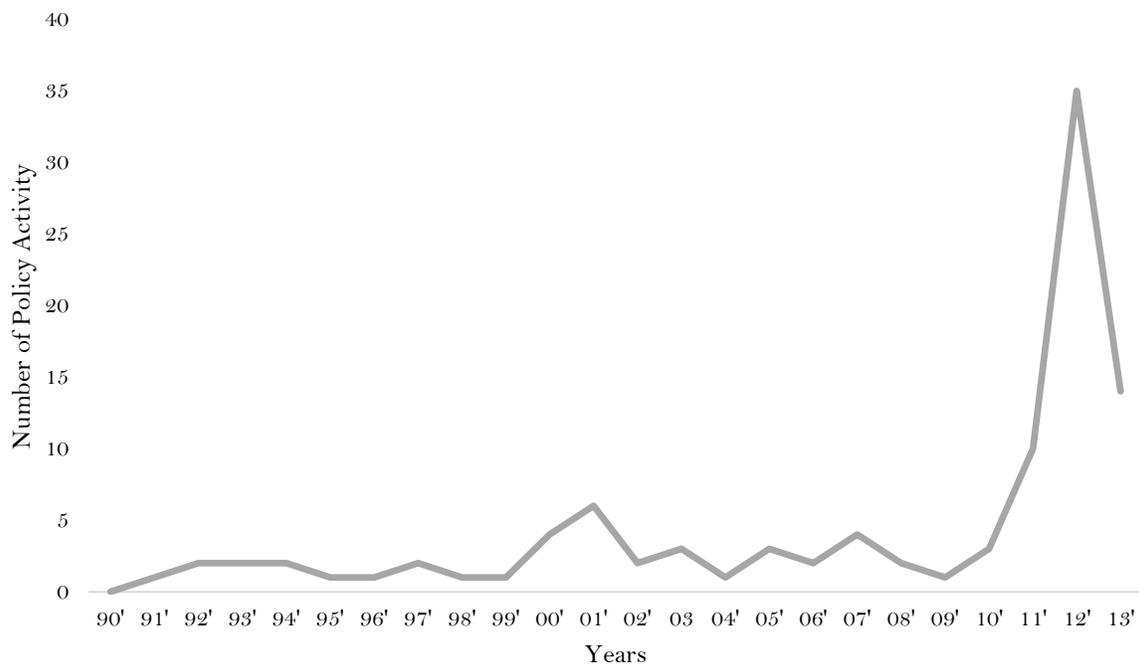


Figure 2. Total Student Nutritional Policy Activity by National Government; SOURCE: Author's compilation, for details see Methodology Section

**Era of Policy Symbols (1992-2000).** In the past few decades, compulsory education in China has made an important transition from *providing education* to *providing good quality education*, and in this process, the circumstances of malnutrition in school age children from rural and remote regions has presented a special challenge (21st Century Education Research Institute, 2012). Despite its pressing threat, student nutrition appears as one that has not been

substantively addressed until recently, especially in its initial period during which national actions were merely symbolic. According to the UNSCN Second Report on World Nutrition Situations (1992), although infant mortality rate was relatively low, the base number of undernourished children was still large, and the prevalence of underweight children greatly varied geographically – for instance, in data from 1987 between 6% and 27% in urban areas and 12% to 47% in rural areas.

Immediately following the ICN, the central government published two policy documents as the guiding principles in addressing student nutrition in schools. The first was the *90s Chinese Child Development Planning Outlines* (Jiu Shi Nian Dai Zhong Guo Er Tong Fa Zhan Gang Yao) which specifically identified child nutrition as a key factor in the development of the nation (State Council, 1992). Giving special attention to the well-being of the population, the *Outline* (1992) identified lowering the malnutrition and extreme hunger rate of children under five by half in the coming decade. This document became the first institutional action at the national level and laid the foundation for further national planning in student nutrition.

The second policy document of importance that was a milestone for student nutrition during this era was the *China Nutrition Improvement Action Plan* (Zhong Guo Ying Yang Gai Shan Ji Hua), which was published by the central government in 1997. Under the 1992 ICN Treaty, China was to meet the goal of eliminating extreme hunger by the year 2000 at all costs (State Council, 1997). In the *Action Plan* (1997), student free lunch was not only identified as an intervention under *Section 5*, but the State Council also named 18 central government agencies including the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance, and the National Education Commission as coordinating organs (State Council, 1997). Moreover, the State Council (1997) also explicitly stated in the Action Plan that it would increase cooperation with international organizations such as the World Bank, UNICEF, Food and Agriculture Organization, and the World Health Organization as a “follow-up effort” (Hou Xu Xing Dong) beyond the ICN and to “secure” (Zheng Qu) international technical and financial assistance (State Council, 1997). The *Action Plan* (1997) marked a founding step in the central government’s effort in shaping the student nutrition movement, not only identifying the intervention it supported but also listing agencies responsible for the implementation and international organizations it was willing to work with.

**Era of Increased Attention (2001–2010).** At the turn of the millennium, momentum for more attention on child nutrition and development continued to build. In the first ten years of the new century, national level policies continued to grow and central government investments in rural and poverty regions started to appear as more concrete action plans were implemented (China Center for Disease Prevention and Control, 2013). Just in 2001 alone, two decade long plans concerning child nutrition were released, *2001–2010 China Food and Nutrition Development Outline* (Zhong Guo Shi Wu Yu Ying Yang Fa Zhan Gang Yao 2001–2010) and *2001–2010 China Child Development Outline* (Zhong Guo Er Tong Fa Zhan Gang Yao).

These two ten-year strategic plans marked the first time that the central government began comprehensive policy planning on nutrition and child development. In 2003, the first substantive government fiscal allocation towards student nutrition was pledged through the *Liang Mian Yi Bu* (Two Subsidies and One Free Program) by both the central and provincial budgets. During 2007–2011, 33.6 Billion RMB (US\$5.4 Billion) was used to provide living subsidies to rural boarding student for the years 2007–2011 (China Center for Disease Prevention and Control, 2013). The program paid for all textbook and miscellaneous fees as well as subsidized fees incurred for boarding students in various school (State Council, 2003). *Liang Mian Yi Bu* holds unique historical significance because it was the first time that the central and local governments were working together to tackle poverty related issues in rural schools, where malnutrition was also the most prevalent. Although the 2003 program did not address student

nutrition as an individual subject matter, the increased attention to poverty induced issues especially in rural regions must be acknowledged. Since then, several other student nutrition and physical health related national documents have been released as the central government has attempted larger and more direct actions in tackling the malnutrition challenge (China Center for Disease Prevention and Control, 2013).

Less well-known are the simultaneous local government actions that were taking place during this time as the central government began making important guidelines for student nutritional work. Various local programs sprouted as early as 2003. For instance, Du Yun City in Gui Zhou Province started a pilot program sponsoring an additional protein meal for all students in its district (MOE, 2003). More notably, Shaanxi Province launched its province-wide *Dan Nai Gong Cheng* (Egg and Milk Program) in 2009 by providing each student with an egg and a carton of milk per day as a government effort to equalize student nutritional inputs (Education Department of Shaanxi Provincial Government, 2013). Thus, this era of increased attention was not only observed at the national policy level, but also a time when student nutrition began to gain traction on the *ground* as more local governments explored different avenues.

**Era of National RCENIP Program (2011- present).** Citing rural poverty as a main reason for student malnutrition, the State Council officially launched RCENIP in late October 2011, covering 680 regions of extreme poverty and 23 million students in the Compulsory Education Phase in grades 1 through 9 (MOE, 2011). According to the MOE (2011), the main goals of the program are to alleviate current malnutrition situations in rural regions, improve school students' nutritional status, and raise education quality. The central government pledged financial assistance from the national budget to initiate the nutrition program, offering 3 RMB (US\$0.50) per student per day, and a total of 600 RMB (US\$100) per student per year, while provincial and other local governing bodies are encouraged to provide or match additional funding (MOE, 2011). Since the ICN in 1992, the scale of RCENIP is unprecedented in any other student nutrition program and marks the first nutrition-specific intervention that the central government has implemented.

The RCENIP represents a program that requires national ministry-level cooperation between many key departments within the central government. The program is coordinated by the MOE and supported by a long list of central agencies, including the Ministry of Communication, National Commission on Development and Reform, Ministry of Auditing, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Health, National Bureau of Food and Drug Safety, etc. (MOE, 2011). The RCENIP Detailed Plan (2011) issued by the State Council clearly stated the relationship between the government, agencies, departments, and schools, making this the largest nutritional intervention in China to date. Meanwhile, the execution of the program is organized by provincial governments and locally managed by county governments in practical execution.

Prompt progress has been observed in funded schools, and of the 680 regions of extreme poverty, 97.4 percent of them have met their student needs; within each region, the program currently covers 99.1 percent of the student population and 99.7 percent of the schools (China Development Research Foundation, 2013). These key findings of the program suggest that the overall functionality of the program is well. The main form of nutritional supplement is meal subsidies or supplements, and current food safety and monitoring mechanisms have been established. The dominant nutritional intervention for the rural schools is meal supplementation, among which 52.7 percent of the rural primary boarding schools and 58.2 percent of the rural secondary boarding schools offer cafeteria food (China Development Research Foundation, 2013). Given the tight timeline for implementation, it is considered a significant accomplishment

for the RCENIP to obtain such a large coverage (China Center for Disease Prevention and Control, 2013).

## Discussion

As observed in Figure 2, the first spike in policy activity took place near the turn of the millennium, which signaled an occurrence of policy decoupling since the first signing of the ICN Treaty was in 1992; this decoupling is also supported by later evidence that the actual policy implementation, namely RCENIP, did not happen until 2011. To answer the research question regarding what led to the rise of policy attention to student nutrition in China, it is important to consider the interactions between transnational and local actors within the context of a growing global concern for student nutrition. *World culture* perspective suggests that local actors, such as citizens, professionals, NGOs, and academia, appear to be on-the-ground receptors for transnational agendas set forth by international actors, in this instance, WHO and FAO. Thus, I would like to look at the relationship between transnational and local non-state actors, global movements, and local needs, as suggested in Proposition 1. First, I would like to look at transnational actors and global processes, followed by local needs, and finally local actors.

**Proposition 1:** Transnational and local actors' involvement in student nutrition has corresponded with global movements rather than local needs, and influenced student nutrition policy diffusion in China.

First of all, it is crucial to acknowledge the global processes that are at work in the student nutrition diffusion to China. Transnational agencies, namely WHO and FAO, were involved in the introduction of student nutrition to China in 1992, and since then, the global discourse around student nutrition has been steadily increasing. These observations lay the foundation for the explanation through a *world culture* perspective.

Second, in order to determine what the non-state actors are responding to, it is necessary to assess the level of local need. In this regard, it is useful to consider the social context between 1990 and 2011. Due to the heavy emphasis on addressing the rural inequality in the both the *Liang Mian Yi Bu* and RCENIP, it would be logical to assume that the policy decisions were based on the grounds of widening disparity between urban and rural regions, intensifying not only the nutrition deficit in rural students but also the overarching political climate in regards to national-level inequality. However, in Figure 3, the National Statistics Bureau (1990-2012) data would indicate otherwise, when one decides to examine the Engel Curve, which is expressed as an average percentage of total household income spent on food purchases, reported for urban and rural regions. Although a decreasing trend in the Engle Curve for the past two decades is observed both in urban and rural households, rural-urban disparity has inevitably shaped the nutritional challenges in remote settings. However, one must note that in the Era of Policy Symbols (1992-2000), rural-urban differences were at their peak and remained rather stable during this period, whereas during the Era of Increased Attention (2001-2010) and the Era of RCENIP (2011-present), the difference is clearly shrinking and is observed at its lowest in 2012.

Several observations can be drawn from this information; for one, the central government's policy postures may not be fully aligned with the social realities. For another, the RCENIP was implemented at a time when urban-rural inequality was at its lowest since 1990. Nonetheless, one would want to keep in mind that the RCENIP reaches all 680 extreme poverty regions whereas the data presented in Figure 3 is only representative of the national aggregate.

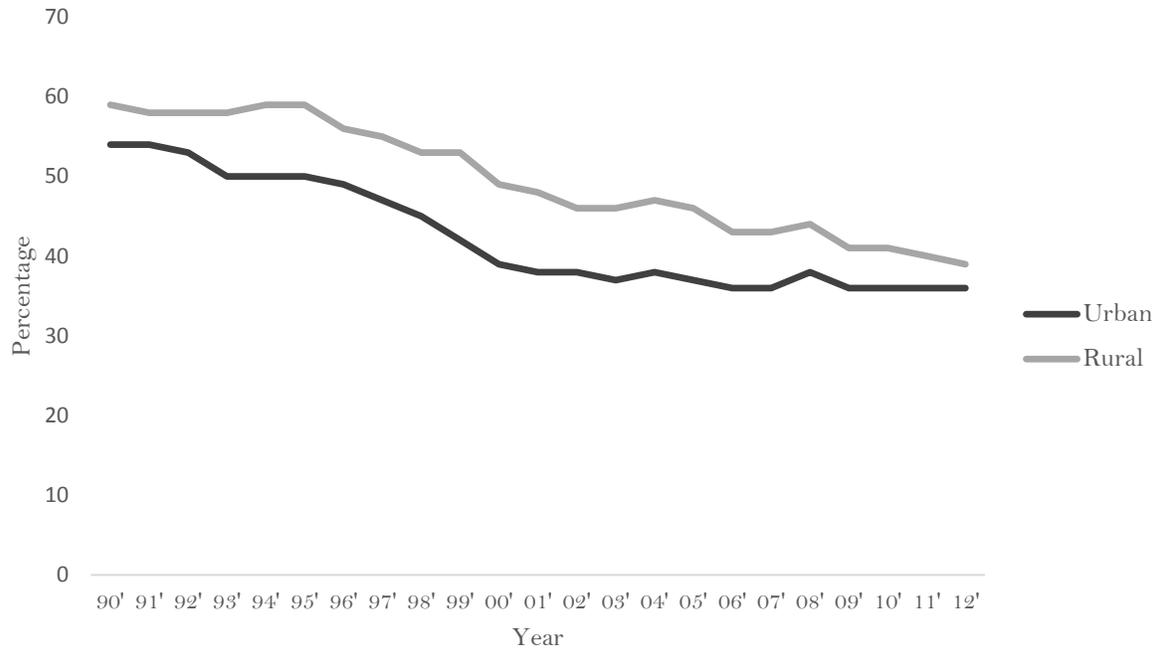


Figure 3. Rural and Urban Engle Curve Comparison by year; SOURCE: (National Statistics Bureau, 2013)

Third, there are several dimensions involved in my discussion on local non-state actors, namely the media, academia, and NGOs. Throughout the first and second eras, public media's concern on student nutrition (see Figure 4) seemed to be quite uniform, presenting a steady increase representative of the global discourse. More recently, the media discourse appears to be rather responsive, instead of acting as a precursor to policy activities, especially considering the instance that elevated media discussion regarding student nutrition was more evident in 2012 compared to 2011. This sudden increase in media attention was an after-effect from when the program came into full swing in 2012. This observation is more aligned with domestic policy activity in the student nutrition domain, instead of resembling global discourse. Thus, the evidence on media activity is insufficient to conclude that global process was a significant contributing factor to the rise of student nutrition policy in China.

Nonetheless, academic publicity of student nutrition has seen a consistent rise through the first and second eras, peaking after the implementation of the RCENIP in 2012 (see Figure 5). Although this observation is consistent with the nature of the academic research cycle, which is often not as responsive and robust as other public opinion outlets, it is still helpful in indicating trends retrospectively. Despite more accurate measures such as citation amounts being not readily available, Figure 4 shows the increasing attention that the academic community in China has given student nutrition. This steady increase in academic attention is not only at odds with the decreasing rural-urban divide, but also symbolic of the global discourse trend. Drawing from this occurrence, it may indicate that the academic community in China has been paying close attention to international discussions on student nutrition. I would even venture to suggest that, according to *world culture* theory, academia as a whole act as a local receptor to global processes and is influenced by domestic media discourse.

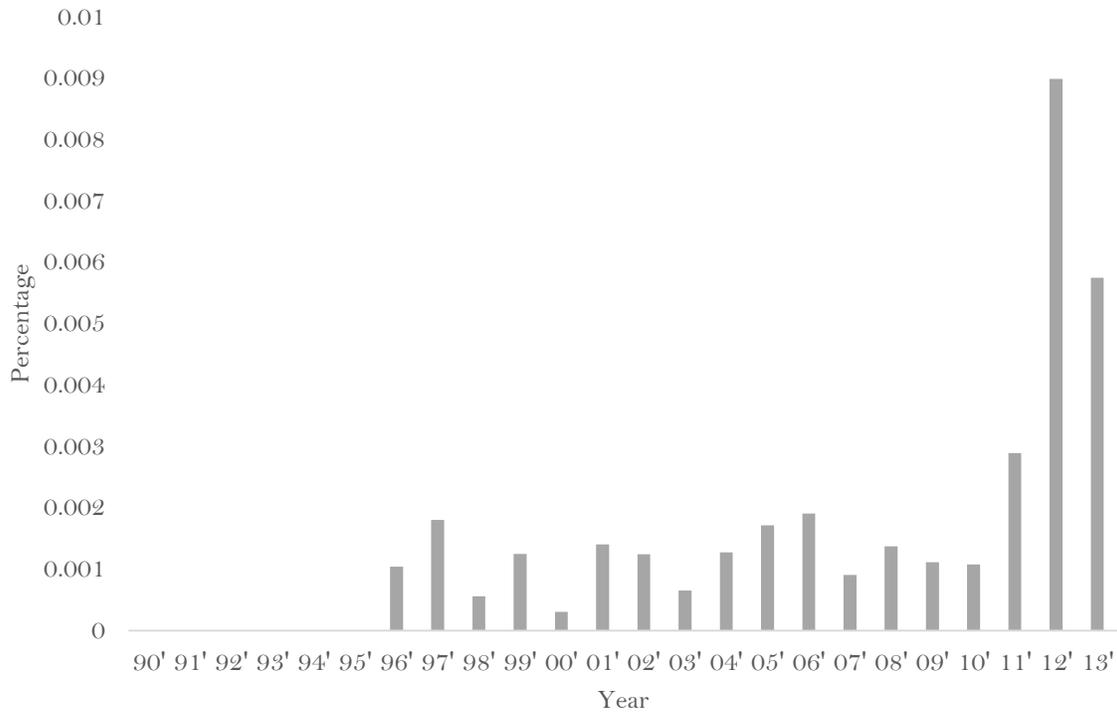


Figure 4. Public Concern for Student Nutrition as measured in Media Discourse by year; SOURCE: (Factiva Database, 2014)

Last but not least, local NGOs play an important role in *world culture* theory's explanations, as they tend to global processes. In Figure 6, one would observe that NGO initiated student nutrition activities first sprouted in 2006, and steadily grew to 2010, until it spiked in 2010-2011, and the number of activities gradually fell after the central government's RCENIP came into full swing in 2012 and 2013. When closely breaking down the make-up of NGOs working on student nutrition in China, one would find that most belong in two distinct categories. Most of the earliest student nutrition NGOs in China were corporation-backed agencies with a commercial vibe, such as food and nutrition industry big names Kraft, Amyway, and local food processing giant Jiuyang. These agencies sprouted as early as 2006, working in various contexts, but their motivations are yet to be properly examined. Another category for these NGOs were the charity-like NGO, one of the biggest names being *Mian Fei Wu Can* (Free Lunch). However intentions these NGOs may hold, the growth trend of their activities is clearly in sync with the steady growth in global discourse.

Although NGO activity as a whole may represent similar trends to that of global nutrition movements, I would like to bring attention to a particular NGO, *Mian Fei Wu Can*. As cited in several preceding articles, *Mian Fei Wu Can* is often viewed as the single most crucial catalyst in pushing the national RCENIP on the agenda (Zhang, 2013) *Mian Fei Wu Can* was founded on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011, after a journalist Deng Fei sent out a Weibo tweet about a personal experience he had speaking with a local teacher from the Southwest regions of China on student hunger. The tweet soon caught wide publicity, and Deng soon unionized the support of 400 other media colleagues to officially launch the organization. According to official MFWC financial reports (2011 & 2012), donations from individuals make up over 90% of its funding sources. In this sense, *Mian Fei Wu Can* may be interpreted as attending and responding to public concern in student

nutrition, and there needs to be more case study research on what *Mian Fei Wu Can*, as well as similar agencies, was in fact reacting to.

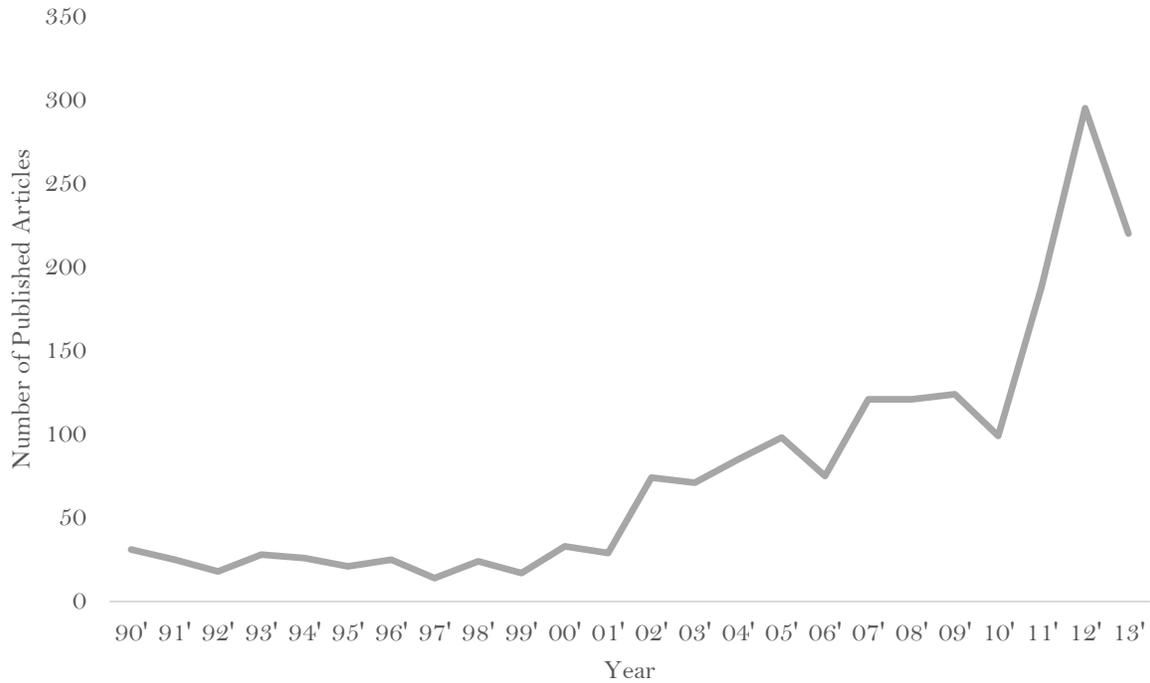


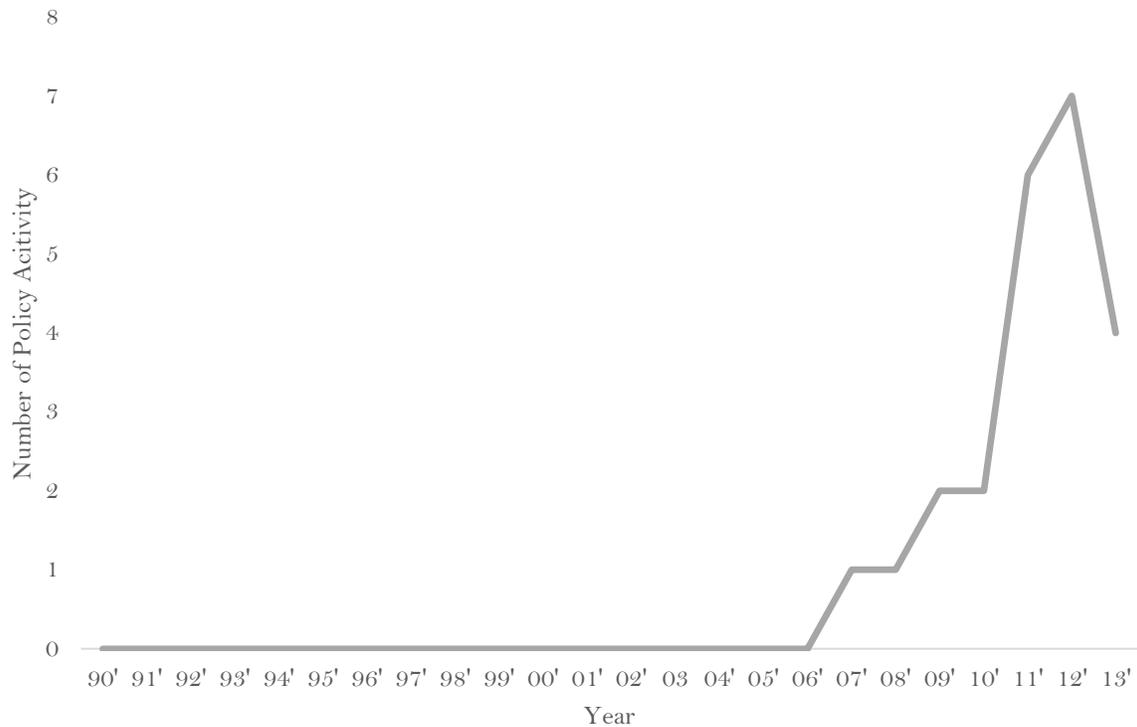
Figure 5. Academic Concern for Student Nutrition as measured by No. of Student Nutrition Related Peer-Reviewed Articles on CNKI by year; SOURCE: (CNKI Database, 2014)

After examining the *world culture* perspective, it is important to follow the investigation of *policy borrowing and lending* theorists in scrutinizing the political and economic domains. Earlier in this paper, Proposition 2 was set forth to help guide this discussion.

**Proposition 2:** Decoupling between policy posture and policy activity is associated with international aid alignment and domestic political factors.

For the specific case of international aid alignment, I intend to acknowledge several key actors on the global nutrition scene, namely the World Health Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization, UNICEF, the World Bank, as well as other bilateral actors.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) were the conveners of the original ICN in 1992, whereas UNICEF and the World Bank are the two largest development project funders in China. The history of these actors' financial and technical assistance is crucial to the understanding of what the international community has done to contribute to the rise of student nutrition programs in China.



*Figure 6.* Total Student Nutrition Related Activity by NGOs in China; SOURCE: Author's compilation, for details see Methodology Section

First, I researched the project database of WHO and that of FAO. Little evidence was found for nutrition related development aid to China after the ICN in 1992 (WHO & FAO Project Database, n.d.). WHO did, however, include China in its 1995 multi-national study on improving household nutrition and food security, and provided generalized policy recommendations (WHO, 1995). Second, UNICEF's posture in regards to child nutrition in China was described as a strategic partnership, outlined by nutrition status monitoring, infant nutrition, and combating micronutrient deficiency (UNICEF China, n.d.). Third, World Bank's role in China's nutritional policy has been considerably more substantial, especially in the Era of Policy Symbols, contributing to 8 projects valued at US\$954 Million total, and covering a wide range of subjects including endemic disease control, maternal and child health, and poverty reduction (World Bank Projects & Operations, 2014). Considering that most of the 8 projects span across multiple regions, World Bank's reach in China was quite considerable during this period. However, in the same time frame, India, China's equally populated neighbor to the south, received 21 projects valued at US\$3.2 Billion total in nutrition development (World Bank Projects & Operations, 2014). In this simple arithmetic comparison, China's received development aid in nutrition was only a third of India's during this period.

Last but not least, bilateral donors have also played an important role in international alignments and structural adjustments. In Figure 7, aggregated bilateral development aid that falls in the category of Basic Nutrition indicates that although the bilateral aid amounts remain relatively small, which would have little effect on policy alignment, the increasing trend between 1991 and 2009 parallels the similar growth in global discourse, which may further lean the discussion towards the *world culture* perspective.

In domestic political analysis, Appadurai (1996) and Takayama (2007) both consider that the media is actively used to produce images of a foreign system in order to create an ideal source of social imagination. This process of social imagination is not self-created, but rather a conscious product of political elites that selectively draw and cite self-appealing evidence to support individual agendas. In the case of Japan, as Takayama (2007) describes, both the progressive and conservative politicians in Japan both cite the rising Finnish Success however for strikingly different motivations and agendas. Thus, media is often used as an opinion tool to induce a sense of public crisis and admiration for a foreign system in order to gain popularity for a particular reform agenda, and to achieve its goal, purposefully shaped discourse often reaches its peak prior to the perceived reform.

In the case of China, after thorough research through the MOE documents, references to international experience in foreign school nutrition programs were formulated after the program implementation in late 2011. In addition, the MOE regularly published themed articles specifically highlighting best practices and lessons learned from various systems, such as the US, India, Japan, Finland, France, Russia, etc. The clear attempt to introduce foreign systems and concepts is symbolic of other externalization strategies that happened elsewhere, but the timing of references seems to require additional information for analysis.

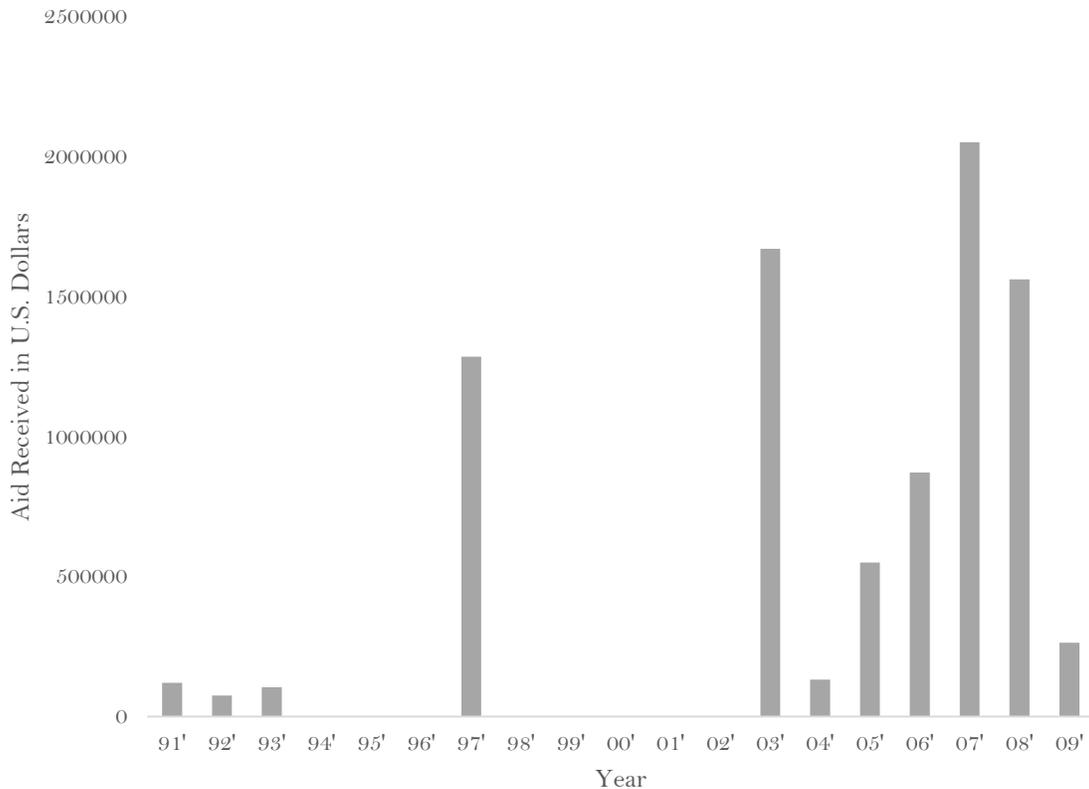


Figure 7. Amount of Bi-lateral international aid to Basic Nutrition in China; SOURCE: (aiddata.org)

Due to the limited amount of new articles making explicit references to international best practices, it was hard to capture the formation of discourse through the media database that was

utilized in prior discussions. Thus, I turned to China's largest social media, Weibo, which is equivalent of the more internationally known Twitter. Weibo was first started in August 2009, and claimed to have 503 million registered users at the end of 2012 (Sina Weibo, 2013). Weibo is not only an important place for civic discussion for most media agencies and scholars. More recently it has become a major news outlet for government affiliations.

As seen in Figure 8, the amount of post-RCENIP references to various sources for best practices grew significantly after the State Council announced its implementation. Keywords containing Japan, the US, India, South Korea, and international student nutrition were referenced the most in Chinese context, but most of the growth was observed after the RCENIP implementation, with the exception of a considerable discussion containing *International student nutrition* prior to the policy implementation. Although this proxy for civil discussion indicates that student nutrition discourse was present prior to the policy implementation, especially with "international" references, it is insufficient to conclude that media was shaping public discourse prior to the implementation in favor for one reform over another. Public attention to student nutrition was spread among several reference frames. In addition, as implied by the sharp increases in numbers of posts discussing student nutrition experiences abroad post-RCENIP, public discourse was responsive to the national policy decision.

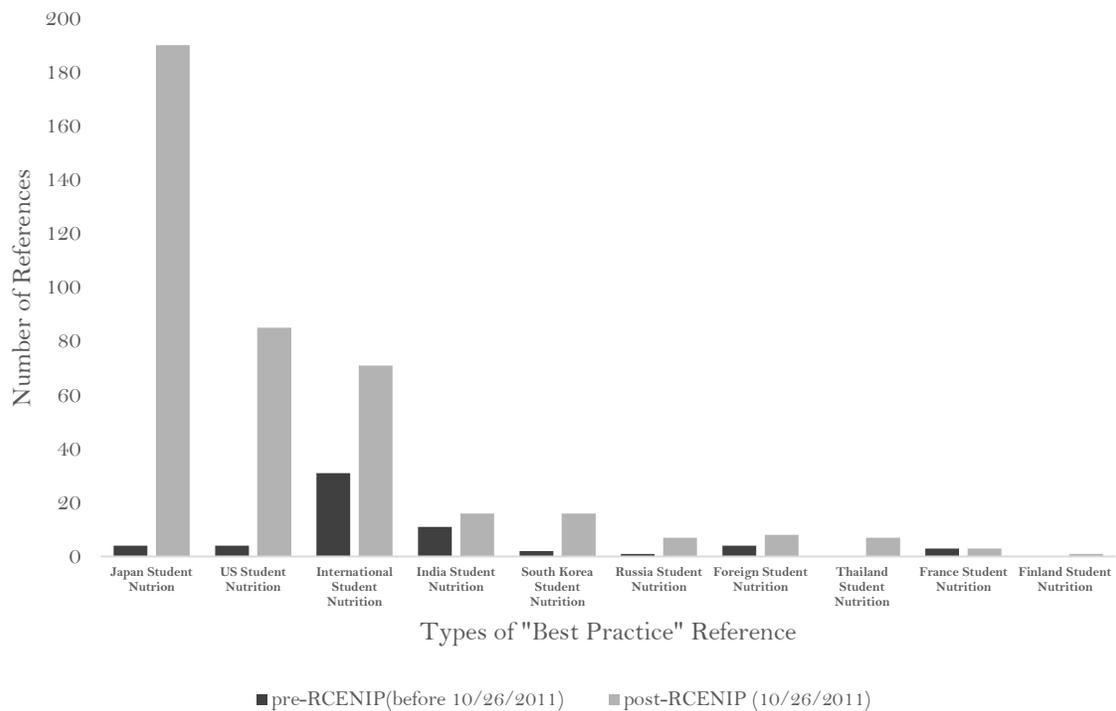


Figure 8. Number of References to Student Nutrition on Weibo; SOURCE: (Weibo, 2014)

### Limitations

This study uses quantitative data to analyze the motivations and conditions of possibilities that have had an influence on the student nutrition policy in China, but does not deal with direct causal relationships. Secondary data were used instead of first-hand accounts and sources because of the difficulty in obtaining this information. Nonetheless, this does not discount the fact that direct interactions with policy makers would be ideal. Future triangulation with

multiple primary sources would be ideal explorations for this topic. In addition, this study deals with a breadth of policy documents concerning RCENIP, and future research may consider placing more attention on individual documents using a more qualitative approach. Moreover, as Lieberthal (1988) has noted, historically there has been a blurry line in terms of clearly defining policy from projects in China. In the case of student nutrition, RCENIP is a significant step forward considering past government policies; however, its namesake implies a heavy program emphasis, thus this distinction between policy and program cannot yet be safely drawn. Future studies may consider exploring the institutional perspective of differentiating policies through specific projects.

## Conclusion

In this article, I employ evidence to achieve two objectives. First, a clear emphasis was put on juxtaposing *world culture* perspective and *policy borrowing and lending* theory, within the global student nutrition movement and Chinese student nutrition policy formation context. Second, I use the above two perspectives to explain what led to the student nutrition policy adoption in China. In order to reach these objectives, I present data from several sources and examined the two propositions drawn from the two frameworks.

The first set of data was specifically used to address the first proposition regarding *world culture*. I show that both transnational and local actors, such as the 1992 ICN, public media, academia, and local NGOs have all interacted and aligned in some capacity with the increasing global discourse on student nutrition. Measures of public opinion, academia attention, and local NGO activities have all presented similar trends following the growth in global awareness to student nutrition. One possible explanation for this observation is that it is purely coincidental with the increase in internet sources. Internet access and web functionality in the past two decades have greatly increased, which may have caused the across the board increase for all the observed indicators. Another possibility could be that local actors, such as media, academia, and NGOs, are actively seeking alignment with international communities and discussions, which can be explained by the normative globalization process outlined by *world culture*.

The second set of data presented in this discussion pertain to the second proposition that decoupling of student nutrition policies in China occurred, and can be associated with the lack of international aid alignment and domestic politics. In regards to international aid, the evidence suggests that too little international aid was distributed to China in student nutrition for any substantial policy alignment to even take place, and thus the initial decoupling happened. As for domestic politics, the RCENIP may not have been a response to actual needs or a result of intentional media framing but may have been influenced by other factors.

This paper extends the theoretical contributions of *world culture* and *policy borrowing and lending* theories and calls for more attention to investigating how global policy processes interact with the Chinese political and social context. As cross-national and cross-sectorial analysis begin to take prominence, it is evident that in-depth vertical case studies require methodological innovation to remain active. The comprehensive review of student nutrition policy development in China presented in this paper has collected new questions for the field of comparative policy studies moving forward. Future studies on this topic may consider a combination of various methods, such as the document and national data analysis covered in this text, as well as qualitative interviews and in-depth observations with actors and agencies both playing important roles in transnational policies locally and internationally.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Due to all three official MOE policy banks dating back only as early as 2008, other sources were used to generate a list of historical activities both for the national-level actors, as well as local governments and NGOs. First, a comprehensive news search was conducted on the main MOE website, which contained historical data prior to 2008, using the Advanced Search option with keywords “Xue Sheng Ying Yang” (student nutrition). The search returned a total of 2 items for Jan 1st 1964 – Dec 31st 1990, and returned 332 items for Jan 1st 1990 – Dec 31st 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe\\_191/list.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_191/list.html)

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/info\\_list/list.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/info_list/list.html)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s6329/list.html>

<sup>v</sup> (21st Century Education Research Institute, 2012) (China Center for Disease Prevention and Control, 2013) (China Development Research Foundation, 2013)

<sup>vi</sup> The results in these searches were organized according to relevance, and the first 200 results were thoroughly read. Triangulating and cross-reference checks for all entries sources were conducted at each step and all identical or irrelevant entries were removed.

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.stats.gov.cn/>

<sup>viii</sup> The data for 2009 only captured results from August to December because prior data was not available. In order to account for the rapid growth in user numbers per year, original “Xue Sheng Ying Yang” (student nutrition) related posts were expressed as a percentage of total original “Ying Yang” (nutrition) related posts, and identical, reposts or replicated posts are removed from the data. Other search words were used as needed in later discussions.

<sup>ix</sup> [http://s.weibo.com/?Refer=STopic\\_icon](http://s.weibo.com/?Refer=STopic_icon)

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.dowjones.com/factiva/>

<sup>xi</sup> <http://www.cnki.net/>

<sup>xii</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/projects/>

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://www.unicef.cn/en/>

<sup>xiv</sup> [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/china\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/china_statistics.html)

<sup>xv</sup> <http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/rap/files/epublications/ChinaedocFINAL.pdf>

<sup>xvi</sup> Austin Strange, Bradley C. Parks, Michael J. Tierney, Andreas Fuchs, Axel Dreher, and Vijaya Ramachandran. 2013. China’s Development Finance to Africa: A Media-Based Approach to Data Collection. CGD Working Paper 323. Washington DC: Center for Global Development.