
Article

The *Trinity*: The Reemergence of the Japanese-style Development Concept as China Rises

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Abstract

This paper examines the history behind using “the *trinity*” to explain Japan and China’s development cooperation approach. In particular, this paper explores the meaning of the *trinity* in development practice in Japan and China and how it has changed over time. Though attracting little attention in Japan in the 1980s when it was first used as an economic cooperation-related concept, the *trinity* became a focus for debate with the rise of China as an emerging aid donor. In the process, the *trinity* became a concept for the simultaneous implementation of aid, investment, and trade measures to achieve a win-win relationship between the donors and recipients of development cooperation. By examining the processes that have formed and transformed this concept, this paper highlights that the meaning of the *trinity* as used in early development discussions is significant as it offers a perspective on loss and gain in development cooperation today.

Keywords: the *trinity*, development cooperation, Japan, China.

1. A term transcending the borders between the West, China, and Japan

The four-character expression “三位一体”, in both Japanese (*san-mi-it-tai*) and Chinese (*san-wei-yi-ti*) is primarily the translation for the English term “the Trinity.”¹ Historically, missionaries are thought to have been responsible for the origin of the translation. The first record of this translation can be traced back to 1623, when Giulio Aleni, an Italian missionary active around the end of China’s Ming dynasty, used the term in his work *The General Outline of Western Knowledge (Xixuefan)*, written in Chinese.² Such works on Christianity written in Chinese had a profound impact on the Japanese language from the nineteenth century onward (Suzuki 2006). Though *The General Outline of Western Knowledge* was banned by the Edo Shogunate,³ it was circulated widely enough to expose Japanese intellectuals to Western thought and knowledge (Koso 1974). This context gives rise to the inference that the term the trinity ar-

rived in Japan via the works of missionaries written in Chinese.⁴

In contemporary Japan and China, the term the *trinity* is often used in fields unrelated to religion, one of which is development cooperation, the subject of this paper. The *trinity*, in the context of Japan's development cooperation, is a policy originally developed by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI; now renamed the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry: MEIT) in 1987 to promote industrialization in developing countries. It refers to comprehensive economic cooperation through three measures: technological and financial aid, direct investment, and imports into Japan (MITI 1987).

As described in detail below, the *trinity* soon fell out of use as a term to describe this policy in Japan, but gained popularity again since the 2000s in the context of development research as a term to describe connections and similarities in development cooperation between Japan and China. For example, the international political scientist Ping Wang argues that China's development cooperation today is accomplished through the same linkage of aid, trade, and investment as found in the Trinity as used by Japan (Wang 2012, p. 89). Moreover, it has been pointed out that as the scale of development cooperation by China grows, it may come to be seen as the "Asian aid model" (Shimomura et al. (Ed.) 2013, p. 270). This is because the combination of government and private sector funding represented by the *trinity*, now implemented not only by Japan but also by emerging aid donors such as China and India, has already proven to be an effective policy for encouraging the autonomy of recipient countries (Shimomura et al. (Ed.) 2013; Saidi and Wolf 2011).⁵ This approach contrasts with the approach of donors in Europe and U.S. that clearly distinguish between government assistance and private investment.

While the meaning of the *trinity* in more recent research differs significantly from that initially attributed to it in the 1980s, the transformation in the meaning of the *trinity* is rarely discussed. However, examining how the *trinity* has changed can inform a deeper understanding of the differences in development cooperation between Japan and China, while clarifying the significance of the *trinity* today.

This paper questions how the concept of the *trinity* was created and how it has changed over time. Firstly, it focuses on government statements and official documents to describe the nature of the policy of the *trinity* formulated in Japan at the end of the 1980s. Secondly, the paper surveys the literature in Chinese to reveal when and how the new concept of the *trinity* was introduced, this time, into China from Japan and how China reacted. Thirdly, it explores the process by which researchers came to focus on the *trinity* and use it to describe Japan's and China's development cooperation approach. The results of this paper indicate that, while attracting little attention in Japan in the 1980s when it was first used, the concept of the *trinity* became a focus for debate with the rise of China as an emerging aid donor. In the process, the *trinity* has changed from a policy for mitigating the dissatisfaction of developing countries to a set of measures for achieving a win-win relationship of development cooperation.

¹ A well-known Christian expression describing the manifestation of a single god in three forms: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

² Database of Chinese Classic Ancient Books (2022).

³ The Military government of Japan during the Edo period from 1603 to 1868.

⁴ Other evidence also suggests that the Japanese expression *San-mi-it-tai*, used, as in Chinese, to describe Christian doctrine, first appeared in Masanao Nakamura's Japanese translation of *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill, published in 1872 under the title *Jiyu no Kotowari* (De Wolf 2010, p. 114).

⁵ Also see Dole et al. (2021), Kobayashi (2007), Marukawa (2007).

2. The birth of the *trinity* at MITI

In 1987, Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) released *The Present Status and Issues in Economic Cooperation*,⁶ presenting the *trinity* as a concept for comprehensive economic cooperation comprising "aid, investment, and trade" (MITI 1987, p. 2). This document (hereinafter, the "1987 White Paper") is considered the first official document related to the concept of the *trinity* (Shimomura 2020, p. 137; Maruyama 2018).

The concepts underlying the *trinity* did not suddenly appear in 1987. In editions of *The Present Status and Issues in Economic Cooperation* published before 1987, trade involving the government, private sector, and partner country was a frequent component of the economic development presented by MITI.⁷ Moreover, the concept of "comprehensive economic cooperation," organically integrating multiple forms of economic cooperation, such as government development assistance, trade, and investment, had been emphasized from the late 1970s (MITI 1978–1986, pp. 1–2). It is clear from the similarities in language that the Trinity is an extension of "comprehensive economic cooperation."

The basic idea of the *trinity* changed in 1987, however, with the scope of "trade" limited to "imports" from the partner country as the result of demand from developing countries—especially ASEAN countries—from the second half of the 1980s. At the time, countries such as South Korea and Taiwan were actively participating in the international division of labor. ASEAN countries, meanwhile, were facing not only a temporary slump in product prices and the burden of accumulated debt, which had been exacerbated due to oil shocks from the late 1970s onward, but also a persistently unfavorable trade balance with Japan (Shimomura 2020; MITI 1986). In this context, Thailand and other ASEAN countries demanded the radical revision of Japan's industrialization support and trade relationships. These demands were focused on the three fields of "exports to Japan, including improved market access," "direct foreign investment," and "technology transfer" (MITI 1986, pp. 87–90), and prompted the prototype for the *trinity*.

MITI responded to these demands from the ASEAN countries with internal deliberations about the New Asian Industrial Development Plan (hereinafter, the "New AID Plan")⁸ aimed at fostering export-based industries in developing countries that could attract foreign capital.⁹ In January 1987, Hajime Tamura, the Minister of International Trade and Industry, embarked on a tour of the ASEAN countries. He regretfully concluded that conventional economic cooperation prioritizing development (irrigation facilities, power plants, and the like) was not adequately contributing to progress in the ASEAN region. Not surprisingly, then, in Thailand, his final stop

⁶ *Keizai Kyoryoku no Genjo to Mondaiten*. Commonly known as the White Paper on Economic Cooperation, it was one of a series published every year from 1958 to 2001. Without the official status of White Papers reported to cabinet meetings, they were used as PR materials to announce approaches taken by MITI officials (Abe 2013, p. 771).

⁷ In editions of *The Present Status and Issues in Economic Cooperation* published from 1970 onward, the status of Japan's economic cooperation was described in terms of three general categories: "economic cooperation directed at the capital base (both government and private sector)," "economic cooperation through technology," and "economic cooperation through trade."

⁸ In negotiations to revive the budget for the fiscal year 1986, the New AID Plan was allotted a total of nine trillion yen in research project expenses (Asahi Shimbun 1986).

⁹ The importance of fostering export industries in developing countries was recognized by MITI from the mid-1980s (MITI 1985, p. 211). The awareness of dissatisfaction and pressure from ASEAN countries can be seen as responsible for the formulation of specific measures in the New AID Plan.

on the tour, he is said to have announced the New AID Plan “in splendid style, greeted with great anticipation from each country.”¹⁰

In the 1987 White Paper mentioned above, Tamura characterized this New AID Plan as “designed to achieve cooperation in the *trinity* of aid, investment, and trade.” This represented the first appearance of the term *trinity* in the development context (MITI 1987, p. 2). Apparently, Tamura was largely responsible for this choice of expression.¹¹

The New AID Plan designated three phases for achieving the *trinity*: (1) the selection of suitable regions and promising industries based on industrialization strategies appropriate to the characteristics of each country; (2) surveys of the selected regions or industries and proposals for specific cooperation measures involving factors such as the industry base, locations, markets, and the investment and loan environment; and (3) the implementation of multifaceted, concrete cooperation across a range of elements, including infrastructure, and human capital and financial capital. These steps aimed to develop local industries that could attract foreign currency and to encourage direct Japanese investment in supporting growth in local export industries in anticipation of future imports into Japan. The underlying premise was that the partner country would encourage autonomous efforts to establish and improve its investment environment (MITI 1988, pp. 165–166). This background indicates that the *trinity* was an initiative aimed at supporting efficient industrialization in developing countries through the expansion of the Japanese approach into ASEAN countries; that is, applying the technological cooperation that had been part of previous Official Development Assistance (ODA) initiatives to achieve economic growth by implementing measures to support potential export industries (Abe 2013, p. 781).

However, this original meaning of the *trinity* formulated in 1987 had entirely disappeared from policy debate in Japan by the early 1990s, possibly because the *trinity* had proven extremely difficult to achieve as scheduled. Thailand (1987), Indonesia (1988), the Philippines (1988), and China (1989) became the recipient countries under the *trinity* policy. However, the actual implement in those countries were limited to technological cooperation, such as surveys of industrial sites and development plans, and dispatching and training specialists (MITI 1989, p. 81).

According to the explanation given by MITI, these difficulties arose from the system used to manage financial aid—yen-denominated loans—from the Japanese government (Abe 2013). Yen-denominated loans were necessary to establish and improve the investment environment in the partner country, including economic and social infrastructure (power, transport, communications, etc.), and to encourage direct investment by Japanese companies. However, at the time, yen-denominated loans were discussed mainly through the so-called “four ministry/agency structure” comprising the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, MITI, and the Economic Planning Agency. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly objected to “the use of yen-denominated loans to encourage investment by Japanese companies being publicly proclaimed as Japanese government policy.” Undoubtedly, the bilateral trade conflicts between Japan and U.S. of the 1980s was behind this opposition by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Japan, as of the late 1980s, had not yet opened its domestic markets to products from developing countries, and the U.S. had expressed concerns that its domestic markets might effectively be left with the burden of importing these products after production increases resulting from Japan’s New AID Plan. The

¹⁰ Yomiuri Shimbun (1987a; 1987b).

¹¹ Records of debate in the Diet around 1987 indicate that “the *trinity*” was a favorite expression of Hajime Tamura across several different contexts, including “the *trinity* of the Ministry of Finance, MITI, and the Ministry of Labor” (1986) and “the *trinity* of the ruling party, the opposition, and the government” (1988).

Ministry of Foreign Affairs feared that the *trinity* would be perceived as a Japanese government policy to promote the foreign expansion of private sector companies, and further fan the flames of U.S. discontent (Shimomura and Wang 2012, pp. 124–125).

For this reason, the focus of the *trinity* formulated by MITI eventually shifted to technological cooperation with maximum utilization of special corporations and public utility foundations under MITI control, such as the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) and the Association for Overseas Technical Scholarship (AOTS) (Abe 2013, pp. 808–809).¹² Beginning in the 1990s, MITI attempted to promote industrialization in Asia primarily through “policy cooperation” rather than cooperation measures centered on ODA, such as the New AID Plan. Policy cooperation refers to measures designed to enhance the ability of the government of a developing country to formulate and implement medium and long-term development strategies through continuous dialogue between MITI and the developing country government (Abe 2013, pp. 782).

With the phasing out of the New AID Plan, from the 1990s, the concept of the *trinity* outlined in the 1987 White Paper virtually vanished from Japan’s official documents (Trinidad 2013, p. 58; Shimomura and Wang 2012, p. 122). Moreover, MITI began to discuss the environmental issues associated with industrialization (MITI 1991; 1992), frequently advocating a completely different kind of *trinity*: “environment, energy, and economic growth.”¹³ In this way, the *trinity* fell into disuse as a concept to describe development cooperation policies. However, the concept of the *trinity* transferred to China with new meaning.

3. The arrival of the *trinity* in China

After the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China in 1972, there was frequent correspondence between public officials in each country’s central governments, as well as among intellectuals and businesspeople. At the end of the 1970s, the Chinese government switched to an agenda of “reform and opening-up.” Following such a change, the experience of Japan—belonging to the Eastern cultural sphere, with many common cultural similarities—was regarded as a valuable point of reference for the further development of China (Ito 2022). Thus, during this 1980s “honeymoon” period of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations, Japan, having just experienced a period of rapid economic growth, became a benchmark for policymaking across numerous aspects of economic growth and industrial development within China.

At the end of January 1987, in the context of this active exchange between the two countries, Japan introduced the New AID Plan to China. At this time, the Chinese government was in the process of introducing foreign capital into the 14 coastal cities that had been designated for stage one National Economic and Technological Development Zones in 1984. Of these, Qingdao City in Shandong Province, where construction of one such zone had begun in 1985, was selected as the location for the New AID Plan in April 1987 through discussions between Japan and China at the senior official level.¹⁴ In March 1989, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) announced the results of the Survey of the Development Plans for the Qingdao Export Processing Zone. The agency assessed Qingdao City as having conditions suitable for investment by foreign companies, and approved efforts by the Qingdao City government to further

¹² Actually, transforming the results of surveys conducted under the New AID Plan into reality in the investment environment proved to be a long and arduous task, as exemplified in the case of Malaysia’s high-tech industrial zone, which did not begin production until 1996 (Nikkei Sangyo Shimbun 1996).

¹³ No. 16, Committee on the Budget, House of Representatives, 120th Plenary Session of the Diet, February 22, 1991.

¹⁴ Nihon Keizai Shimbun (1987).

improve aspects such as communications and transport (JICA 1989, p.39). As already mentioned, the implementation of the *trinity* policy in China focused mostly on surveys of the investment environment.

What, then, of the concept of the *trinity*? The *trinity* of the 1987 White Paper was promptly introduced into China in a paper, “The New State of Japanese Foreign Direct Investment” (Ling 1988), describing the context and characteristics of the spread of Japan’s foreign direct investment, and introducing the *trinity* as the approach and policy behind it. This paper summarizes the content of the *trinity* as measures to improve the quality and increase the quantity of economic cooperation by the Japanese government, increase the amount of foreign direct investment, increase the amount of industrial products imported from developing countries, and related measures. It also singled out direct investment as the core of the *trinity*, arguing that it boosts productivity and technical and management capabilities in developing countries, increases the effectiveness of Japan’s economic aid, and is a necessary condition for Japanese consumers to accept industrial products manufactured in developing countries (Ling 1988, p. 24).

In July 1988, the *trinity* was also presented in the *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China. In the article, the *trinity* is characterized as a new foreign economic cooperation strategy implemented by Japan to promote economic growth in developing countries, especially in the Asia Pacific region. The specific components of the strategy are described as: (1) the quantitative increase and qualitative improvement of Japan’s ODA; (2) the establishment of investment and insurance schemes to promote foreign direct investment by Japanese private-sector companies; (3) support for developing countries to export and capture foreign currency through trade surpluses; and (4) support for developing countries to formulate industrialization strategies focused on export. This description by the *People’s Daily* is not so much an explanation of the concept of the *trinity* itself, but rather a summary of the contents of the 1987 White Paper.

What is especially noteworthy is that, both the paper mentioned above and the *People’s Daily* article were authored by the same person: Professor Emeritus of Fukui Prefectural University Xingguang Ling. Ling, born in Japan in 1933, worked as an academic interpreter and Japanese economic specialist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) Institute of World Economy during the 1980s. He also participated in meetings of the Japan-China Working Group for the Exchange of Economic Information (1981–present), an organization that significantly influenced China’s “reform and opening-up” program from the time of its inauguration (Ito 2020). According to Ling, the interaction between Japan and China in the 1980s, while balancing the roles of the government and market economy, was focused on policies to promote the domestic development of China’s trade, corporate management, and industry. He recalls that, despite writing several academic papers and newspaper articles discussing the *trinity*, he never regarded it as an important concept in international cooperation.¹⁵

Consequently, the *trinity*, as an initiative and concept of “aid, investment, and trade” made very little impression on China in the 1980s. The reason for this becomes clearer when considering the historical backdrop. First, there was a low level of direct investment in China by Japan. While the levels of Japanese foreign direct investment increased rapidly during the 1980s, it was directed mainly toward the Newly Industrializing Economies (NIEs) and ASEAN countries. From 1979 to 1990, direct investment in China accounted for no more than 1.1% of all Japanese direct foreign investment (Guo 1999, p. 84). Direct investment in China from countries around

¹⁵ Interview with Xingguang Ling (October 22, 2021, at the Japan China Science, Technology and Culture Center, Tokyo).

the world, including Japan, began to rise rapidly only from the 1990s, encouraged by policies to promote the introduction of foreign capital and economic reform beginning with Deng Xiaoping's 1992 southern tour. As a result, only in the 1990s, long after the arrival of the concept of the *trinity* in 1987, did China begin to profit significantly from Japanese direct investment and expand imports into Japan.¹⁶

Secondly, learning from the development cooperation experience of foreign countries was not a priority for the Chinese government at the time. From the 1960s to the 2010s, China's development cooperation was invariably directed by government departments related to the economy and trade, with a policy formulation perspective similar in some respects to that of Japan's MITI (Huang and Hu 2009; Zhou 2008). In that sense, it would have been structurally possible for China to adopt the concept of the *trinity* presented in the 1987 White Paper for its own development cooperation initiatives. However, during the 1980s, the Chinese government, in response to what it considered the over-expansion of Chinese foreign assistance during the previous decade, had shifted its direction to balance the demands of internationalism with its domestic capacity. As part of this effort, the Chinese government had diminished the scope of the foreign assistance it provided, while emphasizing equality and reciprocity with its partners. Moreover, in 1982, it had downgraded the Ministry of Foreign Economic Liaison, responsible for foreign assistance, to the level of a bureau (Xue and Xiao 2011; Ma 2007). As a result, although the concept of the *trinity* was introduced to China soon after it first appeared in Japan in 1987, it garnered little attention there.

However, renewed attention in the *trinity* was sparked by the series of development cooperation reforms carried out in China from the mid-1990s, along with an increase in interest in Japan's development cooperation among Chinese researchers. The *trinity* has now become discussed as a common thread in Japan and China's development cooperation policies (see, for example, Shimomura and Wang 2015; Wang 2013). The next section describes how this attention from researchers breathed new life into the concept of the *trinity* in the context of historical change.

4. The reemergence of the *trinity* among emerging donors

The 1990s was a decade of transition for China's foreign trade and development cooperation. The Chinese government engaged in various structural reforms, including the privatization of state-run enterprises (1993) and the establishment of The Export-Import Bank of China (1994). At the end of 1994, Wu Yi, China's Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, developed the Grand Strategy of Economy and Trade. This strategy indicated the direction of China's economic relations and growth based on foreign trade for the second half of the 1990s (Li 1995). A system of preferential loans, introduced in 1995 as an extension of this series of reforms, became an important component of China's development cooperation. Consequently, China emerged from the structural reforms with stronger links between aid, investment, and

¹⁶ That being said, the role of Japan's suggestions on industrial policy in the 1980s cannot be disregarded. For example, at the Japan-China Working Group for Exchange of Economic Information in 1988, Japanese industry specialists and businesspersons explained that it was a cycle of capital investment, profit retention and reinvestment that had supported Japan's remarkable development. They further urged the Chinese government to utilize the advantages of a planned economy to focus on textiles, light industrial products, and the food industry, while actively fostering industries with the potential to provide the next generation of export products (Ito 2020, pp. 69–70). These policy proposals likely contributed to the development of China's manufacturing industries from the 1990s onward.

trade. In such a process, development cooperation had mainly been regarded a means for promoting economic growth.

In this context, the 1990s saw an increase in Chinese researchers' investigations into the Japan's ODA. According to Ping Wang, who has reviewed several representative research papers of this type, Chinese researchers regarded the *trinity* as an important characteristic of Japan's ODA, distinguishing Japan from European countries and U.S., which clearly differentiated aid and trade (Wang 2013).

However, the *trinity* studied in China was already different from the *trinity* of Japan's 1987 White Paper, with a new concept substituted for the original "trade" concept. As described in Section 2, in the 1987 White Paper, trade referred exclusively to "imports". However, Chinese researchers constructed the meaning of the *trinity* by examining Japan's post-war economic cooperation with almost no mention of the original 1987 White Paper. For example, Xide Jin, a pioneering Chinese researcher into Japan's ODA, defined the *trinity* as "an official Japanese concept used up to the mid-1980s, referring to economic cooperation integrating trade, investment, and aid" (Jin 2000, p. 85). Baogen Zhou, a well-known economist at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, indicated that the *trinity* of "aid, investment, and trade" was the key that enabled post-war Japan to achieve rapid economic growth, particularly in the years from 1954 to 1972. Essentially, for Chinese scholars, the concept referred to the use of yen-denominated loans by Japan for economic infrastructure, targeting cheap labor in developing countries while Japanese companies invested in high-profit manufacturing industries (Zhou Baogen 2010, p. 53). In short, from the Chinese scholars' perspective, the concept of the *trinity* is considered to reflect Japan's traditional characteristics of development cooperation until the 1980s.¹⁷

In this way, the meaning of the *trinity* was redefined by Chinese researchers to refer to the promotion of economic growth through the simultaneous implementation of aid, investment, and trade. The opinions of Chinese researchers are divided regarding this redefinition of the concept of the *trinity*. Some criticize it as excessively focused on Japan's own national interests (See, for example, Lin 1993). This is similar to the criticism leveled at the commercial characteristics of Japan's development cooperation by European and U.S. researchers (Shimomura and Wang 2012).

In contrast, some researchers perceive the effects of the *trinity* in a positive light, focusing on the similarities between Japan and China's development cooperation since the 1990s. Ping Wang points out that present-day China "is engaged in securing the supply of resources and actively pursuing trade and investment to open-up markets for Chinese goods even as it provides economic assistance, in an identical approach" to Japan's concept of the *trinity* (Wang 2013, p. 169). Wang characterizes the policies of the *trinity* as the "priming" that eventually led to win-win relationships between Japan and the recipient countries, with financial assistance from the Japanese government encouraging direct investment by private sector companies (Wang 2012, p. 85). Based on this perception, the experience of the *trinity* is seen as a valuable basis for justifying China's overseas expansion by Chinese companies as it furthers not only its own interests but also those of its partners (Huang and Zhang 2016).

This debate regarding the similarities between Japanese and Chinese development cooperation was not limited to China. Since the 2000s, an increasing body of research has sought to

¹⁷ From the 1990s, however, Japan is seen to have abandoned such a tradition by leaning toward the cultivation of political rather than economic power (See, for example, Zhou Yuyuan 2010; Zhang 2012, p. 80).

compare China's expanding development cooperation with that of traditional donor countries. One widely discussed topic is the characteristics shared by the Japanese and Chinese approaches. Specifically, the concept of the *trinity*, while characteristic of Japan's development assistance, has been used to help understand the development cooperation of China in the present day (see, for example, Johnston and Rudyak 2017; Bräutigam 2011).

In fact, the rise of China as an emerging donor is thought to be the catalyst responsible for the reemergence of the concept of the *trinity* in Japan.¹⁸ Japanese researchers studying the *trinity* concept generally make a comparison with China. While some researchers discuss the differences between Chinese and Japanese development cooperation based on the *trinity*, others focus on common characteristics. The former includes researchers who claim that China's development cooperation is based not on "the *trinity*" but rather on a "Quaternity," adding various fourth principles.¹⁹

A representative example of researchers finding similarities between the Japanese and Chinese approaches can be found in the work of Yasutami Shimomura, who has continually sought universal value in the concept of the *trinity* (Shimomura 2020; Shimomura and Wang 2015; Shimomura et al. (Ed.) 2013; Shimomura and Wang 2012). In these studies, the focus of the concept changes over time. For example, while Shimomura et al. (Ed.) (2013) emphasizes common aspects between Japanese and Chinese concepts of the *trinity*, Shimomura and Wang (2015) highlight the creation of knowledge based on the experience of China. The later claims that the significance of the Japan's concept of the *trinity* is not to propose a perfect model, but to furnish "the Chinese foreign aid experts with the opportunities to reexamine and improve China's own economic cooperation strategy" (Shimomura and Wang 2015, p. 15). Furthermore, Shimomura (2020) analyzes the "external pressures" that forced MITI to formulate the concept of the *Trinity*. This study suggests that such external pressures, including the aforementioned demands by ASEAN countries to expand imports into Japan, contribute to the universality of the concept (Shimomura 2020, pp. 130–141). In other words, the *trinity* in 1987 White Paper—providing a model for progressively moving from "infrastructure construction," to "attracting direct investment," then to "export-based industrialization"—was the result of the Japanese government's reflection of the concerns of the ASEAN countries. Thus, the perspectives of developing countries were incorporated into the *trinity*, which makes it a concept that later resonated with China and other Asian countries (Shimomura 2020).

Thus, the debate on the significance of the *trinity* has changed over time and is still evolving today. This diversity in interpretations of the *trinity* illustrates how Japanese and Chinese researchers each sought to affirm the value of their own country's development cooperation, with an acute awareness of the efforts at development cooperation by the other country. However, most researchers use the term as an expression of an abstract relationship between aid, investment, and trade in general, without tracing its history back to the 1987 White Paper. The struggle

¹⁸ Yasutami Shimomura, a leading researcher into the *trinity*, describes how he first became interested in the concept in the 1980s, when he was working in Thailand as a member of the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECF). He experienced for himself how the proposal of the *trinity* had sparked an increase in direct investment in Thailand by Japanese companies, leading to the amelioration of diplomatic tensions between Japan and Thailand. However, it was not until the 2000s, when the *trinity* had become a focus of attention in China as well, that Shimomura commenced dedicated research into the concept (from an interview with Yasutami Shimomura on February 8, 2022, at the JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development).

¹⁹ For example, Inada (2013, p. 108) sees this as the existing concept of the *trinity* with the addition of the "dispatch of laborers," while Enomoto adds "economic cooperation"—comprising "construction contracting, the provision of labor, and design consulting services" (Enomoto 2017, p. 24).

to achieve the *trinity* policy in the 1980s—such as the specific measures outlined in the New AID Plan—, while going no further than technological cooperation due to the consideration for Japan-U.S. relations, were effectively relegated to the background.

5. Development cooperation as seen through the changing concept of the *trinity*

This paper has attempted to elucidate the processes whereby the concept of the *trinity* set forth in the 1987 White Paper changed over time and was evaluated within the different contexts of Japanese and Chinese research. The reemergence of debate on the *trinity* in the context of Japan's development cooperation was due to a renewed focus by researchers on the relationship between aid, investment, and trade within the context of the rise of China.

Unlike other Japanese concepts such as “*Kaizen*” and “*Hito-zukuri*,” the *trinity* had a short “use-by date” as a policy concept for Japan's development cooperation. However, the history of the *trinity* illustrates the potential function of meanings that have fallen out of usage. In fact, during the second half of the 1980s, the prominent increase in Japanese direct investment and the transfer of production bases to Thailand and Malaysia, compared to other countries, significantly eased local discontent in those countries (Shimomura 2020). In this sense, even if the policies of the *trinity* were not implemented as originally planned, they may have actually performed their intended role of resolving issues in developing countries by communicating the Japanese government's policies to Japanese companies.

Today, the original meaning of the *trinity*'s has been transformed into an idea of comparing Japan and China, and exploring the characteristics of Asian-style development cooperation. The relationship between the *trinity* and the measures it evaluates is like that between a container and its contents: the shape of the container has not changed, but different contents have been poured into it with each changing era. Reviewing the “current contents” of the *trinity* in each era enables us to discover different ways of thinking about development cooperation. Today, for example, the *trinity* has become a term used to advocate the effectiveness of development cooperation integrating “aid, investment, and trade,” and the resulting win-win relationships. However, highlighting the significance of mutual benefit may likely result in obscuring the possible conflict of interest in development cooperation. By contrast, the *trinity* presented in the 1987 White Paper was not so much aimed at the active pursuit of mutual interest, but represented the outcome of a response to the demands of developing countries including the opening-up of Japanese markets. Despite its passive formation process, the launch of the *trinity* effectively promoted Japan's development cooperation at that time and benefited Japan's national interests in terms of results. In this sense, the original meaning of the *trinity* is significant as it provides a perspective to consider perceptions of loss and gain in development cooperation today. Nevertheless, there are still many unanswered questions about the various receptions of the *trinity* in other countries. Further studies are required to provide greater insight into the relationship between concept and practice in different contexts.

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