

Governing the poor in Guangzhou: Marginalization and the neo-liberal paternalist construction of deservedness

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Abstract

Since the early 21st century, the Chinese government has proactively expanded social protection by providing better benefits and broader coverage for its people. However, a new puzzle has emerged in the Minimum Living Standard Scheme, ‘last resort of social protection’ in China. Normally, when the benefit standard is set higher, relatively more people situated below this line are entitled to receive assistance. However, in reality fewer people than expected receive support. We study the case of Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province, to explain this phenomenon and analyse the social citizenship of marginalized groups in urban China. We reveal the decline in replacement rates and tighter conditionality applied to defining the ‘deserving poor’ by reviewing administrative data and policy documents from 1995 to 2016. Drawing on the longitudinal qualitative study conducted between 2009 and 2011, we further illustrate how the decreased replacement rate and tighter conditionality diminish the well-being of the poor. Our findings on policy changes and their outcomes in Guangzhou provide some important insights into poverty governance and social citizenship under China’s social development in the past decade.

Keywords

social assistance, neo-liberal paternalism, social citizenship, social construction of deservedness, minimum living standard scheme

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China has achieved significant progress in poverty alleviation. The number of China's poor population, defined by individuals whose incomes are below the international poverty line (i.e. US\$1.25 per day, constant 2005 prices), decreased from 683 million to 212 million between 1990 and 2005. These numbers imply that at least 76.09 per cent of the world's total poor population have been lifted out of poverty.¹

The Minimum Living Standard Scheme (最低生活保障 or *dibao* for short and hereafter) is one of the broadest cash transfer schemes in the world.² The minimum living standard, as the benefit standard and poverty line, is a single amount calculated with reference to the consumer price index, expenditure of low-income households, minimum wage and disposable income per capita.³ Local fiscal capacity also determines the local benefit standard, since the administration, delivery and (partial) financing of the *dibao* is decentralized to local governments at the county and municipal levels, and thus benefit standards vary across localities.⁴ The local benefit standard multiplied by the number of eligible household members equals the eligible benefit of a household. A recipient household is expected to receive a specific amount of assistance to fill the gap between total disposable household income and the poverty threshold.⁵

The Chinese government has been more proactive in social policy development since the early 2000s.⁶ The government has raised the benefit standard of the *dibao* (which is the last resort for income support in China's social safety net) to improve the livelihood of poor people, as well as to develop a harmonious society. Although raising social assistance standards implies more recipients, the actual number of recipients has dropped in several Chinese cities. National statistics show that the number of urban *dibao* recipients reached as high as 23.5 million in 2009 then declined to 14.8 million in 2016.⁷ This paradoxical policy phenomenon has been conceptualized as 'raised benefit standards and reduced caseloads' (标提量减).⁸ In the provinces of Guizhou and Yunnan, officials have even set it as a policy objective of targeted measures in poverty alleviation, that is to reduce caseloads and raise benefit standards (减量提标).⁹

Sixty per cent of the *dibao* recipients are able-bodied but unemployed or flexibly employed individuals.¹⁰ Government officials have become more concerned with the so-called welfare dependency given increasing social expenditures and the large number of *dibao* recipients.¹¹ The neo-liberal notions of welfare-to-work (工作福利制) or workfare and individual responsibility have been introduced into *dibao* regulation.¹² The policy changes have sparked heated debates among local and international scholars on topics related to reducing welfare dependency versus the 'social construction of deservedness' in the context of social policy expansion in China.

Jiwei Qian and Ka Ho Mok recently reviewed the city-level social assistance datasets of 280 cities between 2003 and 2011 to prove that increased *dibao* aggregate benefits (rather than direct benefits) hinder the enrolment of unemployment insurance.¹³ In general, ineffective policy coordination occurs when policy bureaus adopt *dibao* eligibility as a screening method for other social assistance benefits such as low rent housing, tuition fee remission and health assistance.¹⁴

Yuebin Xu and Ludovico Carraro conducted focus group studies in three Chinese cities and found that, though financial discouragement to work existed, the observation about welfare dependency is overstated because several recipients still encountered barriers (e.g. personal health status and family responsibilities) to the labour market.¹⁵

Meanwhile, as reported in the case studies of Wuhan and Lanzhou by Dorothy Solinger and Yiyang Hu¹⁶ and the longitudinal research of Yu Guo and her colleagues,¹⁷ the *dibao* only provides the minimum income and thus may be insufficient for poor people to attain basic living requirements.

Solinger and Ting Jiang also observed a new mandate that essentially restrains able-bodied recipients from benefitting from the *dibao* and encourages them to work.¹⁸ The policy adjustment may be a result of learning from the US welfare-to-work programmes which involve punitive measures.¹⁹ Consequently, this new *dibao* mandate has extended policy and scholarly debates from benefit standard and welfare dependency to conditionality and social inclusion.

Chak Kwan Chan conducted research on *dibao* eligibility and reviewed the policy documents of 31 major cities in China. Chan found that *dibao* applicants were required to prove their poverty and to adhere to proper behaviour to qualify for assistance. He also suggested that the criteria for *dibao* eligibility create poor quality of life and further exacerbate stigmatization and social segregation.²⁰ Several empirical studies, such as those by Joe Leung and Meng Xiao in Beijing,²¹ Yu-Cheung Wong and his colleagues in Shanghai,²² Chak Kwan Chan and Kinglun and Kinglun Ngok in Guangzhou,²³ and Solinger in Wuhan,²⁴ support the argument of exclusion – rather than inclusion – in *dibao* implementation.

The outcomes of social exclusion are further shaped by the interests and capacity of policy bureaus in policy design and implementation. Solinger and her colleagues showed that the series of policy adjustments to the *dibao* serve changing political and economic agendas of the central and local governments.²⁵ Chan and Ngok found that street-level bureaucrats in charge of *dibao* do not necessarily possess relevant knowledge and capacity.²⁶ Therefore, without proper accountability and judicial mechanisms, any strict conditionality only intensifies the problem of power abuse and the disadvantaged situation of recipients. These studies illustrate how China's social assistance programme aims to maintain civic order by regulating the poor and demanding proper and moral behaviour, a strategy similar to several other social assistance programmes around the world today.²⁷

In developed countries, the framing of deservedness (or undeservedness) is well regarded as a political strategy against blame avoidance during welfare retrenchment.²⁸ China has been developing inclusive social citizenship and a universal welfare state;²⁹ however, imposing welfare conditionality and constructing boundaries between the deserving and undeserving poor seem contradictory. With a few exceptions,³⁰ most studies on the *dibao* have focused solely on a single dimension of policy change; thus, a comprehensive assessment of the contradictory evolution of *dibao* is lacking.

In-between moderating welfare dependency and constructing the undeserving poor, we ask the following questions: what is the policy direction of the multi-dimensional adjustments to the *dibao* and regional variations in terms of implementation, especially for a hybrid system comprising the Chinese value of Confucian benevolence, the European belief of universalism and social citizenship, and the American idea of welfare-to-work;³¹ and, more importantly, how do multi-dimensional policy changes to the *dibao*, China's last resort social assistance programme, shape the social citizenship of poor people?

To address the research questions, we study the case of Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong Province. The emergence of the *dibao* is an indispensable part of China's market-oriented economic reforms. Workers laid off from state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were left without social protection as public benefits were based on the work-unit system (单位体制). In 1993, Shanghai became the first city to reform the traditional social relief programme to mitigate rising unemployment and poverty among laid-off urban workers. In 1994, the Ministry of Civil Affairs encouraged other cities to enhance their financial commitments to the relief programme, raise their respective benefit levels, and expand the social coverage. The programme was gradually extended to 12 cities in 1995, 116 in 1996, 334 in 1997, and finally achieved nationwide coverage in all 668 cities and 1,689 counties in urban China in 1999.³²

Given its prosperous market economy, Guangzhou was the first city in Guangdong to initiate the *dibao* in 1995. Guangzhou provided income assistance to poor individuals with local urban household registration. In the past two decades, Guangzhou had made several policy adjustments to the level of benefit and conditionality of its social assistance programme.

Guangzhou's policy adjustments are a typical case of the decentralized and localized implementation of the *dibao* and the effects of the social assistance programme on recipients. Using administrative data and policy documents from 1995 to 2016, we first outline the changing landscape of the *dibao* in Guangzhou. Second, drawing on the data from a longitudinal qualitative study conducted between 2009 and 2011 in Guangzhou, we investigate the living conditions of *dibao* recipients before and after the policy adjustments. Finally, drawing on the *dibao* policy changes and policy outcomes in Guangzhou, we provide some insights into poverty governance and social citizenship under the seemingly grand and progressive narrative of social development in the past decade.

Theorizing social citizenship, neo-liberal paternalism, and marginalization

According to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, citizens are entitled to receive state assistance and they are guaranteed a basic standard of living. The emergence of the *dibao* suggests that the Chinese government subscribes to the European values of universalism and social rights of citizenship.³³

Social rights of citizenship are the normative foundation of post-war welfare states in Europe. These rights entitle citizens a specific standard of living or well-being as guaranteed by the state regardless of where citizens reside.³⁴ Citizenship defines the relationship between the citizen and the state and the relationships among citizens.

Multi-dimensional changes and the social citizenship cube

By taking rights (in terms of accessibility and generosity) and obligations into account, Jon Kvist proposes that social citizenship comprises three dimensions³⁵ manifested in a specific configuration of social benefits. The social citizenship cube (see Figure 1) depicts the possible changes in the configuration; for instance, 'the further a benefit is situated towards the back of the cube, the stronger the attached obligations'.³⁶

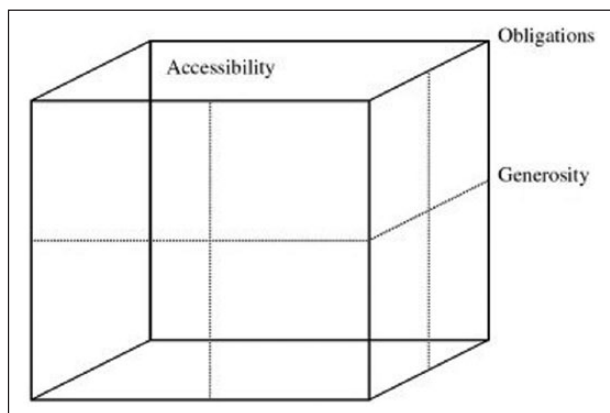


Figure 1. Social citizenship cube.

Source: Jon Kvist, *Exploring diversity: Measuring welfare state change with fuzzy-set methodology*, 203.

This cube is particularly relevant for understanding China's fragmented social protection. Generally speaking, an individual's access to social benefits is determined by the household registration system (i.e. urban versus rural), labour market status (i.e. formal sector versus informal sector), and locality (i.e. rich city versus poor city).³⁷ Fragmentation of social citizenship occurs with differing accessibility (i.e. local household registration and need-based criteria), generosity (i.e. financial subsidy), and obligations (i.e. behavioural changes).

The three-dimensional assessment of the social citizenship cube explicitly illustrates the effects of paradoxical changes on the *dibao*. Changes in benefit levels and conditionality are due to the central and local governments' adjustment of accessibility, generosity and obligation configurations of local social citizenship.

Neo-liberal paternalist construction of deservedness

The past decade has witnessed an increase in welfare conditionality across the world. With reference to the social citizenship cube, conditionality refers to the broad scope of the 'means test' in terms of accessibility and consequential tightened obligations and benefit sanctions against welfare recipients.³⁸ Conditionality suggests a disciplinary turn in the context of a hybrid political logic of neo-liberalism and paternalism.³⁹

While neo-liberalism and paternalism have different assumptions about the relationship between citizens and the state, they work together to define poverty problems and provide solutions for poverty governance. According to the neo-liberal doctrine, good citizens are expected to be 'competent actors who recognize and act on their interests as freely choosing agents of the market'.⁴⁰ Neo-liberalists attribute poverty and welfare dependency to individual incompetence and irresponsibility. Thus, to eliminate welfare dependency, a strong state is expected to discipline welfare recipients, who in turn are fully responsible for the consequences of their actions.

Following this logic, a strong state acts like a paternal state possessing ‘comprehensive knowledge and legitimate authority to supervise the children in ways that help them to be responsible and self-reliant’.⁴¹ The state gradually increases welfare conditionality to instil a greater sense of responsibility in the poor.⁴² Simultaneously, the state develops procedures to monitor and correct the behaviour of the poor to match the welfare conditionality it sets.

Overall, neo-liberal paternalism reconfigures the boundary separating the deserving poor from the undeserving poor according to the conditions of economic needs, individual status (e.g. single mothers and the unemployed), and conduct (i.e. active job seekers).⁴³ Given this mind frame, only those individuals who behave according to the rules and the underprivileged are recognized as the deserving poor. Neo-liberal paternalism aims to produce competent and self-regulating citizens through civic incorporation and social control. In other words, neo-liberal paternalistic poverty governance shifts full social rights of citizenship to self-care and from self-care to meeting individual needs through market interventions such as labour commodification.⁴⁴

Neo-liberal paternalism was conceptualized by Western developed countries and transferred to developing and transition countries in Central and Eastern Europe.⁴⁵ The neo-liberal paternalist construction is also culturally compatible with China’s social welfare system. Chinese Confucian culture encourages society and individuals to accept authoritarian and paternal state control in exchange for benevolent state welfare and social stability. Authority and benevolence are the main characteristics of China’s socialist welfare system.⁴⁶ In addition to this belief, market-oriented economic reforms have introduced neo-liberal ideas to Chinese society. The ideological influence of neo-liberalism is evident in several social policies such as the marketization of social welfare in the 1980s and the outsourcing of social services by the government in the 2010s and, particularly, the welfare-to-work programme of the *dibao*.⁴⁷

Marginalization and social citizenship

In the previous two sections, we discussed the three dimensions of policy change and their political logic. In this section, we will theorize marginalization and citizenship status with reference to policy changes related to generosity, accessibility, and obligations.

Citizenship endows residents of a nation with universal claims to social benefits with ‘a modicum of economic welfare and security’⁴⁸ while non-citizens are excluded.⁴⁹ However, social benefits and their redistributive functions are still inadequate to move welfare recipients out of the margins and fully integrate them into community life. Moreover, full and decent social citizenship entails not only acquiring material possessions (e.g. receiving income assistance), but also doing,⁵⁰ that is, citizens practise social citizenship by engaging in various social relations and fulfilling civic obligations and social responsibilities on the basis of interaction and participation in community life.⁵¹

Social assistance programmes are considered a significant social policy because they redistribute material resources and non-material social relations to the broad society.⁵² Policy adjustments to the *dibao* can create different levels of social rights of citizenship by delineating individuals as deserving and underserving. The *dibao* meets the material and non-material needs of some people on the one hand and disempowers or excludes marginalized individuals on the other hand.⁵³

Thus, we propose to examine the marginalization of welfare recipients in terms of material interests and social relations in response to the evolution of dimensions of social citizenship (i.e. accessibility, generosity, and obligations). For instance, increasing the conditionality of social assistance may exclude some deserving poor from the social safety net, and in doing so it may further exclude individuals from achieving a decent living.

Research design

Our study employs the urban *dibao* in Guangzhou to answer the already-mentioned research questions. Guangzhou was one of the earliest cities in China to carry out the *dibao* in 1995 and initiate policy adjustment (i.e. conditionality) in 2006. Therefore, Guangzhou is a highly suitable case for a comprehensive review of the long-term evolution of the *dibao* in China.

Guided by the concepts of the social citizenship cube and the neo-liberal paternalism construct, we employed administrative data and policy review to analyse generosity, accessibility, and obligation configurations between 1995 and 2016. Results provide an objective measurement of the altered benefits and conditionality in the past two decades. Results may also suggest the shifting boundary between the deserving and undeserving poor.

Against the policy background, we further analysed longitudinal qualitative data gathered from welfare recipients, which included their subjective assessments and daily experiences of social citizenship status (e.g. material interests and social relations). Qualitative data were collected between 2009 and 2011 in Guangzhou. A total of 50 *dibao* households from a street-level office in Yuexiu District, one of the oldest administrative districts in Guangzhou, were invited to participate in the study. The team interviewed household representatives every half year in five waves during the research period.

Most recipients had few skills and no job because they were laid off from SOEs in their middle age (one example is ‘40–50 people’ where ‘40’ means unemployed female workers aged over 40 whereas ‘50’ refers to unemployed male workers aged over 50). During the research period, we found that some family members were further challenged by mental and physical disabilities. The integrative analysis of administrative data, policy review, and longitudinal interviews with *dibao* recipients provides a comprehensive overview of policy changes and their effects on people’s livelihood and marginalization under China’s social development in the past decade.

Dibao policy evolution in Guangzhou: 1995–2016

This section examines the evolution of the *dibao* in Guangzhou and addresses the phenomenon of ‘reducing caseloads and raising benefit standards’ according to the components of generosity, accessibility, and obligations as depicted by the social citizenship cube.

Under China’s fiscal federalism and decentralized welfare regime, prosperous cities are not eligible for fiscal transfer from higher levels of government and must secure their social provision from their own resources. Thus, cities are allowed a certain autonomy to undertake policy experiments and develop local solutions for their respective social

problems.⁵⁴ Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai are the top three cities in China in terms of politico-economic capacity. In 1993, Shanghai became the first city to reform its traditional social assistance programme. On the basis of Shanghai's successful experience, by the first half of 1995 the central government had encouraged Guangzhou and five other coastal cities to carry out urban *dibao*.⁵⁵

Findings from administrative data analysis and policy review suggest that policy progress and setbacks are found in Guangzhou's *dibao*. The government continues to raise benefit levels on the one hand but also imposes tougher negative sanctions on the other hand. Both the actual replacement rate and the number of recipients have decreased since 2007.

Generosity: Raising standards but decreasing replacement rates

The generosity aspect of the *dibao* can be measured by the absolute amount of benefits and percentage of per capita disposable income (also known as 'replacement rate' in China). In 1995, the *dibao* disbursed to urban residents in Guangzhou was RMB 200 (approximately US\$30) per person per month. Benefit adjustments were applied in 1997, 1999, 2005, and 2007. A formula was developed in 2009 to automatically calculate the benefit standard by taking the local consumer price index into account.⁵⁶ In 2016, the benefit amount for urban residents was RMB 840 (approximately US\$125) per person per month.

As shown in Figure 2, even if the absolute amount of the *dibao* benefit increases, the actual replacement rates (i.e. generosity) vary. In the first eight years, the replacement rate fluctuated within a small range between 25 per cent and 30 per cent. By contrast, the replacement rate peaked at 25 per cent only and has fluctuated around 20 per cent since 2003. The overall trend is downward, which implies that the benefit adjustments made to the *dibao* cannot catch up with the income growth of other local residents. The income assistance function of the *dibao* has further weakened in the era of economic growth. Moreover, the wealth gap between welfare recipients and other residents has widened.

Adjusting the benefit standard in relation to the poverty line has also affected the eligibility of recipients and the coverage afforded by the *dibao*. Without any significant economic development and income growth, raising the benefit standard should have ensured that more people would be caught by the social safety net. For instance, the number of *dibao* recipients from urban and rural regions in Guangzhou reached its peak before 2007, but since then the total number has steadily decreased (Figure 3). We examine this paradoxical phenomenon further in terms of accessibility and obligations.

Accessibility: A broader scope of eligibility assessment

Accessibility refers to the scope of application and eligibility criteria such as proof of household income and assets and local household registration. When Guangzhou's government enacted the *dibao* in July 1995, it clearly indicated that its establishment was to guarantee poor people's livelihood and provide a stable environment for economic development. Income and local household registration were the two main criteria of accessibility. Between 1995 and 2004, the municipal government of Guangzhou focused solely on

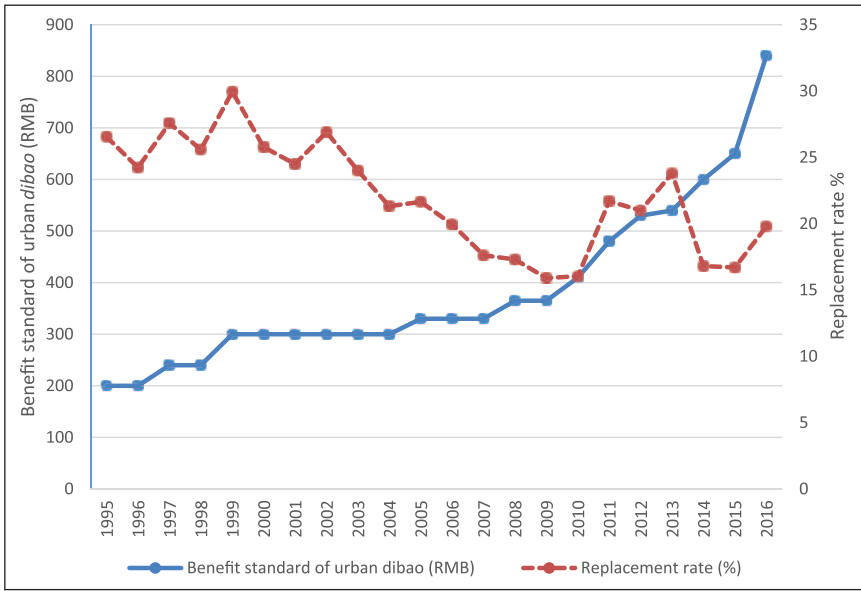


Figure 2. Benefit standard and replacement rate of the urban *dibao* in Guangzhou, 1995–2016. Source: 广州统计年鉴1995–2016 (Guangzhou statistical yearbook 1995–2016), <http://www.gzstats.gov.cn/gzStatI/chaxun/njsj.jsp>, accessed 12 November 2017.

benefit adjustment. During this period, the municipal government raised benefits for urban *dibao* three times but made no significant change in the aspect of accessibility.

In 2015, the Guangzhou Municipal Measures for the Minimum Living Standard Scheme⁵⁷ made a significant change in the regulation of accessibility. Following the Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening and Improving the Work of Rural and Urban Minimum Living Standard Scheme,⁵⁸ Guangzhou’s new measures expanded the scope of the means test from family income to household assets. Consequently, the *dibao* benefits of applicants whose incomes and assets were over the test limit, those who owned a vehicle or boat, and those who sent their children to study abroad and paid for their education themselves were not approved.

This policy document also listed several types of misconduct and behaviour that disqualify recipients from acquiring their *dibao* benefits. Such inappropriate conduct defined by the government included self-financed overseas travel, lack of community work hours, two-time refusal for employment training or a job, and high consumption. The tight constraints on accessibility were manifested not only in the means test, but also through assessments of lifestyle and behaviour.

Obligations: ‘Work first’ and the benefit sanction

Obligations refer to the appropriate behaviour of *dibao* recipients prior to receiving income assistance. *Dibao* recipients can be sanctioned because of misconduct. The principle of balancing rights and obligations of urban *dibao* recipients is emphasized in the

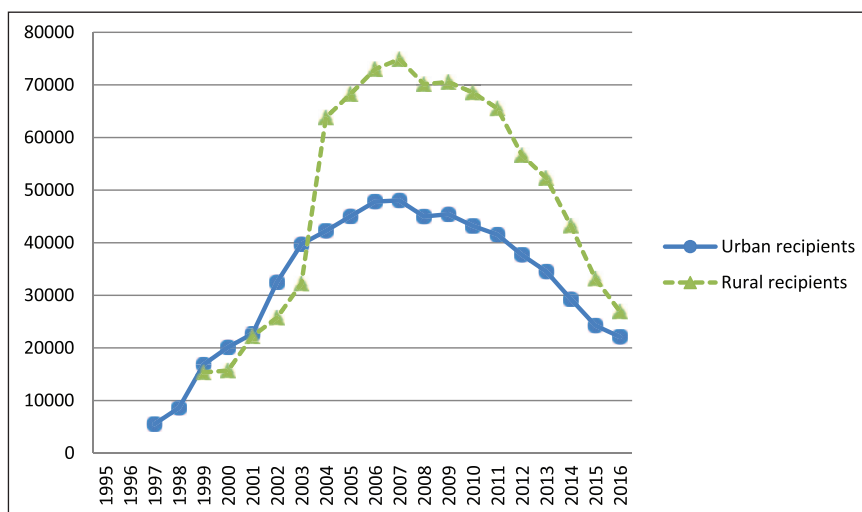


Figure 3. Number of *dibao* recipients in Guangzhou, 1995–2016.

Source: 广州统计年鉴1995–2016 (Guangzhou statistical yearbook 1995–2016), <http://www.gzstats.gov.cn/gzStatI/chaxun/njsj.jsp>, accessed 12 November 2017.

Guangzhou Municipal Regulation for Urban Minimum Living Standard Scheme Recipients to Participate in Community Work.⁵⁹ Since January 2006, able-bodied unemployed *dibao* recipients have been required to participate in community work organized by street offices and residents' committees. Community work may include sanitation, neighbourhood patrols and assistance, and care for the elderly, and participants are required to spend not fewer than 1.5 days (totalling 10.5 hours) a week. This requirement has made Guangzhou the first Chinese municipality to impose workfare requirements prior to *dibao* accessibility.⁶⁰

In 2015, the Guangzhou Municipal Measures for Minimum Living Standard Scheme called for relatively tighter workfare requirements among *dibao* recipients. Monthly community work hours increased from 42 hours in 2005 to 60 hours in 2015, a significant rise of over 42 per cent. Moreover, new restrictions on behaviour and lifestyle have been implemented. At present, *dibao* recipients are not only required to actively seek employment opportunities and join training courses, but also to live 'as defined' by the government. Street offices and residents' committees monitor the lifestyle of *dibao* recipients, including leisure activities and education choices for their children. To claim *dibao* benefits, recipients must show that they have been responsible citizens.

Marginalization in material interests and social relations

This section employs the qualitative data of a longitudinal study conducted between 2009 and 2011 in Guangzhou to investigate the marginalization and citizenship status of *dibao* recipients. During the research period, the research team interviewed 50 *dibao* households every half year in five waves.

Among the interviewed households, fewer than five households have successfully overcome poverty and marginalization. One possible way for recipients to overcome poverty is to claim pension benefits when they reach the retirement age (i.e. if they previously made a 15-year contribution). Another possible route is when the children of *dibao* recipients complete their education and enter the labour market. None of the successful cases were related to employability enhancement and behaviour regulation of *dibao* recipients.

Lack of employability and ineffective training

As previously mentioned, most of the recipients were aged 40–50 with a low level of education, and all have been laid off from SOEs. Therefore, most recipients lacked employability and work skills. Various job training courses have been provided to these *dibao* recipients to enhance their employability. However, a mismatch in training courses and labour market demands is common. For example, recipients take courses in cutting, tailoring, and flower arrangement which they do not believe will help them find jobs. Moreover, completing practical courses in computer literacy and water and electrical training did not automatically provide recipients with jobs.

Recipient A is a 45-year-old male who was laid off from an SOE. He completed junior secondary school, and he suffered from gallstones. Although he successfully obtained a junior certificate as an electrician after completing a training course, his age, educational background, and physical disability still kept him outside the labour market. He summarized his unsuccessful re-employment experiences as follows:

I am middle-aged. Who wants me? Bosses can easily get someone younger than me. There are so many migrants from outside Guangzhou. They don't have a local household registration. All are looking for jobs. They ask for lower salary, and they have good qualifications. God knows [whether they are] genuine or not. But I am just not competitive, you know.⁶¹

Overall, government officials have provided *dibao* recipients with several training courses through the direct support of public institutions and the purchase of services of social organizations. However, few recipients considered the training courses useful in enhancing their employability and competitiveness in the labour market.

Job mismatch under poor case management

As previously mentioned, recipients are expected to accept job offers to demonstrate their responsibility to the community. Declining job offers twice can lead to a termination of benefits. However, job referrals are often made by residents' committees or street offices, and the conditions and abilities of recipients are rarely considered. A mismatch of recipient and employment opportunities occurs often and further results in refusals to accept unsuitable jobs and disputes over benefits.

For instance, Recipient B viewed the security guard's post arranged by the residents' committee as too demanding. A middle-aged man in poor health, he felt that he was unable to do the job:

It is a night shift job, staying up all night for only RMB 800 per month. I am not in good health. Staying up at night would just worsen my health. The money is not even enough to cover medical treatment. I would rather not earn the money.⁶²

In addition to the physically demanding nature of jobs, employment arrangements may not be flexible enough for recipients with main caregiving roles in the family. Recipient C, a lone parent, had to look after her daughter and mother-in-law. However, she risked losing her benefits if she refused to accept a job. Recipient C explained:

Yes, they said that if I don't work, then they would terminate my *dibao* eligibility. How could they do that? It is unfair that I have to take whatever they offer me. Well, you also need to think about whether I am able to take it or not. I have my daughter and mother-in-law to look after.

Interviewer: They didn't accept your explanation?

No, they didn't. I said that I had reasons for not taking up their offer. They just refused to listen, and said that my status would be terminated if I did not take up the job.⁶³

These cases reveal how recipients fall into the poverty trap. Typical reasons include physical inability and extensive caring duties which may disqualify them from the labour market. It is expected that when jobs are offered to recipients, such cases are managed with careful and specific consideration and discretion. However, case management is carried out by street-level bureaucrats without professional expertise. Thus, the procedure to help recipients re-enter the labour market is flawed.

Disciplined lifestyles and behaviour

A review of the eligibility criteria of the *dibao* suggests that people have to show that they are 'poor and good citizens' when local governments conduct a lifestyle assessment.⁶⁴ Empirical evidence from the current study suggests that recipients perceive an increasing welfare stigma. Several recipients adopt a disciplined lifestyle and behaviour in local communities so as to comply with the eligibility guidelines. However, the pressure and prejudice are sometimes intangible. For example, local authorities asked questions about participation in activities, such as *taiji*, to learn about the leisure activities and healthy lifestyle of recipients. One recipient responded in a frustrated tone:

[Sigh] A *dibao* recipient doing *taiji*? No chance. It's not a good impression if people see this, even though they don't speak up.⁶⁵

To avoid social pressure, the recipient had to give up the right to enjoy leisure and social activities. This empirical data supports the prediction that lifestyle assessment leads to social segregation and inequality.⁶⁶ Moreover, the intangible social pressure may lead to benefit cuts and even termination. Several cases were observed in the study. For instance:

Those neighbours! They were jealous that I had an income on top of my *dibao* benefits. They called the residents' committee to complain. Then the residents' committee deducted RMB 50

from my RMB 415 benefits without any investigation. I was extremely angry, and questioned the residents' committee: 'How can you do that?! If neighbours said I have extra income, you should make a home visit before drawing conclusions. How can you deduct my benefits immediately?!' Then they answered, they had no idea, and pushed me to seek answers from the street office.⁶⁷

Similar to the job referral system, the decision to impose benefit sanctions relies heavily on the personal judgement of street-level bureaucrats. Many recipients felt that they were treated unjustly because of the lack of transparency in the complaints and appeals procedure. In the first wave of interviews, one recipient shared her experience about benefit termination and re-application:

Interviewer: Why did they terminate your benefits?

Public resentment.

Interviewer: On what issue? Because your living conditions seemed acceptable?

Not living conditions. They said we dressed too well! The clothes were given by someone who planned to throw them away! What's more, there was one time that my daughter bought a little more when a supermarket had a sale. Some neighbours saw and said we bought a lot of things. Then, the residents' committee terminated our benefits when it heard the gossip. Later, when prices rose quickly in 2008, we were unable to afford anything, and had to apply for benefits again. Our names were publicized again, and made us feel like we were begging in front of the public.⁶⁸

In follow-up interviews, the same recipient repeatedly mentioned this experience and provided several recent examples to illustrate the unfair treatment that she experienced in the past six months.⁶⁹ Her case implied a strained relationship between recipient and community caused mainly by the increased welfare stigma and disciplinary measures imposed through poverty governance.

Mixed feelings towards community work

Community work requirements suggest the matching of rights and responsibilities of welfare recipients. In addition, regular participation in community work cultivates the work habits of recipients and prepares them for employment. In the interviews, recipients expressed mixed feelings towards community work.

On the one hand, some recipients viewed community work as a good avenue to develop social connections with other people. For example, one recipient said that community cleaning is not a tough job. He also believed that participation in community work could earn him appreciation from neighbours and maintain harmonious community relations.⁷⁰

On the other hand, recipients with poor health often complained that community cleaning is physically demanding. Similar to the situation of job referrals, street-level bureaucrats did not adequately consider the recipients' health condition. Several recipients mentioned that when they were absent because of health reasons, street-level

bureaucrats often accused them of lying and avoiding obligations.⁷¹ Government officials' suspicions further increased the welfare stigma.

In the interviews, some recipients also disagreed with compulsory participation in community work. A recipient questioned the discourse of obligation in the policy:

If we get the *dibao* benefit through our labour, it's not social security or allowance, but earned income. We don't need to claim the *dibao* benefit from you if we are able to work. Doing community work twice a week, it looks the same as our wages.⁷²

In summary, the recipients of the current study showed mixed reactions to community work requirements. A group of recipients who were socially engaged in community work responded positively to the requirements. By contrast, the group of recipients who perceived the heightened conditionality as a burden and erosion of their social rights gave negative feedback. While the Chinese government strives to balance rights and obligations in its social policies, implementation of these policies by street-level bureaucrats will partly determine the successful reintegration or further marginalization of welfare recipients.

Discussion and conclusion

The present research has analysed the policy changes to China's social assistance initiatives and their effects on the inclusion or marginalization of welfare recipients. In the past two decades, the Chinese government has proactively expanded social protection, and the development effort is shown by the increase in *dibao* disbursements. Moreover, raising the benefit standard (as a poverty line) is expected to widen the social safety net for more people; however, case numbers of *dibao* recipients have decreased across China. By claiming that they were reducing poverty, local officials could earn political credit.

By focusing on the implementation of the *dibao* in Guangzhou, our study addressed this paradoxical phenomenon in China's social policy arena. Analysis of administrative data has revealed that the trend of substantially increased benefits is concurrent with reduced case numbers and decreased replacement rates. Policy analysis and longitudinal qualitative interviews further suggested that the growth in the absolute amount of benefits has been conditional, that is, the change depended on stringent lifestyle assessment and behaviour monitoring. The downward trend of the replacement rate and upward trend of conditionality could lead to further marginalization of welfare recipients despite the proactive expansion of social protection in the past decade.

Firstly, the increasing amount of absolute benefits and declining replacement rate deliver a mixed message on the generosity dimension of the social citizenship cube. Our results suggest that the social assistance funded through local fiscal capacity in Guangzhou was still not generous enough to meet the income growth enjoyed by Guangzhou residents in general. While the rising poverty line targets more of the poor population, the actual number of welfare recipients has dropped in Guangzhou since 2007. From the perspective of government officials, raising the level of benefits implies the benevolent attitude of the state whereas reduced caseloads illustrate effective poverty alleviation. Both are good cases for credit claiming in the era of expansion of social policies.

Secondly, the favourable downward trend of the number of caseloads seems unrelated to local and national economic development, but instead is related to the heightened conditionality on welfare in terms of accessibility and obligations. The recent new conditionality imposed on welfare recipients includes lifestyle and behavioural assessment prior to *dibao* access. Acceptance of community work and paid employment also serve as obligations on recipients before they receive cash assistance.

Requirements regarding training and job-seeking suggest a strong resemblance to the 'work first' regime in the neo-liberal welfare-to-work world which is characterized by the moral authoritarianism of employability (i.e. job competition in the labour market) and social order,⁷³ and this tendency seems to be on a trajectory of 'reinforcing work discipline and ethic'.⁷⁴

The policy changes to the *dibao* (i.e. raising benefit standards, paternalistic lifestyle assessment in relation to accessibility, and work-first obligation) present a new mode of 'authority and benevolence' social welfare in China.⁷⁵ Similar to the situation of the American underclass comprising the marginalized and disadvantaged,⁷⁶ the policy initiatives of the Chinese local government suggest a sense of deservedness among well-behaved and responsible citizens. The neo-liberal paternalist state also constructs the public perception of proper lifestyle and responsible behaviour of poor people. Welfare recipients accused of misconduct and whose lifestyle is deemed inappropriate can easily lose their benefits. Thus, the construction of deservedness suggests disciplinary measures imposed through China's poverty governance.

Finally, despite the declining replacement rates, tightened accessibility, and increasing obligations, welfare recipients still cannot achieve their desired material interests and social status. A declining replacement rate implies that the gap in living standards between welfare recipients and the public is widening. In other words, the *dibao* recipients in Guangzhou are unable to fully enjoy the fruits of economic development, and their well-being increasingly falls behind.

Welfare recipients still have to convincingly prove that they deserve to receive benefits, which in themselves are low, and that they are poor and well behaved. The screening procedures lead to a certain degree of welfare stigma. Moreover, the lifestyle assessment and reporting mechanisms for suspected misconduct intensify the negative relationship between welfare recipients and their communities, which results in more stigma. This study has therefore empirically confirmed that social segregation as a result of the implementation of lifestyle assessment is one result of the *dibao*.⁷⁷

Social and economic vulnerability of *dibao* recipients can turn into political vulnerability in decision-making. Recipients tend to maintain good relationships with street-level bureaucrats who determine their eligibility. The complicated screening and reporting procedures also confer greater discretionary power to street-level bureaucrats over *dibao* recipients. In disputes and appeals over benefits, welfare recipients find themselves in a relationship of unequal power vis-a-vis bureaucrats.⁷⁸

This study has illustrated how changes in benefits, accessibility, and obligations can further marginalize welfare recipients in terms of their material interests and social relations. Embedded in a broader discussion of social assistance and social citizenship, the theoretical contribution of the study is threefold. Firstly, this study has analysed the paradoxical phenomenon of reducing caseloads and raising benefit standards by referring to

the social citizenship cube which provides a multi-dimensional picture of social policy change in contemporary China. Secondly, the study has identified a disciplinary turn in how the state constructs the concept of deservedness in the *dibao*. By comparing the neo-liberal paternalist state in the United States⁷⁹ with authoritative yet benevolent social welfare in China,⁸⁰ the study has highlighted a hybrid form of social assistance policy, thereby contributing to ongoing discussions on the nature of China's emerging welfare state.⁸¹ Finally, the study has provided empirical proof of the material and relational marginalization of welfare recipients after certain measures were applied to the *dibao*. The study not only focused on the requirements of workfare,⁸² but also the effects of complicated screening procedures such as lifestyle assessment.⁸³

In conclusion, recent social policy changes to the *dibao* have failed to meet the poor's material and non-material needs. These policy changes may further erode the social rights of citizenship of the marginalized welfare recipients in China.

Notes

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