

**The miserly minimum livelihood guarantee:
social assistance (just to) to stave off starvation**

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December 2014

Prepared for Beatriz Carrillo Garcia, Johanna Hood, and Paul Kadetz, eds,
Handbook of Welfare in China(Edward Elgar).

As two commentators on China's Minimum Livelihood Guarantee program [*zuidishenghuobaozhang* 最低生活保障, for short, *dibao*] observed, using rather alarming language: 'The *dibao* merely prevents recipients starving,' (Wu and Webster 2010, p. 303). Its beneficiaries experience stigmatization and restrictions that just add to their ordeal of material deprivation.

At best, it has been characterized as 'mainly supplementary income' (Wong, Chen, and Zeng 2014, p. 340), though in reality many appear to have nothing else to fall back upon. While about one hundred home visits have nearly unfailingly confirmed these unfavorable reflections, comparisons with similar schemes around the world have only bolstered these gloomy views. Moreover, the trend in the project's operation over its 15 years in nationwide existence--signaling intensifying stinginess--seems to march in step with the submissiveness its subjects have displayed. This parallel development shores up my pessimism.

This chapter will spell out these claims. After a brief note on sources, I begin by describing the program, its causes, history and aims. I go on to sketch features of its recipients and provide statistical information. Next I document pitfalls of the program. I then refer to arrangements elsewhere that supply poor relief. I conclude by explicitly noting factors that explicate the impetus behind China's leadership's pinch-penny stance toward its poor: its relentless push toward a vision of modernity; its obsessive drive to dominate and contain discontent; and its shifting budgetary choices toward the program. Whether the measure is material benefits or political intent, my appraisal details how China's rulers disparage their destitute, a group that has been forged by the post-1990 policies of those rulers themselves.

Sources

My interviews took place in eight cities over seven years (2007-2014), averaging a dozen households per city. These cities are Wuhan (several times), Guangzhou (where college students did the work), Lanzhou (three times), Xi'an, Shanghai, and three prefectural Hubei cities (Xiantao, Jingzhou, and Xianjiang). My conversations were unstructured, lasting a half hour on average. In most cases community officials sat with us as I spoke with family members. Once—in Lanzhou in 2010, I and my sociologist host were alone with the subjects, and I was enjoyed more frankness than usual. But the presence of cadres did not stop the *dibaohu* [recipients of the program, 低保戶] from breaking into tears, nor it prevent them from admitting their grievances about—and gratitude for—the program.

The statistics I used are mostly official, but also data compiled by other researchers. Western and Chinese economists; social policy specialists; anthropologists; political scientists; sociologists; and social work, urban studies and policy studies scholars have all examined this program.

The work in English often is built upon existing household surveys, such as the China Household Income Project, the China Urban Household Survey or other datasets created by China's National Bureau of Statistics, or works with investigations and questionnaires administered by the authors themselves. Some have a demographic focus; others analyze the scheme's outcomes. The latter include the *dibao*'s effects on recipients' household expenditures; its efficacy in 'targeting' (coverage of those who qualify for the program plus inclusion of others ineligible); its participation rate; its ability to reduce poverty; its generosity; its geographic inequities (richer areas, where there are fewer truly poor, supply larger handouts);

its impact upon human capital formation; and its influence on beneficiaries' time use.

While such studies are valuable in identifying traits of the beneficiaries and their behavior, the authors may not be prepared to interpret their own results fully. One example is the claim that, because the benefit withdrawal rate (percent of the benefit taken away when the recipient obtains new income, as from a job) is low, the scheme is unlikely to become a poverty trap. The truth, based on some 100 household visits, is that--given China's excessively competitive schooling and hiring practices--the children of the very poor have bleak and unpromising futures ahead of them.

Another example is that the *dibao* encourages spending on education and health care. While this is undoubtedly accurate in light of the careful statistical work supporting that conclusion, the mechanism involved could be that, where local-level minders are merciful, beneficiaries may get away with running petty businesses whose meager profits achieve what the *dibao* is meant to do--allow the poor to keep body and soul together. Meanwhile, the allowance itself is saved for use in family betterment.

There is English-language qualitative work that describes the program, history and goals and its politics, or that is ethnographic, based upon close reading of a limited set of subjects and their livelihood travails. We are fortunate to have both research forms, as they inform each other.

Among Chinese authors, the ethnographic, descriptive bent is more prominent than quantitative analysis: On-the-spot surveys may yield statistical results, but have a core containing the subjective saga of the daily life surrounding the *dibao* hu. Large surveys of the poor and systematic studies of recipients in just one or a few cities, behind-the-scenes hints about how participants are selected and

how administrative levels bargain over funds all exist. One paper, using interviews, attacks the view that those who enjoy the allowances are disinclined to work (Han and Guo 2012). The leading scholar of the *dibaoprogram* is Tang Jun, of the Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Sociology's Social Policy Studies Center, whose work is marked by advocacy, critique, interviews and comparative research, as well as quantitative coverage of the program; in short, it has displayed all these modes of inquiry.

Background, the program, the participants, statistics, failings

Background

Social assistance in PRC cities goes back to the 1950s, when a program entitled the 'three nos' [*sanwu* 三无]—those with no source of livelihood, no legal supporter and no work ability--was instituted. That program satisfied for an era in which most urban dwellers were employed and serviced by their firms.

But as—in the 1980s and '90s--the country's political economy shifted from planning, the firms that made it up were forced to cope with an unaccustomed market. And as that old economy began to falter and crumble under the onset of rivalry with private, collective and foreign factories that had no welfare responsibilities, while the state-funded social security system cracked apart (Leung 2006, p. 196; Shang and Wu 2004, pp. 260, 265), so many workers so abruptly were cast aside that a new welfare model became a necessity. According to Athar Hussain, as many as 68.9 million jobs were sacrificed between 1994-2003, including those in

state- and collectively-owned sectors in enterprises, public institutions and the government (Hussain 2007, p. 107).

Besides introducing competition, market economics increased the price level and the scale of fees that beset the public (Gustaffson and Deng 2011, p. 2). Adding to the hardships, efforts to handle the extremities of the people who had been pushed away--such as the 'Reemployment Project' of 1998-2001, with its 'basic living allowances' for laid-off state workers--failed to assemble the required resources to meet the need, even as the numbers of the urban poor far outpaced the capabilities of the three-nos program (Hammond 2010, pp. 33-48, 71, 76; Chan 2010, p. 633). By 2001, in 21 of China's 31 provinces, the official *People's Daily* announced, the 'reemployment rate' (ability of the laid-off to find new jobs) had plunged to under 19 percent (Wu and Huang 2007, p. 173).

Shanghai's leaders were aware of the protest upheaval going on in the Northeast by the early 1990s (Hammond 2010, p. 71; Hurst 2009; Lee 2007). Hoping to forestall such disorder, they developed the *dibao* (Wong 1998, p. 200; Hammond 2010). By the mid-'90s, cities nationwide followed suit; in 1997 the State Council issued a draft document setting up a national urban residents' Minimum Livelihood Guarantee System (Guowuyuan 1997). Two years later, that draft became the formal regulation specifying the program's rules (Chengshijumin 2007).¹

The program

This program's official aims were to 'maintain the basic living standard for urban residents,' defined as meeting the 'necessary costs of food, clothes, and housing, giv[ing] reasonable consideration to water and power and fuel bills,

and [providing for] the educational costs for children' (Shang and Wu 2004, p. 261). Soon after then-Premier Zhu Rongji had signed the authorizing order, a Ministry of Civil Affairs official referenced the 1997 Party 15th Congress as having authorized the project to 'perfect the traditional social relief system, establish a wholesome modern social welfare system, and guarantee that the economic system reform, especially the state enterprises' reform, could progress without incident [*shunlijinbu*顺利]' (Wang, 1999, p. 18)

These hopes revealed that the paired objectives of securing 'stability' and facilitating the firms' restructuring lay at the core of the program. One writer went so far as to refer to the *dibao* as a 'tranquilizer,' which would permit the state enterprises in Shenyang's Tiexi district (a site of massive layoffs) to go forward without obstruction. For without it, this essayist unabashedly penned, 'these people must become a burden that the enterprises would find it hard to throw off...even to possibly arousing even larger social contradictions' (Ding 1999, p. 7). Thus, the *dibao* had not just a goal of preserving livelihood; it was also to 'ensure no threats to social order'...even while its 'benefit levels were set low so as not to be a disincentive to work' (Lindqvist, Tang and Li 2013, pp. 313, 316).

But the program failed to fulfil these goals within its first two years (Shang and Wu 2004, p. 261; Hammond 2010, pp. 120-123). Besides, China was soon to join the World Trade Organization, which it did in December 2001 (Solinger 2003). It was roundly expected that this accession would lead to millions more workers being thrown from their plants, as international competition overcame their employers' ability to stay afloat.

Taking note of ongoing protests by the laid-off, Premier Zhu called for an enormous on-the-ground survey of the plight of the furloughed throughout the country, in which he himself participated, involving some 800,000 officials (Ge and Yang 2004; Hammond 2010, p. 86ff). The outcome was a massive increase in the funding for and the numbers served by the program, with investment leaping from 1.5 million in 1999 up to 10.5 million by 2002, as beneficiaries ballooned from 2.8 million in 1999 to 19.3 million.

Despite these boosts, the program as implemented far from succored the needy. At its early stage, the undertaking called for municipalities to design their own programs, each creating a means test to define eligibility by establishing a local poverty line or norm [*dibaobiao* *zhun* 低保标准]. Households whose members' average per capita income fell below that line were to be accorded monthly allowances to lift per-person income up to norm in their city. Dependence on localities let each city devise a 'scientific determination' of the norm, based on its economic conditions--its residents' basic livelihood needs; its price level; its degree of development; and its financial ability to contribute to the program.

But this reliance on cities opened a loophole for stingy officials to devise 'local conditions' or 'local policies' limiting eligibility and excluding needy individuals (Shang and Wu 2004, p. 265; Hong 2005, 12). Thus significant disparities grew up among cities in the way the program was managed. In Shanghai, for instance, housing, medical and education allowances were granted to recipients along with their cash (Chen and Wong, Zeng, and Hamalainen 2013, p. 334), while similar treatment was lacking elsewhere. Another variation is that some local *dibao* bureaucrats knowingly

permit recipients to save their allowances while living on earnings from jobs (Interview, Lanzhou, November 21, 2014), while other officials refuse to give funds to a person known to be engaged in informal employment (Wong, Chen, and Zeng 2014, pp. 336-38). And poorer urban jurisdictions set their norm low to minimize the numbers they have to serve, whereas in cities with more revenue and where, often, the numbers of the poverty-stricken are fewer, the line is pegged at a higher level (Yang and Park 2006, p. 4; Zhang and Tang 2008, p. 62).

In an attempt to iron out disparities, in 1999 the central government stepped in to subsidize the more indigent areas, such that the portion born by localities has varied significantly, from sites along the east coast--where the city pays out the bulk or even all the allowances, to places where sizable assistance from the central government allows locales in the west, central China and the northeast to bear relatively little of the costs (Wang and Wang 1998, pp. 18, 19; Hussain 2002, p. 70; Tang 2002a; Solinger 2010).²So, by the early 2000s, large-scale central governmental transfers reversed the initial reliance on often inadequate local budgets (Leung and Xu 2014].

Cities chose not just their poverty lines but also their modes of fixing their lines—whether using a shopping basket, the Engels coefficient (representing the percent of its income a family spends on food) or some other method (Li 2006, pp.130-131). So much discretion remained at the local level, despite central-level support. Another source of variance was a division of the recipients into two types, who, respectively, were granted either a ‘make-up deficiency subsidy’ or a ‘complete amount’ subsidy (Tang 2012, p. 66). The latter amounted to the old ‘three nos,’ the former being households in which there was a person (or persons) at work but where the per capita income still

fell short of the local poverty norm, whether because of the household's high dependency ratio or its working member's unit's poor economic results.

Alternatively, there might be one or more persons who had received unemployment insurance, but for whom the period for receiving it had terminated without new work having been found (Mao 1997, p. 5; Jianlizuidi 1996; Wang 2004, p. 133). Later, cities set up their own list of three or four categories, ranked by urgency, with priority for the most needy (equivalent to the three nos) (He and Ping, n. d., n. p. and Zhang and Tang 2008, p. 67), Interview, street level official, Lanzhou, November 21, 2014).

Operationally, a three-level assessment process puts applicants through repeated appraisals of their household's income, first at the community [*shequ* 社区] level, then at the street [*jiedao* 街道] tier, and lastly, where the final decision is made, in the district [*qu* 区] (Zhou 2012, p. 20-21; Chen and Wong 2013, p. 331). Not only do these investigations entail community workers entering the home and digging for hidden possessions; they also call for neighbors to engage in a 'democratic selection' of recipients and for a public posting within the *shequ* informing passersby of the family's income, data that fellow community members are encouraged to challenge. Many cities, hoping to save funds, set up lists of articles (computers, cell phones, fancy pets, motorcycles) the possession of which is to automatically cancel a potential recipient's chances to secure the funds.

What is most intriguing, and seemingly most secret, is that the *dibao* apparently runs according to a quota system. Despite multiple community cadres' and higher-level officials' claims that 'whomever needs it gets it' [*yingbaojinbao* 应保尽保], the stability of the numbers of recipients over the years,³ along with each administrative

echelon's orders to 'set a proportion of its budget income for *dibaofunds*' (He and Ping n. d., n. p.), suggest that--just as one would suspect in China, with its formerly planned economy--apportionments to administrative units are not unlimited. Other researchers reason similarly:

There's been speculation that there's an undisclosed ceiling on *dibao* payments. If this is the case, it explains why applicants are often frustrated by the attitude of neighborhood officers. Since funding for the *dibao* comes from the district governments...it's likely that there's a budget for the program and that officials cannot accommodate more applicants than the budget allows(Chen, Wong, Zeng and Hamalainen 2013, p. 333).

Clinching any doubts, scholars in Wuhan agreed that there are 'quotas for each community, as decided by the street office, according to the economic situation of the place, its numbers of poor households, and its average income' (Interview, Wuhan, November 3, 2014).

Given this skepticism about the beneficence of the *dibao* and questions about its effectiveness, how is it assessed by scholars? One relatively positive statement is that it 'lowers the poverty rate somewhat, but substantially reduces the poverty gap and severity for eligible participants' (Gao, Garfinkel and Zhao 2009).⁴ Another team of scholars determined that it demonstrated 'excellent targeting compared with all other programs in the developing world' (Chen, Ravallion and Wang 2006, p. 1).

And yet this same team admitted that 7.7 percent of the total urban population had a net income below the relevant *dibaoline* in their cities of

registration in the mid-'00s, while only about half of this eligible population was receiving the *dibao*; 'leakage' had resulted in 'about 40 percent of the [program's actual] recipients in fact [being] ineligible to get it!' The team also noted that '29 percent of all poor urban people [without specifying how the total poor was derived] get the *dibao*, but only about 2 percent of the nonpoor do' (Chen, Ravallion and Wang 2006, p. 18).⁵ Its conclusion was that 'the *dibao* is a long way off from reaching its aim of bringing everyone up to the *dibaoline*' (Chen, Ravallion and Wang 2006, p. 19). A major source of the shortfall is that 'the scheme is underfunded,' with the *dibao* payments being 'too low to assure that the *dibaoline* is reached' (Ravallion 2009, pp. 22, 23).

But simultaneously these scholars estimated a withdrawal rate of just 3 percent (i.e., a recipient loses very little of his/her *dibao* allowance by earning money). The implication they draw is that the scheme is 'unlikely to create a poverty trap,' as finding work while remaining on the *dibao* rolls is not discouraged (Ravallion 2012, n.p., pp. 2-3). This statistically derived judgment, however, is countered by scholars who found that, 'the work activation function [of the *dibao*] was very limited for laid-off workers' (Wong, Chen and Zeng 2014, p. 340), presumably because recipients assume they will lose their allowance should they be known to be getting a wage. Leung found that 'work income was totally deducted from the benefits received, motivating recipients to conceal their incomes from work' (Leung 2008, p. 11).

A critical question in evaluating the worth of the program is whether its beneficiaries can subsist just on its payments. The answer here is probably no. Informants in Wuhan in 2007 were, it appeared, struggling mightily to do just that (Solinger 2011), a situation that Wuhan scholars believed still existed in 2014 (Interviews, Wuhan, November 3, 2014). And a Civil Affairs

Ministry official who manages the program nationally alleged that, ‘among the *dibaohu*, staying home is very common’ (Interview, Beijing, October 9, 2014); the scheme’s most prominent scholar judged that ‘one can maintain a basic livelihood in Beijing [on the *dibao*] if nothing bad happens’ (Interview, Tang Jun, Beijing, October 10, 2014).

Other information, however, prompts suspicion. Three researchers discovered in Shanghai from 2009 to 2011 that, ‘Very few families relied on the *dibao* as their sole source of income, with many getting support from retired parents, relatives, and through informal employment’ (Wong, Chen and Zeng 2014, p. 338). And an informant from a small Heilongjiang town related that, ‘many [there] find jobs,’ ideally jobs not offering a contract, the better to conceal their work and its wages (Interview, Hong Kong, November 7, 2014).

Participants

Those taking the *dibao* are a very sorry lot. As of 2002, about two-thirds of its recipient families were saddled with one or more chronically ill persons or people suffering from serious illnesses, while a third had a disabled person living at home, according to the Ministry of Civil Affairs (He and Ping n.d., n. p.). This situation has likely not changed much. The most recent official tabulation shows that over 60 percent of the participants were of working age in 2013, seemingly verifying that the project’s initial charge was to take care of laid-off workers; the tabulation also suggests that people in this group more than a decade after losing their workposts remained unable to make ends meet on their own. In 2013, 38 percent of the beneficiaries nationwide were unemployed, with another 22 percent working only occasionally in one flexible, temporary position or another (and, doubtless, often

shifting among such slots). A mere 2 percent were counted as formally 'employed', with the remaining beneficiaries being children or students (Gao, Wu and Zhai forthcoming).

In spring 2011 a research team in three Jiangsu cities found that *dibaohu* continue to eat very poorly (Zhu, Chen and Wu 2012, p. 6). For instance, a third could afford to eat meat or fish just once per week on average, while nearly three quarters were unable to buy any new clothes over the course of a year. Over 60 percent lacked the means to purchase any daily necessities costing over 50 yuan. Additionally, only 30 percent could manage to pay the fees for seeing a doctor if they become ill (Zhu, Chen and Wu 2012, pp. 6-7). Pitifully, these findings are not far from those of Tang Jun and his collaborators in their 1998 survey (Tang 2004). One cannot help but wonder how families who subsist just on the *dibaocould* have managed to survive while so malnourished for more than a decade.

If they do labor, their casual employment clusters in sectors where prestige is low, such as pedicab driving other kinds of transport and hauling, and housework. Fewer than 1 percent perform skilled labor that could be termed professional or even low-level office work (Zhu, Chen and Wu 2012, p. 15). These findings match what investigators have ascertained throughout the time of the program's operation (Solinger 2011).

Statistics

By every kind of measure the *dibaohas* never been sufficient to do more than stave off starvation, no more than to preserve destitution. This was apparent in interviews in 1998 and 1999, as noted (Tang Jun 2004). But at that time,

the average *dibaonorm* (poverty line) across China represented 26.7 percent of the average disposable urban income (Solinger 2011). That figure dropped steadily with time, standing at 22.24 percent in 2005 and then at 17.9 percent in 2007 until, in 2010, it reached a tiny 13.8 percent (China Civil Affairs 2011 Yearbook 2012, p. 145; China Data Online]. Relatedly, in 2012, the average *dibaoline* across the country was 19 percent of the average consumption level in the respective cities (Gao, Wu and Zhai, forthcoming, p. 7).

As a percentage of average urban income, the highest year was 2003, when the allowance amounted to 21 percent. But by 2007 it had shrunk to just 16 percent, and it remained thereabouts thereafter (Tang and Xiu 2011, p. 212). Raw figures display its skimpiness: as of September 2013 the line as a national average was just 362 yuan per person per month, with a range of 277 in Ningxia and 640 in Shanghai (Leung and Xu 2014, p. 144). For wages the story is similar: in 1998, the urban average poverty line (*dibaonorm*) amounted to 20.5 percent of the mean wage in very large cities. By 2007, that statistic had been cut fully in half, down to 10.3 percent. And four years on, it had declined even more, to 7.8 percent of the average wage in state firms. Too, the line's rate of increase has been lower than that for the minimum wage for every year since 1999 (Chen, Wong, Zeng and Hamalainen 2013, p. 329).

Finally, not only has it been calculated that its annual rate of adjustment has fallen behind the rate of inflation (Gao, Yoo, Yang and Zhai 2011, p. 116); after adjusting for the consumer price index (CPI), the pace of increase of the average line has been 'much slower than that without adjusting for the CPI' (Gao, Zhai, Yang and Li 2014, p. 229). All told, the

livelihood—or, at the very least, the relative livelihood—of the *dibaohuis* clearly a topic of declining moment for whichever authorities determine these matters.

Failings

Given that the program was fostered in an effort to pacify its participants, one should not expect it to do much good for these people. Tracing its shortcomings leads to several categories of explanation: some are the fault of the program itself, some of the cadres' conducting it, some of those taking it, some of 'contradictions' that easily crop up between the two sets of actors, and some the result of public reaction.

Turning first to weaknesses in the program itself, unlike social assistance programs in much of the rest of the world, China's does not aim to develop human capital. Schemes known as 'conditional cash transfers' have at least a shot at breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty, as claimed by some (Hanlon, Barrientos and Hulme 2010, p. 6), though other analysts have challenged this (Franzoni and Voorend 2011, p. 2). For better or worse, unlike contingent hand-outs which require that grantee mothers bring their children to clinics and take them to school, the *dibaoputs* no demands upon its recipients.

It seems evident to me—after dozens and dozens of home visits--that the offspring of China's poverty-stricken urban parents grow up in households filled with worry, tension, and a lack of adult ability to (and even of knowledge how to) nurture their young intellectually. Moreover, the

skimpy budgets of these parents are totally inadequate to prepare the children for what is vicious educational and job market competition.

One possible solution would be to institute ‘expenditure-type’ aid, which would calibrate each family’s allowance to its medical and educational needs (Tang 2013, p. 218). Shanghai appears to have pioneered a project of this type in 2013, but its effectiveness has not yet been evaluated, to my knowledge (Zhang 2013, p. 271). Such a plan has been an unfulfilled plea of many *dibaohu* over the years (Solinger 2011). Perhaps, though, opposition to such a notion lurks at high levels: one poverty researcher, being reminded of the low-grade schools on offer for to the poor in their own neighborhoods, remarked, ‘Your demands shouldn’t be too high if you’re a *dibaohu*’ (Interview, Beijing, October 13, 2014).

A second issue intrinsic to the program has to do with its success at targeting. Despite the view of scholars cited above, the capacity of the *dibao* to accurately pinpoint those who deserve to receive it, and to winnow out those whose income is higher than the line, has been questioned. On the basis of a 2004 survey of nearly 7,000 households in 14 cities in eight provinces, Meiyang Wang found that undercoverage was 61 percent, while leakage⁶ amounted to 40 percent (Wang 2007, pp. 76, 85).

The roots of the leakage are not hard to uncover; much can be laid at the feet of the providing officials. First, there is bribery to get onto the rolls (Wang 2007, p. 87). And secondly, cadres sometimes dispense the funds as a kind of *renqingbao* (人情保)--through personal relations or out of sympathy, or because they find candidates threatening (Leung 2008, p. 12; Chen and Wong 2012, p. 331). There is even an

allegation that such factors may determine allocations even more than means-testing does ((Leung and Xu 2014, p. 171).

A related flaw in cadres' conduct is fraud. In one case, officials refrained from reporting recipients' change of financial situation, leading to an issuance of 300 million yuan that likely lined the pockets of those in charge. One report tells of more than three million people-times or incidents [*renci*人次] when *dibaohu* who were to be awarded funds never saw them delivered (Tang 2013, p. 218). Worse, 80 percent of households surveyed in five provinces had to go without their subsidy, while 60 percent of those funded were not at the poverty level in another investigation (Jiancha Daily 2014). There are also lapses owing to the low educational preparation of work personnel, failures of coordination among relevant bureaus, and insufficient technological support in information use and storage (Tang 2013, p. 218).

Other bases for pitfalls can be traced to the poor themselves. Certainly the inability to live just on the *dibao* drives the impoverished to take up odd jobs and even start small businesses; they then feel compelled to hide their income (Chen, Ravallion and Wang 2006, pp. 6, 7). Undeclared income in turn renders it impossible for program managers to assess applicants' actual neediness (Ge and Yang 2004; Leung and Xu 2014, p. 149).

And yet, in a small town in the northwest, it is not just recipients who cheat; , everyone seems to be in cahoots: people go so far as to get fake divorces when a spouse lands some work, so as to prevent the household from appearing to take in cash that would render it unqualified for the *dibao*. The knowing judge who performs the separation ritual is a personal friend of the couple's and so just goes through the required motions. Meanwhile, students get their parents to request that the civil affairs office prepare a document (falsely) claiming they are *dibaohu*, in the interest

of winning a subsidy from their universities (Interviews, Hong Kong, November 7 and 14, 2014).

Then there are quarrels between the dispensers and grantees, pleas and angry visits to the community office by poor people who feel deprived and deserving (Heberer 2009, p. 113; Cho 2010, p. 32). In some tightly-knit communities recipients band together in small groupings against officials, criticizing the system and its injustices (Cho 2010, pp. 34, 35; Chen and Wong 2012, p. 334). Finding an explanation for these complaints in the cadres' behavior, two researchers in Wuhan judge that:

The targets of the *dibaowork* are society's weak masses [*ruoshiqunti* 弱势群体].

Because of this, work personnel must be very patient and have a spirit of serving the poor...this kind of concept about the work isn't something that professional training of two days per year can address. The *dibao* workers' attitude often incites contradictions between themselves and the recipients; it becomes a fuse that sparks conflicts between the weak social masses and the government (Li and Ding 2006].

A last drawback could come from public disapproval. This sentiment is stirred up by the media, which charges the beneficiaries with welfare dependency (Leung and Xu 2014, p. 149), an accusation familiar elsewhere. Indeed, there is denunciation from the left (blaming the system for its miserliness) and from the right (from which come attacks on the plan's inefficiency, plus concerns that the system will nurture

laziness) (Tang 2012, p. 70). In the US, as noted below, such indictments led to the massive 1996 pullback.

Chinese social policy researchers have their disagreements as well. One recently championed a campaign to catch cheats who enjoy the *dibao*, such as those who keep foreign savings under false names; there are beneficiaries, some allege, owning luxury cars and several homes. But another scholar retorted that such deception 'can only be a minority of cases and a temporary situation' (Minzhengbu 2012).

True, the government has made attempts to help the urban poor, especially the laid-off and otherwise unemployed, to help themselves. Efforts involve grants of small-scale credit, training programs, tax cuts for setting up ventures, and reemployment services (Zhang and Peng 2014, p. 46). The fact, however, is that the poverty-beset are, sadly enough, usually psychologically, intellectually, and physically not really capable of responding to these programs. Besides, there are questions as to the seriousness of local bureaucracies--which, in any event, are not well coordinated among themselves--about lifting up those left behind to fit in again. Symbolic of their disinclination to succor the disadvantaged is the disappearance of 'welfare enterprises', which formerly provided employment for the disabled. Such firms dropped away once the market economy took hold (An 2014, p. 52).

Totally deficient in competitive ability, afraid of entering the high-stress employment market, or fearing the loss of their *dibao*, recipients'

disinclination to work is understandable (Zhu, Chen and Wu 2012, p. 24). Thus, ‘Many recipients would rather wait for retirement or rely on the *dibao* than actively seek a job, given their limited skills’ (Chen, Wong, Zeng and Hamalainen 2013, p. 333).

Perhaps more promising is a recent initiative in two provinces, Hebei and Ningxia, both housing numerous poor persons. These localities pledged to cancel GDP-based assessment for poor counties and cities. Instead, officials’ evaluation will rest upon their success in raising living standards for impoverished residents and in cutting the numbers of persons living in destitution (Wildau, 2014). Judging the outcome will have to await implementation.

This recital of fundamental flaws in the program’s workings undergird researchers’ adverse judgments. But these appraisals, one might worry, have been reached in isolation. How does the scheme fare if held up against others of its kind, in other places?

Comparisons with social assistance elsewhere

A review of literature on related projects outside China only buttresses the negative observations above. Despite that China’s *dibaoshare*s features with similar schemes elsewhere, its deficiencies are highlighted by comparison.

First the similarities: Not surprising is that social policy in Hong Kong resembles that in China. In 1971, a means-tested public allowance scheme was

instituted for its neediest; this venture, much like China's today, was funded with the least possible expenditure and with minimal state intervention in the market. Following the territory's takeover by the PRC in 1997--just as China's *dibao* was starting--sustaining social stability and keeping welfare responsibility tokens have marked the Special Administrative Region's welfare net, much as they do the Mainland's (Chan 2011).

Another parallel is with Latin America and Korea, where, as in China (but for different reasons—for China it was massive loss-making in the state sector), older welfare programs could no longer be sustained once economic crisis hit (whether because of debt crunches in the former or the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s in the latter). An accompanying craze for economic liberalization added to the sense of urgency. Pursuant to these shocks, spikes in unemployment and a giant spurt of the informal labor market drove political elites to shift their styles of welfare provisioning, like China (Kim, Kwon, Lee, and Yi 2011, p. 130; Yang 2012, p. 58; Dion 2011, p. 2110; Takahashi 2013).

A second commonality between the *dibao* and most means-tested programs is its 'welfare residualism'—stigmatizing and degrading in its methods, complex and confusing in its application procedures, and niggardly in its benefits (Soss, Fording and Schram 2011, p. 204). Its low effectiveness is typical of such schemes. Perhaps this sameness can be traced to China's having drawn its inspiration from the US (Tang, interview, Beijing, October 9, 2014 ; Tao 2014, pp. 15-17).

If this is so, the program it must have copied would be American's Supplemental Security Income, the federal cash assistance program aimed at the poor disabled, the blind or the aged (Campbell 2014; Berkowitz and DeWitt 2013;

Weaver 2000). Its treatment of suppliants is similarly demeaning and punitive (Campbell 2014). I always remember the 39-year-old Lanzhou father I met in 2010 who was suffering from a chronic liver ailment. The *dibao*'s terms dictated that his family deserved an educational subsidy for his daughter, but they were unaware of this. When I urged him to inquire, his reply was unnerving: 'It's too complicated to ask. I've already spent a month just applying for this [the *dibao*]....' He then threw up his hands in exasperation (Interview, Lanzhou, July 15, 2010).

Like the American scheme, the Chinese one is federally subsidized and run by localities, with variations rampant. And despite persistent public charges of fraud and deceit directed at them, both schemes are unavoidably entrées into long-term poverty traps. One more theme aligning China's program with others is its move, since 2009, to drive recipients out to the labor market—whether that market is receptive to them or not, which in fact it is not. This turn, termed a 'reorientation' in the West, aims to 'help and/or push non-working people back into employment' (Bonoli and Natali 2012, p. 3; Clasen and Clegg 2012, p. 144; Palier 2012, p. 243).

In general, social assistance is riddled with faults, as Joe Soss and his co-writers have charged:

In practice, social programs are rarely designed or evaluated as if the elimination of poverty were an attainable goal...programs for the poor are used mainly to temper the hardships of poverty and ensure that they [the poor]

do not become disruptive for the broader society (Soss, Fording and Schram 2011, p.1).

But the *dibao*'s differences with other social assistance policies are stark. Some commentators attribute the institution of new assistance programs to the introduction of democracy, as in Mexico (Takahashi 2013; Dion 2010, p. 210; Segura-Ubiergo 2007, p. 266; Chidambaram 2012; Yang 2012). If true, it could be that regime type/transformation may play a role. Whether successful at reaching their goals or not, such policies at least are geared toward enhancing the human capital of poor children. Such schemes, too, aspire to reduce poverty, not, as in China, to keep the poor minimally alive (Takahashi 2013, p. 4). Thirdly, in other countries extra benefits are often added on--child allowances, medical insurance, child care, an 'earned-income tax credit,' food stamps or food sold at below-market prices; such additional benefits exist in Japan, Korea, India, and the US (Schoppa 2006, p. 45; Weaver 2000, p. 13; Gao, Yoo, Yang and Zhai 2011, p. 114; Sadanandan 2012, p. 214).

Fourth is about program coverage, the percentage of the population (or the poor) who are served. Probably the impoverished population is larger where higher proportions of the populace are treated. Whatever the case, Chile covered over 9 percent of its population as of 2008 and El Salvador 6.5 percent in 2009 (Franzoni and Voorend 2011, p. 6). OECD countries went as high as 25 percent in New Zealand in 1992 (Gao, Yoo, Yang and Zhai 2011, p. 114). But in China, by 2011 approximately 3 percent of the urban population got the *dibao*, by contrast (Gao, Zhai, Yang and Li 2014, p. 220). Yet one more dimension is

the threshold line's relation to the national median income, where China shames by comparison: in the European Union, social assistance lines are generally 50 to 60 percent of per capita income (Tang and Xiu 2011, p. 212), but in China after 2007 the average norm was just 16 percent (Tang and Xiu 2011, p. 12).

And last, and surely not least important, is the percentage of GDP devoted to the schemes. This final facet is significant because it symbolizes the level of concern a government is willing to shower on the poor. While in China that percentage for the urban *dibao* has wavered around 0.12 percent after rising from under 0.1 percent in 2003, the percent for targeted poverty programs elsewhere ranged from 0.5 to 1 percent in Latin America in the early 2000s (Haggard and Kaufman 2008, p. 217); OECD countries spent on average 2.5 percent of GDP on cash transfer programs; and Mexico invested 0.3 percent as of 2008, while Indonesia's cash transfers cost 0.5 percent of its GDP in 2005 (Hanlon, Barrientos and Hulme 2010, pp. 22, 40, 42).

Though Leonard Schoppa judged that, 'Japan ranks low relative to other OECD nations,' it nonetheless spent 0.21 percent of its GDP on family cash benefits in 1995, an amount that looks generous next to what is being done in China (Schoppa 2006, pp. 44-45). And despite that Sweden matches China's prohibition (at least on paper) against doling out aid to families owning motorcycles or classy consumer goods, its assistance threshold was about 35 percent of the mean disposable income in 2010 (Gustafsson and Gang 2013, pp. 300, 304). According to Gao and her collaborators, only 22.5 percent of South Korean poor households were benefiting from its program in 2010. But at least as a nationally-run system (unlike China's) it may feature more cross-national

equity; besides, its provisions include medical benefits. And there is no effort in Korea (as there is in China) to exclude the work-able (Gao, Yoo, Yang and Zhai2011, pp. 114, 115 and 119).

The US system has one component that compares unfavorably with China's. The 'welfare reform' of 1996 transformed a relatively generous program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—which had nurtured everyone whose income and/or assets fell below a given level--into a restrictive one (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) that demands work and sets a five-year lifetime limit (Scholz, Moffitt, and Cowan 2009, pp. 209-210). Though the goal in this remake was to break the cycle of poverty within families, there has not been evidence to date that this was achieved.

My perspective

I have revealed my own viewpoint--that the *dibao* project is inadequate, belittling, debasing and impoverishing. Yet even if these traits characterize normal practice in social assistance, China would appear to be stingier than elsewhere. Hoarding its collective resources to mount flashing neon lights and to fabricate fabulous, towering edifices--structures flanked by racing, high-speed roadways--the country registers as more frugal toward its unfortunate than are other states.

My final assessment springs from several telltalesigns. The first is the management of the *dibaohu*. These low-skilled, now laid-off workers were left almost entirely to their own devices. I argue that this happened since they are viewed and treated as a blemish on the visage of the nation as it stretches

toward modernity (Solinger 2008, Solinger 2009). This perspective fits with the work of Borge Bakken, who, in his analysis of China's fervid drive to promote material progress, has written that, 'Only the creation of the modern person can promote modernization' (Bakken 2000, p. 62). My outlook also resonates with the country's campaign to raise the 'human quality' [*suzhi* 素质] of its populace (Goodman 2014, pp. 109-11; Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006; Yan 2008; Murphy 2004), with its implicit exclusion from the mainstream of those who cannot make this grade. For this reason, the *diba* keeps the poor largely out of sight (Solinger 2013). Snobbery goes a long way to elucidating the shabby treatment these people are accorded.

The next pillar undergirding my view of the destitutes' predicament is the changes the program has undergone over a decade. These transformations are likely a function of the dwindling value to the regime of bothering with the *diba* grantees—supporting their livelihood is just no longer worth much money. This judgment is born out statistically, in the dropping proportions the allocations represent of average wages, income, and consumption in urban society at large, as well as of GDP. I would argue that this overall decline—despite rising absolute rations—rests upon the low utility now accorded these once-workers as a place to inject investment after they have grown largely mum.

And besides numerical evidence, with time there have been intimations that allowances are only for the utterly bereft and incapable, not for anyone with the capability of working. This contrasts with the program's early years, when it assisted all who met two qualifications: that the average income of the household's

members did not reach a locally-designated poverty line/minimal livelihood norm; and that the household's registration was urban and local.

Much like the US's AFDC, the *diba* became the victim of public suspicion, and a 2012 State Council regulation added a new criterion: the family now must expose for examination every form of its assets, including motor vehicles, insurance, housing, savings, any negotiable stocks its members might own, the sum of its tax payments, and its mortgages, not to mention its income (Guangdong 2012, p. 1).

Additionally, this document, along with numerous interviews, highlighted yet one more clue to understanding the state's altered appraisal of the program's recipients: it has become increasingly difficult to obtain the allowance at all. One source recalled that rules began to grow tighter around the year 2010 (Tang, Interview, Beijing, October 9, 2014). The ability to labor has more and more become a line dividing who is eligible from who is not (Interviews, scholars, Wuhan, November 3, 2014; street leader, Lanzhou, November 21, 2014; student from Heilongjiang, Hong Kong, November 14, 2014).

More evidence comes from fieldwork. In 2009, for the first time, one family's adults were assigned by their community leaders [*shequlingdao* 社区领导] to do menial make-work to earn some wages (Interviews, Wuhan, September 2, 11, 2009). The mother was appointed to an eight-hour-per-day position as a security guard at a community gate, earning 500 yuan monthly (equivalent to about

US\$72); the father was occasionally called upon to help community officials, also getting reimbursed. Previously these people had been left on their own and simply handed a monthly allowance.

In Wuhan interviews in summer 2012, community officials mentioned a new stringency greeting applications. One explained,

A person aged under 50 with work ability can't get the *dibao* now; the policy has become very strict. If s/he can't find work, that's not a condition for getting the *dibao*. We encourage them to work (Interview, June 26, 2012).

In a different Wuhan community, the *dibao* manager asserted that, Now, it's almost impossible for a healthy laid-off person to get the *dibao*. Only the seriously ill and disabled can get it. Getting the allowance depends on age and ability to work; it's only for the old, weak, those with ill health and the disabled. If one has working ability, he's unlikely to get it. In the past, the policy was more relaxed; lots of laid-off people received it (Interview, June 30, 2012).

In sum, I surmise that benefits have plummeted precisely because the targets are largely no longer raucous, and consequently no more either a threat to the state nor a thorn in the side of the larger reform (Solinger 2010, Solinger forthcoming). The outcome has been a steady downslide in what is doled out to the *dibaohu*. Grown silent, they match quite neatly the premise of Piven and

Cloward's jaundiced but telling interpretation of welfare: 'The size of the welfare rolls is not a response to the needs of the poor but...to the trouble they make.' Speaking of the 1960s 'a time of profound disorder,' they pronounce that, 'a placid poor got nothing, but a turbulent poor sometimes gets something' (Piven and Cloward 1993, pp. 336, 338). It would seem that only massive havoc on the highways would be enough to stir the country's decisionmakers. And this the weak, ill, and deserted are not apt to mount.

Notes

¹ What follows draws upon Solinger 2010 and Solinger2011.

² Hussain(2002) said that only 21 of the 31 provincial-level units contributed toward the cost of the *dibao*. But an article by Tang Jun, also published in 2002, states that, ‘With the exception of Beijing, Shanghai, Shandong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong, all the other provinces got the central government’s financial subsidies.’

³ After climbing to over 22.5 million recipients in 2003, the numbers stabilized, even dropping some after 2009.

⁴Qin Gao explained byemail(21 March 2012): the ‘poverty gap...is the average income shortfall below the poverty line, that is, the amount of money needed to bring those below the poverty line to the poverty line. The squared poverty gap weights more heavily those who are poorer (that is, those whose income shortfall is larger); it is a measure of severity of poverty. The more the people who are at extreme poverty, the higher the value of the weighted poverty gap.’

⁵Ravallion, notes some improvement between 2004, when 29 percent of the *dibao*-eligible poorreceived the *dibao*, and 2 percent of the non-poor did, and 2007, when 39 percent of the *dibao* eligible poor were recipients, and just 1.2 percent of the non-poor did (Ravallion, n.d., n.p.).

⁶‘Undercoverage’ is the proportion of people who need assistance but are not covered; ‘leakage’ is the proportion not needing assistance who are covered’ (Wang 2007, p. 85).

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