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Welfare for Autocrats: How Social Assistance in China Cares for its Rulers, by Jennifer Pan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. vii-225 pp. US\$29.95 (paper)

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Welfare for Autocrats, by Jennifer Pan, presents an in-depth look at how one Chinese social assistance program, the minimum livelihood guarantee known colloquially as *dibao* (低保), became a tool for maintaining social control. Adding to the broad literatures on institutional change and social welfare in China, the book also adds insight into exactly how the state manages potential troublemakers through ground-level surveillance, monitoring, and redistribution. Pan artfully integrates detail on the day-to-day workings of the *dibao* system with immense data from a variety of sources and state-of-the-art methods to paint a comprehensive picture of the causes and consequences of what she calls “repressive assistance.”

The overarching argument of the book is that *dibao*, a social assistance program originally designed to alleviate urban poverty, became a tool of state control. After the Falun Gong demonstrations of 1999 alarmed the Chinese Communist Party of the potential pervasiveness of social opposition to party policies, concerns over social control “seeped” into unrelated policy areas, including social programs. Pan positions “seepage”—where “a goal or priority of the regime impacts an unrelated policy” (4)—as a one type of conversion leading to institutional change. Early policy architects saw *dibao* as improving social stability by alleviating the basic survival problems of the poorest poor. Once social maintenance policy goals seeped into the program, the distribution of *dibao* transformed into a more strategic, targeted system that paired redistribution with surveillance and repression.

Through implementation and purposeful manipulation by local officials, the *dibao* system became a grassroots tool to collect information on “targeted populations” (*zhongdian renkou* 重点人口)—those the state sees as potential troublemakers—by enrolling them in this aid system. By incorporating these populations, local state actors encouraged a dependent, almost subservient relationship between populations with the potential to destabilize social order and the state. Thus, the modern *dibao* became a system of “repressive assistance,” state assistance used to quell undermining forces even before they cause destabilization by reducing the potential for collective action. This shift in policy implementation created distributional consequences, however, as targeted populations are more likely to get state assistance than equally poor non-targeted populations. Explored at the end of the book, Pan argues that these inequalities have the potential to backfire on the regime by creating more discontent in those passed over for the benefit than it prevents in the targeted populations.

Pan’s deployment and communication of state-of-the-art methodologies adds undeniable value to the book. The arguments are outlined using a wide range of data and methodologies, including more than a hundred interviews in four provinces with government officials and *dibao* recipients; a field experiment assessing the reaction of local government officials via public forums; an analysis of more than a decade’s worth of policy documents and media reports; a survey of 100 neighborhoods in four cities; and a nationally representative sample of urban citizens. The sheer volume of data behind the book could be overwhelming, but Pan presents her work clearly and concisely, with her discussion easily accessible for those less familiar with the methodologies she utilizes. Not merely focusing on the flashy

methods or clearly identified causal relationships, Pan also provides immense detail and description from her research experiences in China.

Other than the sheer volume of data generated in this project, Pan provides two primary contributions to the study of modern China. First, the study provides a much-needed low-level analysis of how social control works in China. Studies of social order and control tend to be pre-occupied with the central level stability mindset and lack the connection to the ground level, where much of the social control work is done. This book adds to the small but important literature that focuses on ground-up stability maintenance. Second, the book adds much needed research on the targeted population, an important but understudied group in China. State forces see these populations as a significant threat to regime legitimacy, and yet very little academic research focuses on the management of the targeted population. Pan's study sheds light into the day-to-day surveillance and repression of these citizens.

One question I am left with after reading the book is the scope conditions for institutional seepage. The book describes this form of institutional change as one form of institutional conversion, adding to the broader literature on how sticky institutions can change. But under what conditions is seepage likely? Within the study of Chinese politics specifically, would we not expect seepage of the all-important social control and stability management to occur across all institutions? Or would this only be through institutions that can provide repressive assistance? Pan briefly identifies other possible areas for seepage, including education and environmental management, but this discussion is less developed than her other conceptual neologism of repressive assistance, which is clearly and carefully positioned in the broader concepts of coercion and repression. Without scope conditions, the reader is left assuming that seepage could, and probably has, occurred across all policy realms. The negative consequence of this is the potential for reductive conclusions about Chinese politics broadly, which does not do Pan's nuanced application to the case of *dibao* justice. A deeper dive into institutional seepage as a broader process would better help the reader understand the concept more effectively.

Welfare for Autocrats is an important collection of fascinating data and rich detail with a clear narrative of welfare and repression in China. Readers interested in institutional change, stability management, and social assistance in China will all benefit greatly from reading this book.