

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Social protection under authoritarianism: Health politics and policy in China. By Xian Huang, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2020.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3d6733q8>

Journal

Governance, 36(2)

ISSN

0952-1895

Author

Vortherms, Samantha A

Publication Date

2023-04-01

DOI

10.1111/gove.12773

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Social Protection under Authoritarianism: Health Politics and Policy in China. By Xian Huang, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2020.

Samantha A. Vortherms

In *Social Protection under Authoritarianism: Health Politics and Policy in China*, Xian Huang provides a meticulously detailed account of China's social health insurance system, explaining both its development and variation. This book is an essential read for any scholar interested in social welfare and policymaking in China as well as those who study authoritarian politics more broadly.

Social Protection under Authoritarianism argues that, to maintain authoritarian stability, autocratic leaders pursue a "stratified expansion strategy" in social protection. Autocrats first provide privileged protections for elites to ensure their continued support before expanding minimal coverage of protections to the masses to ward off bottom-up challenges to their rule (Chapter 2). Huang uses China's social health insurance program to highlight the stratification strategy, which grew in dominance between 1999 and 2011 as China's provinces' economies diverged (Chapter 3). The focus on establishing and maintaining elite privileged status stemmed from the Center's concern about ensuring continued protections for those whose support the regime relies upon. The central government uses fiscal transfers to provinces to ensure protection for elites in the public sector and the state-owned economy. Provinces with larger elite groups receive more fiscal transfers. Chapter 4 highlights how different forms of center-local transfers correlate with the size of different elite groups. For example, the more fiscal dependents and urban residents, the higher tax rebates from the central government to provincial governments (105).

While the Center's interests drive an elite bias in social protection provision, local governments balance contradicting incentives in central government policies while adapting to local disparities in socio-economic conditions (Chapter 5). Local officials tailor health insurance programs based on local fiscal resources and local social risk factors, leading to four models of local social health insurance provision (Chapter 6). Risk-pooling provinces provide lower benefits distributed to more people. Privileging provinces provide lower coverage but more generous benefits. Dual model provinces implement protection policies that cover more people with higher levels of generosity. Finally, status-quo provinces provide selective coverage substantively lower than the privileging model. The last empirical chapter turns to outcomes, specifically highlighting the inequalities in insurance program enrollments. Using nationally representative survey data, Huang shows how individuals with different socio-economic backgrounds enroll in different insurance programs, which vary in generosity. Traditionally understood elite groups—those with urban household registration, formal employees, and those in the state sector—are more likely to be enrolled in insurance programs that provide more generous protections.

Huang's book makes several key contributions to the existing literature both in the study of Chinese politics and authoritarian politics more broadly. First, the book contributes directly to the authoritarian welfare literature on how and why autocrats provide social protections in the absence of elections and direct accountability institutions. Existing work focuses on higher-level theorizing that simplifies the redistribution decision. The core contribution of the book is its focus on the complexity of social protections within one country context, a necessary result of autocratic leaders balancing conflicting incentives of redistribution across large and diverse populations. In particular, I appreciate Huang's dynamic argument: that stratification is not simply a model of welfare provision, but a multi-stage process. Social health insurance is only extended to the masses after elites establish a privileged position

in distribution (27), although this argument could have been pulled through the empirical sections a little more purposefully.

Second, Huang takes seriously the multiple levels of policy making, highlighting not only the resulting variation in health insurance outcomes, but also the policy making process and incentives at both the central (Chapter 4) and local (Chapter 5) levels. Only when considering multiple levels can readers understand the variation in policy outcomes.

Third, *Social Protection under Authoritarianism* provides rich empirical detail on both the complex systems that run social health insurance in China and their outcomes for enrollment in different programs. Chinese welfare programs are complex by design, as Huang emphasizes, and it is rare to have a single source that lays out the system's nuances as well as Huang's book does for the health insurance program.

I have a few remaining questions that would push these contributions further. First, on the multi-level policy process, Huang contends that the central government tolerates regional variation in health insurance expansion "as long as welfare privileges of elite groups... are maintained" (6), implying greater expansion to the masses is locally driven. Yet in the theory chapter, Huang argues that autocratic leaders do need to distribute more broadly to "placate" the masses (31). The book could integrate these two dynamics from the center's position in Chapter 4 a bit more to help identify central incentives to expand beyond the elites, albeit after securing elite protections.

Second, Huang uses health insurance as a case of social welfare provision without much discussion of social health insurance as a case study of social protections. This strategy allows Huang to provide a focused and detailed account of one social protection program, but reduces the contextualization in the social welfare literature more broadly. The argument's reach could be improved by discussing social health insurance in the context of other social welfare programs, in particular the pension system, in the theory or conclusion of the book for broader generalizations of the theory. From a political economy perspective, these two forms of social protection have different rationale and consequences that align well with Huang's existing argument. By not contextualizing health insurance in other forms of social protection, Huang misses an opportunity to broaden her argument's impact on other bodies of literature such as the productionist welfare state. But this minor criticism does not undermine the fundamental contribution a focused analysis of the health insurance system provides.

Social Protection under Authoritarianism is an empirically rich deep dive into China's social health insurance program, its complexities, determinants, and outcomes for inequality. It is a welcome addition to the study of authoritarian redistribution and the growing literature on authoritarian welfare systems.