

3 *Dibaohu* in distress

The meagre minimum livelihood guarantee system in Wuhan

Dorothy J. Solinger

A problem in the development of the *dibao* system is that it's a relief system, but very many people consider it social welfare; everyone wants it. If they can't get it, they feel uncomfortable in their hearts. ... There are widespread errors of understanding of the system. The *dibao* standard is not based on expenditures. So if you spend a certain amount of money each month to buy medicine, you can't on this account compare yourself with other people who are getting more *dibao* funds.

(Interview, Community [shequ] V, Wuhan, 27 August 2007)

This confounding of two forms of assistance is alluded to here by a member of the tiny personnel corps charged with taking care of the *dibao* (*zuidi shenghuo baozhang*, Minimum Livelihood Guarantee; hereafter, *dibao* or MLG) in a 'community' (*shequ*) office in Qiaokou, one of Wuhan's seven city-centre districts, in summer 2007. The confusion may or may not be genuine; just as likely, it could be feigned. The point the cadre hoped to convey was that those whom she (and the state) see as greedy, troublesome *dibao* designees are inclined to demand more funds for their subsidy allotment just because their mandatory monthly expenses surpass the amount the allocation can cover.

But the underlying issue might have escaped the official: according to a number of interview subjects in Wuhan that summer, the standardized setting of the city *dibao* norm really ought to be calibrated to the specific requirements of individual households, or at least to the varied characteristics of different types of families. Homes in which the chronically diseased or disabled lie prone on a bed day and night often, for instance, can just barely afford the minimal medicines that will keep these sick people breathing; in other cases consumption needs depend a great deal on the age structure of the family members.

And yet, according to national regulations announced in 1999 (Chengshi jumin zuidi shenghuo baozhang tiaoli 1999), the *dibao* is determined according to an inflexible criterion: each recipient household each month is to receive the difference between its average per capita income and its city government's calculated minimal level of income needed to survive (but do

nothing more than to survive!) in that city – the amount, that is, necessary for purchasing basic necessities at the prices prevailing locally. The funds distributed are ‘just enough to keep body and soul together’, in the words of the *dibao*’s leading scholar within China, Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) social policy researcher Tang Jun (Tang 2002b: 4; Hussain *et al.* 2002: 59). The crux of the trouble is that most beneficiaries aspire to more than that.

Should we view the system as beneficent or miserly, as charitable or churlish? And how do practices in the city of Wuhan measure up comparatively, as revealed statistically, as described by officials there and as experienced by the people who get the outlays? I begin by outlining the programme at the national level, its history and purposes. I go on to appraise how that city stacked up originally and stacks up now against other similar municipalities. The assessment, we will see, is not straightforward.

Last, I offer findings from at-home, face-to-face interviews with 53 *dibaohu* (MLG recipient households, also termed *dibao duixiang*, or *dibao* targets) conducted in three different districts in Wuhan: Hanyang, a low-to middling-income area; Qiaokou, a lower-income section; and Qingshan, the wealthiest of the seven districts making up the urban core. The residents in the communities covered could be questioned because of personal connections with community officials. The ‘sample’ consists of those *dibaohu* at home and willing to speak with me and/or three graduate students who assisted me. Besides the interviews with recipients, I also spoke with city-level bureaucrats in charge of the programme in Wuhan and Lanzhou, and with community cadres at several Wuhan community offices.

My documentary data come from the following sources. For 1996 through 2002, I used all articles on the *dibao* in the journal of the responsible ministry, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, *Zhongguo Minzheng* (China Civil Affairs). For 2003 to 2006, I consulted statistical yearbooks and annual social development ‘blue books’ published by CASS; and for 2006 and 2007, I read official government work reports, 50 official articles found on the Internet, and sundry documents collected in Wuhan and Lanzhou in August and September 2007.

The *dibao* programme: history and purposes

The Chinese regime’s switch in force to market incentives and competition-based compensation in the mid-1990s is widely recognized as having yielded increasing income differentials and – less often recognized – newborn urban poverty. Indeed, the incidence of urban indigence shot upward once state and collective enterprises were enjoined to cut back drastically on their workforces in and after the mid-1990s; at the same time, with the total overhaul of the socialist economy and its institutions, the traditional welfare entitlements were also taken away (Wang 2004: 60, 71–87; ‘*Zhongguo chengshi*’ 2006), leaving losers at a total loss.

In the 1990s, the Chinese leadership agonized over what they saw as the potential impact of these deprivations on their regime’s hallowed objectives of

social stability and a successful project of state enterprise reform. As explained in 1996 by Wuhan's Qiaokou district government office vice chairman, Wang Mingxing (also the City's Finance Bureau chief), 'Urban *dibao* work concerns social stability; it's not only economic work, even more it's a political task' (Liu 2002: 4). Accordingly, the political elite initiated a special poverty-assistance approach to handle the people most severely affected by economic restructuring – supplementing an earlier programme to care just for the '*san wu*' (or 'three withouts', sometimes referred to in English as 'Three Nos') persons, those lacking work ability, people to support them, or any source of livelihood, and adding to a contemporaneous project whereby still-extant firms that could afford to do so provided monthly allowances to their laid-off workers. Once the new administration of Premier Wen Jiabao had got under way, concern for the poor became linked to the new catchword, 'harmony' (Di shi'erci quanguo minzheng huiyi zai jing juxing 2006).

The rhetoric of the rules for the programme – especially its language of rights and self-reliance – belie its actual outcomes. The empowering 1999 Regulations proclaim that those households whose members, living together, have an average per capita income below that needed for a minimal livelihood 'have the right to obtain material assistance with their basic livelihood'. The statute also alleges that the policy is meant to 'encourage self-support through labor' (Chengshi jumin zhuidi shenghuo baozhang tiaoli 1999: 16). Yet little, in fact, is heard either of rights or of spurs to economic autonomy in the speeches of top leaders; nor are these ideas present in the great majority of government documents. In Wuhan in particular these principles have not been in evidence.

The case of Wuhan

Wuhan in the context of dibao history

Wuhan initiated its *dibao* programme in March 1996, a full three years after Shanghai had devised the original version. In that year the Government Work Report presented at the Fourth Session of the Eighth National People's Congress called for gradually establishing the system nationwide during the Ninth Five Year Plan (from 1996 to 2000). This was also the year that state industry for the first time experienced an overall loss (Rawski 1999: 144). Wuhan, a city where heavy industry was prominent, and where much factory equipment was long obsolete (Solinger 1991: Chapter 3), by then already contained laid-off and unemployed workers from firms in the red or which had disappeared, whether sold off or bankrupted. In 1998 and 1999, researchers led by Tang Jun investigated the implementation of the *dibao* in five cities, including Wuhan (the others were Shanghai, Tianjin, Chongqing and Lanzhou), finding the city a place where '*xiagang* [layoffs] and unemployment are a widespread social problem' (Yang and Zhang 1999: 102; Tang 2002b: 10). Street cadres told the study team that:

Recently state-owned enterprises are commonly in recession, especially textiles, printing and dyeing. Staff and workers are being laid off in droves and those not laid off are having a tough time too. Once they're laid off, they're immediately without a source of livelihood, especially those older ones. If they have no special skill, it's hard for them to find work. Doing business is more difficult; if you mess up, the capital won't be returned. If we didn't establish the *dibao* system, many families would not be able to eat even rice. If there are a lot of such families in the city, how can there be social order?

As of early 1998, the traditional *sanwu* targets in Wuhan amounted to just 4.2 per cent of the total *dibao* recipients; labour-age unemployed people with working ability constituted another 45 per cent, while still at-work and laid-off staff and workers stood at 25.6 per cent. Thus, the lately impoverished urbanites together accounted for about 70 per cent of the targets, whereas such people had amounted to only 58.15 per cent two years before. In Jiang'an district, in particular, the district hit hardest by firms' failures, unemployed people as a percentage of the total helped by the MLG shot up from 34.4 per cent to 59.8 per cent of beneficiaries two years later. If the laid-off and still at-work poor were added in, these new poor climbed to 76.2 per cent of the recipients in that district that year (Yang and Zhang 1999: 100, 101, 102).

Wuhan, situated in the second set of cities starting the project, might have copied earlier examples, but instead claims to have set up its own model. But the documentation I found on this 'model' is sparse: it mentions only that it 'took the city district as the business accounting unit, the street as the contracting unit, and the residence committee as the unit that accepted and heard cases in the first instance'. Its chief principle was that the government – as opposed to the enterprises, as in earlier experiments elsewhere – took responsibility (Meng and Tan 1996: 19; Yang and Zhang 1999: 99; Tang 2002b: 31). Among cities, the funds-sharing formula among administrative levels varied – Lanzhou, for instance, got 65 per cent of its funds from the centre, 15 per cent from Gansu province, and had to contribute just 20 per cent itself, with its districts (as a group) throwing in a portion of the city's total (Interview, *dibao* section head, Lanzhou, 5 September 2007; Tang 2002b: 25). As of 2002, the city-to-district share was 30 to 70 in Dalian; but in Qingdao, 70 to 30; and in Shenyang, Wuhan and Chongqing, 50 to 50 (Hussain *et al.* 2002: 71). In my interview in summer 2007, the director of the *dibao* office at the Wuhan city Civil Affairs Bureau told me that the city was by then contributing close to 60 per cent, with the central government putting in about 40 per cent. Each district was to contribute half of what it got, though the City sometimes supported a district if necessary (Interview, Wuhan, 28 August 2007).

This 'Wuhan model' was later publicized nationwide and had some influence on other municipalities Chongqing, though, removed Wuhan's limits on working-age residents, using local urban registration (the *hukou*) as the only

qualification, regardless of a person's unit's ownership status, and without reference to whether the person was at work, laid off, or unemployed (Tang 2002b: 12, 14, 27). Tianjin also altered the model, determining that, 'because of illness, disability, having lost work ability and being older, some people have more difficulties, so we can be more lenient' (Tang 2002b: 19). At this early stage – as was to remain the case – Wuhan unabashedly declared that its aims were 'to help the enterprises throw off their worries and solve their difficulties' and 'to lighten the enterprises' burdens' (Meng and Tan 1996: 19).

Wuhan's programme considered comparatively

Despite that Wuhan's rhetorical formulation was typical, in line with the right given to cities in the national regulations to design the details of their own programmes, Tang Jun's group found conspicuous variations in the approaches taken by the different municipalities it investigated. Its study of 2,354 poor families discovered that the *dibao* line was respectively 31, 21, 21, 27 and 28 per cent of the average local income in these cities, with Wuhan tied with Tianjin for lowest (Tang 2002a). After an elevation of the norm in autumn 1999, Shanghai's rate went up to 40 per cent, but in Wuhan it remained low, at 27 per cent.

Reflecting these disparities, when *dibao* recipients were asked whether they felt the funds they got were insufficient, in Wuhan as many as 67 per cent replied that they were, whereas in the other cities the percentage went from 44 per cent for Lanzhou to 59 per cent in Tianjin and Chongqing (Tang 2002b: Chapter 8). And, perhaps an indication of the greater stinginess in Wuhan, as many as 46 per cent of the targets admitted that they 'didn't like to interact with their neighbours or colleagues', while the same inquiry got affirmative rates ranging from just 34 (in Shanghai) up to 42 per cent (in Lanzhou) (Tang 2002b: Chapter 8, p. 33). Thus, the team's report characterized Wuhan as particularly miserly, using the words of a street office official there as illustration:

In giving out funds we need to be very strict and eliminate those who don't meet conditions. We can't follow our personal feelings; we must consider the overall picture, compare the various residence committees [in our street area], and strive to solve [just barely, was the implication] the problems of the poorest families.

(Tang 2002b: 12)

Two scholars at the Wuhan University Research Institute of Social Security noted that before executing the system, the city Bureau of Civil Affairs submitted a report to the city government judging that the poverty-stricken portion of the city's populace amounted to four per cent of all registered residents. But at first, in 1996, only a tiny 0.05 per cent of urban residents entered the system, at a time when 10 million yuan was budgeted, meant to

assist 1.2 per cent of the city's population, and the norm was pegged at 120 yuan per person per month (Yang and Zhang 1999: 103; Tang 2002b: 14, 13). Contemporaneously, in Tianjin, the norm was set at 185 yuan, which could accommodate 1.8 per cent of the city's people and in Chongqing, where 130 was the norm, 2.8 per cent of the non-agricultural population was being covered (Tang 2002b: 15, 32; Anon., Xiao ziliao 1999: 26). Clearly metropolises are free to allow idiosyncratic factors to determine the local poverty lines that administrators in the city finance, statistics, price and civil affairs bureaucracies set ('Shi renmin zhengfu' 2004: Chapter 2, Article 4, 3).

By early 1998, the proportion of the populace actually serviced in Wuhan had risen (but just to 0.15 per cent), although some in-kind benefits were thrown in, such as subsidies for grain, housing rentals, and a few other basic necessities (Yang and Zhang 1999: 103). Revealing the dire situation in Wuhan, in February 1997, the City Education Commission and the Bureau of Civil Affairs jointly issued a ruling allowing that *dibao* families with children attending nine-year compulsory schooling need not pay miscellaneous school fees. The regulation also decreed that each primary school student in these households was entitled to a subsidy of 50 yuan for book copying; junior high students got 100 yuan for this (Yang and Zhang 1999: 100).

The Wuhan University researchers also noted that, 'The results of several internationally used methods of estimating the poverty line are all higher than Wuhan's line'. According to the 'income proportion' approach, which takes 50 per cent of the local average per capita income as the poverty line, Wuhan's line in 1995 should have been 174 yuan, and according to the 'proportion of expenditure' method (presumably indicating a certain proportion of local average per capita expenditure), it should have been 169 yuan. Or, sample statistics of residents' spending showed the minimum per capita outlay as 144.25 yuan. But the Wuhan Bureau of Civil Affairs relied on a so-called, undefined 'vegetable basket' method for calculating poverty (estimating the cost of the minimum foods needed to survive), and set the line at a mere 130 yuan. It was only in mid-1998 that this standard was raised, and then just to 150 yuan (Yang and Zhang 1999: 103).

A 2001 study examining 35 cities' 1998 implementation of the *dibao* featured a formula representing a city's generosity, while also illustrating the disparity among cities in how they decided on how high to make their norms: this is the ratio between its *dibao* norm and its average wage for the year 1998. The value for these cities ranged from 20 to 30 per cent; Wuhan's percentage was just 21.35 (Wu 2001: 38). Similarly, in a listing of 36 cities' 1998 *dibao*, 24 municipalities had levels above Wuhan's 120 yuan (the highest was Xiamen, at 250 yuan; seven were the same as Wuhan; and only five were lower) (Anon., 'Xiao ziliao' 1999: 26).

Another exercise tells the same story: Wuhan's 1998 per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was in the middling range among 19 special municipalities and provincial capitals, at just under 14,000 yuan. The range went from Shenzhen at 33,300 down to Chongqing at just 4,700 yuan (see Table

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3.1). Compared with other cities with similar per capita GDP levels, such as Shenyang (13,900), Jinan (14,800), Qingdao (12,700), and Fuzhou (14,800), Wuhan was low in its *dibao* to GDP per capita ratio, at 10.32 per cent: Shenyang stood at 12.93 per cent, Jinan at 11.33 per cent, Qingdao at 15.12 per cent, and Fuzhou 13.76 per cent. In the same year, Wuhan's *dibao* accounted for just 17.4 per cent of its average wage, while Shenyang's was 23 per cent, Jinan's was 20.2 per cent, Qingdao's was 23.6 per cent, and Fuzhou's 23.3 per cent (see Table 3.2).

The numbers of *dibao* targets nationwide and the funds for their assistance rose in 2001 and 2002, but there were no large leaps thereafter (See Figure 3.1, and also Tables 3.3 and 3.4.) Perhaps Wuhan's management shifted around this time: comparing four cities' *dibao* as a percentage of average disposable income in mid-2002, Wuhan's ratio was 32.2 per cent, above both Jinan (27.8 per cent) and Qingdao (28.2 per cent). Of these four cities, only Shenyang, where dismissed workers were by far the most numerous nationally and where the central government was especially generous with welfare money (Feng *et al.* 2002: 26; 'New Social Security System 2001) was higher

Table 3.1 Cross-city comparison of MLG (*dibao*) norm and per capita GDP, 1998

| City | MLG line (yuan/month) | Annual MLG line (monthly × 12) | Annual av. per capita GDP (yuan/year) | MLG line as % of per capita GDP |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Beijing | 200 | 2400 | 18,478 | 13 |
| Tianjin | 185 | 2220 | 14,800 | 15 |
| Shenyang | 150 | 1800 | 13,922 | 13 |
| Dalian | 165 | 1980 | 17,251 | 11 |
| Changchun | 130 | 1560 | 8,866 | 18 |
| Harbin | 140 | 1680 | 8,504 | 20 |
| Jinan | 140 | 1680 | 14,834 | 11 |
| Qingdao | 160 | 1920 | 12,699 | 15 |
| Shanghai | 205 | 2460 | 28,240 | 9 |
| Hangzhou | 165 | 1980 | 18,600 | 11 |
| Nanjing | 140 | 1680 | 15,537 | 11 |
| Wuhan | 120 | 1440 | 13,957 | 10 |
| Chongqing | 130 | 1560 | 4,700 | 33 |
| Chengdu | 120 | 1440 | 11,107 | 13 |
| Xi'an | 105 | 1260 | 8,425 | 15 |
| Lanzhou | 100 | 1200 | 9,196 | 13 |
| Fuzhou | 170 | 2040 | 14,828 | 14 |
| Shenzhen | 245 | 2940 | 33,289 | 9 |
| Xiamen | 250 | 3000 | 31,727 | 9 |

Sources: For the *dibao* norm: 'Small material: Nationwide various cities' residents' minimum livelihood guarantee norms (*Xiao ziliao: Quanguo ge chengshi juimin zuidi shenghuo baozhang biaojun Shehui*), *Society*, 1999, 26; for the average per capita GDP: *Wuxi Statistical Yearbook 1999*; China data online accessed 29 May 2009

than Wuhan, at 34.9 per cent (see Table 3.5). These and later data suggest that Wuhan's decision makers increased their payments to the *dibao* fund as a percentage of the city's budget in the 2000s. For instance, in 2004, comparisons between Wuhan and other provincial capitals make the city look rather better,

Table 3.2 Cross-city comparison of MLG (*dibao*) line and average wages, 1998

| City | MLG line (yuan/month) | Annual MLG line (monthly × 12) | Annual av. wage | Annual MLG as a % of annual av. wage |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|---|
| Beijing | 200 | 2400 | 12,285 | 20 |
| Tianjin | 185 | 2220 | 9,946 | 22 |
| Shenyang | 150 | 1800 | 7,811 | 23 |
| Dalian | 165 | 1980 | 9,275 | 21 |
| Changchun | 130 | 1560 | 7,869 | 20 |
| Harbin | 140 | 1680 | 6,603 | 25 |
| Jinan | 140 | 1680 | 8,326 | 20 |
| Qingdao | 160 | 1920 | 8,125 | 24 |
| Shanghai | 205 | 2460 | 12,059 | 20 |
| Hangzhou | 165 | 1980 | 10,194 | 19 |
| Nanjing | 140 | 1680 | 10,661 | 16 |
| Wuhan | 120 | 1440 | 8,255 | 17 |
| Chongqing | 130 | 1560 | 5,710 | 27 |
| Chengdu | 120 | 1440 | 8,248 | 17 |
| Xi'an | 105 | 1260 | 6,922 | 18 |
| Lanzhou | 100 | 1200 | 7,736 | 16 |
| Fuzhou | 170 | 2040 | 8,772 | 23 |
| Shenzhen | 245 | 2940 | 18,381 | 16 |
| Xiamen | 250 | 3000 | 12,799 | 23 |

Sources: Small material: Nationwide various cities' residents' minimum livelihood guarantee norms (*Xiao ziliao: Quanguo ge chengshi juimin zuidi shenghuo baozhang biaojun Shehui*), *Society*, 1999, 26; for the average per capita GDP: *Wuxi Statistical Yearbook 1999*; China data online accessed 29 May 2009

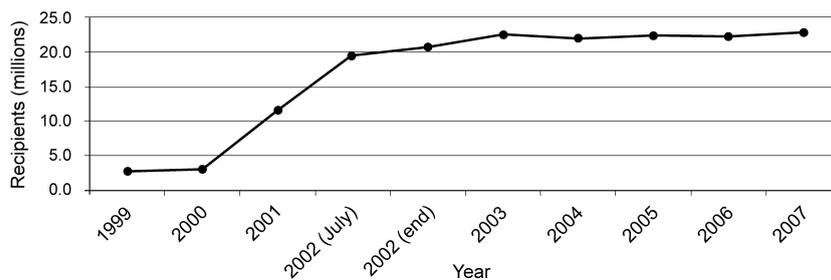


Figure 3.1 Number of participants in the MLG (*dibao*) 1997–2007.

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though just in a relative sense. By then, Wuhan's *dibao* as a per cent of the average wage had decreased, to 16.5 per cent, but Shenyang's had dropped much more, to 14.2 per cent. Qingdao's had also gone down, to 20.5 per cent, while Fuzhou's by then was 15.2 per cent (see Table 3.6, and Tables 3.7 and 3.8).

Yet despite the improvement in comparative quantitative measures, it seems that the style of Wuhan's management remained grudging. In the five-city investigation in 1998–99, researchers had found that Lanzhou adopted a more

Table 3.3 Government spending on the MLG (*dibao*) as a share of total spending and GDP–2007 (unit: billion yuan)

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Total MLG expenditure</i> | <i>Total gov't expenditure</i> | <i>MLG as % of gov't expenditure</i> | <i>GDP</i> | <i>MLG as % of GDP</i> |
|-------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------|------------------------|
| 1999 | 2 | 1319 | 0.11 | 8968 | 0.02 |
| 2000 | 3 | 1589 | 0.19 | 99,215 | 0.03 |
| 2001 | 4 | 1890 | 0.22 | 10,966 | 0.04 |
| 2002 | 11 | 2205 | 0.48 | 12,033 | 0.09 |
| 2003 | 15 | 2465 | 0.69 | 13,582 | 0.11 |
| 2004 | n.a. | 2849 | n.a. | 15,988 | n.a. |
| 2005 | 20 | 3393 | 0.57 | 18,387 | 0.11 |
| 2006 | 20 | 4042 | 0.50 | 21,181 | 0.10 |
| 2007 | 28 | 4957 | 0.56 | 24,660 | 0.11 |

Sources: For the *dibao*, figures are either taken from or estimated from the following sources: Tang Jun 2002a, 2006. For government expenditures (1999–2006): *China Statistical Yearbook 2007*: 279. For GDP (1999–2006): *China Statistical Yearbook 2007*: 57; and for 2007: Wen Jiabao 2008; Ministry of Finance 2008

Note: Figures are rounded to two significant digits

Table 3.4 Number of participants in MLG (*dibao*) 1997–2007 (unit: million)

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Number of participants</i> |
|-------------|-------------------------------|
| 1999 | 2.8 |
| 2000 | 3.2 |
| 2001 | 11.7 |
| 2002 (July) | 19.3 |
| 2002 (end) | 20.6 |
| 2003 | 22.5 |
| 2004 | 22.1 |
| 2005 | 22.3 |
| 2006 | 22.4 |
| 2007 | 22.7 |

Sources: For 1999: Tang Jun 2002a: 15–16; for 2000: *ibid.*: 18; for 2001: Hong Zhaohui 2002: 9–10; for 2006: '2006 nian 10 yuefen quanguo xian yishang dibao qingkuang'; for 2007: 'National urban and rural residents, the minimum livelihood guarantee system for equal coverage' 2008. For 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006: *China Statistical Yearbook 2007*: 899

Table 3.5 Cross-city MLG (*dibao*) line and average disposable income, July 2002 (unit: yuan per month)

| City | MLG line (yuan/month) | Av. disposable income (yuan/month) | MLG line as % of av. disposable income |
|-----------|--------------------------|--|--|
| Beijing | 290 | 1039 | 28 |
| Tianjin | 241 | 778 | 31 |
| Shenyang | 205 | 588 | 35 |
| Dalian | 221 | 683 | 32 |
| Changchun | 169 | 575 | 29 |
| Harbin | 200 | 584 | 34 |
| Taiyuan | 156 | 615 | 25 |
| Jinan | 208 | 748 | 28 |
| Qingdao | 205* | 727 | 28 |
| Shanghai | 280 | 1104 | 25 |
| Hangzhou | 285* | 982 | 29 |
| Nanjing | 220 | 763 | 29 |
| Wuhan | 210 | 652 | 32 |
| Changsha | 190* | 752 | 25 |
| Chongqing | 185 | 603 | 31 |
| Chengdu | 178 | 748 | 24 |
| Xi'an | 156 | 599 | 26 |
| Lanzhou | 172 | n.a. | n.a. |
| Shenzhen | 317* | 2078 | 15 |
| Xiamen | 290* | 981 | 30 |
| Guangzhou | 300 | 1115 | 27 |

Sources: for the *dibao* line: 'General survey of 36 cities' minimum livelihood guarantee norm (*Quanguo 36ge chengshi zuìdi baozhang biāozhūn yilan*), http://china.com.cn/city/txt/2006-11/25/content_740675.html (accessed 17 August 2007); for urban residents' average disposable income: *Chengdu Statistical Yearbook 2003*, China data online (accessed 29 May 2008)

Note: *indicates that figure is average of upper and lower figures for *dibao* norm for city for that year

'mobilizational' approach to its indigent than did Wuhan (Tang 2002b: 25), a tendency that the city appears to have retained over the years (Gansusheng renmin zhengfu bangongting 2002: 58–69). Officials there 'emphasized arousing the *dibao* targets' activism for production, organizing them to develop self-reliance' (Tang 2002b: 25).

This approach was still evident in the city again in 2007, when Lanzhou was showing considerably more leniency toward the sidewalk business of the indigent than Wuhan then was. A talented but hard-up woman in Wuhan complained that the fees for advertising her artwork on the streets had escalated substantially over time, so that she was forced to abandon any effort to make sales outside (Interview, Wuhan, 26 August 2007). And, unlike in the past, after around 2000 nowhere in the city could shoe repair specialists be found outside, apparently banned by the authorities. In Lanzhou, by way of contrast, all manner of curbside business was going on unobstructed in 2007,

Table 3.6 Cross-city comparison of MLG (*dibao*) line and average wages, 2004

| City | MLG line (yuan/month) | Average monthly wage of staff and workers | Annual MLG as a % of annual av. wage |
|-----------|--------------------------|---|--|
| Beijing | 290 | 2473 | 12 |
| Tianjin | 241 | 1813 | 13 |
| Shenyang | 205 | 1444 | 14 |
| Dalian | 276* | 1643 | 17 |
| Changchun | 169 | 1159 | 15 |
| Harbin | 200 | 1161 | 17 |
| Qingdao | 230 | 1120 | 21 |
| Shanghai | 280 | 2490 | 11 |
| Hangzhou | 285* | 2408 | 12 |
| Nanjing | 220 | 2172 | 10 |
| Wuhan | 220 | 1331 | 17 |
| Chongqing | 185 | 1196 | 15 |
| Chengdu | 178 | 1463 | 12 |
| Xi'an | 180 | 1275 | 14 |
| Shenzhen | 317* | 2661 | 12 |
| Xiamen | 290* | 1712 | 17 |
| Guangzhou | 300 | 2633 | 11 |
| Fuzhou | 210* | 1382 | 15 |

Sources: for the *dibao* line: 'General survey of 36 cities' minimum livelihood guarantee line (*Quanguo 36ge chengshi zuidi baozhang biao zhun yilan*) http://china.com.cn/city/txt/2006-11/25/content_740675\hich\af0\dbch\af13\loch\fo 8_2.htm (accessed 17 August 2007); for wages: *Wuxi Statistical Yearbook 2005*, China data online (accessed 29 May 2008)

Note: *indicates that figure is average of upper and lower figures for *dibao* norm for city for that year

including stalls for fixing footwear as well as hawking by young men vending political picture posters (Author's observations, Lanzhou, 3 September 2007).

Indeed, the section chief of the *dibao* office in the Gansu provincial civil affairs department admitted that summer that, 'If the *chengguan* [the police in charge of maintaining order in public spaces] – the very same body that has often chased poor and unemployed persons off the avenues of Wuhan – 'is too strict, the *dibaohu* cannot earn money. And letting them earn money is a way of cutting down their numbers. If their skill level is low, their only means of livelihood can be the streetside stalls they set up themselves' (Interview, Lanzhou, 5 September 2007). He claimed that complaints to their communities from the unemployed had secured the greater leniency. Lanzhou also set up a phone hotline at every administrative level for the poor to report their dissatisfactions, with the goal of rectifying errors in officials' workstyle, a practice not mentioned in Wuhan. In recent years, too, Lanzhou established an organ in each community, entitled the 'democratic assessment small group' (*minzhu pingyi xiaozu*) to judge whether applicants qualified for the MLG. And also unlike in Wuhan, the Bureau of Labour and Social Security set a goal of eliminating the phenomenon of families having no employed members

Table 3.7 Cross-city MLG (*dibao*) line and average disposable income (yuan per month), March 2004

| City | MLG line (yuan/month) | Av. disposable income (yuan/month) | MLG line as % of av. disposable income |
|-----------|--------------------------|--|--|
| Beijing | 290 | 1303 | 22 |
| Tianjin | 241 | 956 | 25 |
| Shenyang | 205 | 744 | 28 |
| Dalian | 276* | 865 | 32 |
| Changchun | 169 | 742 | 23 |
| Harbin | 200 | 745 | 27 |
| Taiyuan | 171 | 779 | 22 |
| Jinan | 208 | 1000 | 21 |
| Qingdao | 230 | 924 | 25 |
| Shanghai | 290 | 1390 | 21 |
| Hangzhou | 285* | 1214 | 23 |
| Nanjing | 220 | 967 | 23 |
| Wuhan | 220 | 797 | 28 |
| Changsha | 200 | 918 | 22 |
| Chongqing | 185 | 768 | 24 |
| Chengdu | 178 | 866 | 21 |
| Xi'an | 180 | 712 | 25 |
| Lanzhou | 172 | 640 | 27 |
| Shenzhen | 317* | 2300 | 14 |
| Xiamen | 290* | 1204 | 24 |
| Guangzhou | 300 | 1407 | 21 |

Sources: For the *dibao* line: 'General survey of 36 cities' minimum livelihood guarantee line (*Quanguo 36ge chengshi zuidi baozhang biao zhun yilan*) http://china.com.cn/city/txt/2006-11/25/content_740675.html (accessed 17 August 2007); for the urban residents' average disposable income: *Chengdu Yearbook 2005*, China data online (accessed 29 May 2008); for Lanzhou: *Lanzhou Statistical Bureau* (ed.) (2007) *Lanzhou Statistical Yearbook 2007*: 297

(*ling jiuye jiating*), aiming to guarantee that at least one person per household had work (Interview, Lanzhou, 5 September 2007).

Another distinction between the two cities is the relative severity with which the needy are excluded from the programme. In Lanzhou, a directive from the end of 2001 barred from receiving *dibao* funds only three kinds of people: the labour-able who without good reason refuse to take a job; those with working ability who decline to participate in public service work assigned to them by the community; and those whose household's actual livelihood level is obviously higher than the local minimum livelihood norm (Gansusheng 2002: 59), whereas Wuhan's regulations disqualified people engaged in 18 different kinds of behaviour.

In at least one Wuhan community in 2007, households, however poor, were prevented from getting the *dibao* if their members engaged in any of 18 sorts of forbidden behaviour, including being in possession of or even using a motorized vehicle; purchasing a refrigerator; having obtained air conditioning

Table 3.8 Cross-city MLG (*dibao*) line and average disposable income (yuan per month), September 2005

| <i>City</i> | <i>MLG line (yuan/month)</i> | <i>Av. disposable income (yuan/month)</i> | <i>MLG line as % of av. disposable income</i> |
|-------------|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Beijing | 300 | 1471 | 20 |
| Tianjin | 265 | 1053 | 25 |
| Shenyang | 220 | 842 | 26 |
| Dalian | 240 | 1000 | 24 |
| Changchun | 169 | 839 | 20 |
| Harbin | 200 | 839 | 24 |
| Taiyuan | 183 | 873 | 21 |
| Jinan | 230 | 1132 | 20 |
| Qingdao | 260 | 1077 | 24 |
| Shanghai | 300 | 1554 | 19 |
| Hangzhou | 300* | 1383 | 22 |
| Nanjing | 230* | 1250 | 18 |
| Wuhan | 220 | 904 | 24 |
| Changsha | 200 | 1036 | 19 |
| Chongqing | 210 | 854 | 25 |
| Chengdu | 195 | 947 | 21 |
| Xi'an | 200 | 802 | 25 |
| Lanzhou | 190 | 711 | 27 |
| Shenzhen | 344 | 1791 [<i>sic.</i>] | 19 |
| Xiamen | 290* | 1367 | 21 |
| Guangzhou | 330 | 1524 | 22 |

Sources: For the *dibao* line: ‘General survey of 36 cities’ minimum livelihood guarantee line (*Quanguo 36ge chengshi zuidi baozhang biao zhu yilan*”, http://china.com.cn/city/txt/2006-11/25/content_740675.htm) (accessed 17 August 2007); for urban residents’ average disposable income: *Chengdu Statistical Yearbook 2005*, China data online, accessed 29 May 2008; for Lanzhou, for Lanzhou: *Lanzhou Statistical Bureau* (ed.) (2007) *Lanzhou Statistical Yearbook 2007*: 297

or a computer in the recent period; spending more on electrical fees than 15 yuan per month, or more than 40 yuan on phone fees; having a family member who uses a cell phone or other hand-held communication gadget (even if having acquired it as a gift or a loan); or having a member at work outside the city whose income is hard to verify (Interview, Wuhan, Community X, 27 August 2007).

Also forbidden was arranging for one’s children to select their own school, enrolling them in special classes for study or training; or arranging for them to study with a foreigner. Some grantees took these guidelines seriously, as did a mother of a 16-year-old boy:

This year his grades could qualify him to transfer to the Number 3 Senior High School, a provincial-level ‘keypoint’ institution. But I don’t have the money, and secondly, if it’s discovered that there’s a child in the family who has transferred to a ‘keypoint’ high school, our *dibao*

qualification would be eliminated. We can't take this risk. He really wants to study in that school, but he knows the family's conditions, so he doesn't demand it of me; I feel I have really let my son down.

(Interview 6)

Several Wuhan interviewees found their families' *dibao* funds cut back or even cut off when a member took on some wage-earning work. In one representative case, the wife in a family of three bravely reflected that:

The family has one person working, so our subsidy was lowered a lot. We're not thinking of arguing about it, we all are very submissive people, so we don't think of haggling over money. If you give us 200-plus yuan it still can be of use.

(Interview 11)

Speaking to another woman, aged 34, the questioner pointed out that the woman's husband was out of the city doing odd jobs (*dagong*), and that she was managing a stall, and inquired whether their monthly *dibao* quota was therefore decreased. 'Yes,' she replied, and continued:

It's a no-way affair (*mei banfa de shiqing*). In my stall in one month I can earn only so much money, his work also isn't stable, but now our work is calculated into our income, and then they have to cut our subsidy. But this income fluctuates, sometimes we have it and sometimes we don't, only relying on the *dibao*, that little money, means that basically there's no way to live.

(Interview 12)

In 2007, when Lanzhou was providing 7.75 per cent of its urban population with the *dibao*, Wuhan was underwriting a mere 4.8 per cent of its own residents (Interviews, Wuhan, 28 August 2007 and Lanzhou, 5 September 2007). But Lanzhou probably received substantial financial subsidies from the central government as a part of the Party's post-2000 programme to develop the west, and so perhaps had more wherewithal to offer to the needy. And in some sections of Wuhan the proportion served matched Lanzhou's average: in Community X, in Hanyang district, about 7.9 per cent got it and in Community V, in Qiaokou district, 7.84 per cent did (Liu 2002: 5).

Whatever the differences, in the two cities, as in others throughout the country, the average payment of the *dibao* supplement varied among urban districts as of 2007. Though each city had just one *dibao* standard, in the more productive, well-off districts (where high-tech, capital-intensive, high-paying firms predominated), the average supplement per household was higher than in poorer districts. As officials in both Wuhan and Lanzhou explained, this discrepancy occurs because in the poorer districts, where the numbers of recipients are higher, the average stipend can be lower at least in

part because these districts tend to have more tertiary sector employment opportunities and so less may be needed to make good the difference between a family's income and the city's *dibao* norm.

Not only was the financial income of Qingshan, Wuhan's wealthiest district, higher than in other city districts, but it had comparatively fewer *dibao* targets to subsidize, allowing larger allocations per recipient. Qingshan also had fewer aging plants, so unemployment was lower: in 1998, its unemployed constituted the lowest proportion of total MLG recipients (where it was just 38.6 per cent), as compared with their percentage in the other districts of Wuhan, such as Jiang'an, where 60 per cent of all *dibao* recipients were unemployed (Yang and Zhang 1999: 102). Moreover, in industrial districts, prices are higher, and the consumption standard is higher, so *dibaohu* needed more funds. This relationship held in both Lanzhou and Wuhan, according to informants (Interviews, Wuhan, 28 and 30 August 2007 and Lanzhou).

In sum, it is clear that localities have definite leeway in the treatment of their *dibao* targets. While Wuhan emphasizes beautiful, unencumbered thoroughfares, Lanzhou values more highly allowing its poor to have a chance at prospering, if possible. Such variation complicates the evaluation of the worth and generosity of the MLG programme.

Insights from interviews in Wuhan

My 2007 Wuhan home visits discovered people getting the *dibao* to be living in precisely the same state of duress in which Tang Jun's group had found such folks nine years before: ailing, fearful about expenses and the future, and eating poorly. The description penned by one of my assistants about the first *dibao* domicile she visited is both poignant and precise:

The home is very small and narrow, the facial colour of the wife is yellowish white; she's always lying on the small, short bamboo bed, the daughter is sitting at the bedside chatting with the mother, the father is cooking food. The kitchen has no ventilator so the air throughout the whole home is filled with the mist of oil soot. It looks like the health of the wife is not too good.

Among the 53 households interviewed, several grievances cropped up repeatedly. Though only a few informants complained about the paucity of the funds the supplement supplied, this fact was at the root of all their troubles. From the information provided me, the average per capita income in most households, after adding in the money from the *dibao* allotment, was usually in the range of 220 to 240 yuan, about the amount they were supposed to be receiving at the time, assuming the speakers were telling the truth (see Table 3.9). Granted, some refused to reveal their financial situations and perhaps some were not directly asked. But if they truly took in that sum, their total take amounted to about one US dollar per day, according to the current exchange rate.

Table 3.9 Interviewees' household size, *dibao* allowance and income (unit: yuan)

| Case # | No. of Household Members | <i>dibao</i> | Other incomel from | Total income | Income per capita |
|--------|--------------------------|--------------|--|--------------|-------------------|
| 1 | 3 | 200+ | 500/n.a. | 700+ | 233+ |
| 2 | 3 | 415 | 218/pension | 633 | 317 |
| 3 | 4 | 200+ | 900/pension | 1300+ | 325+ |
| 4 | 3 | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| 5 | 2 | 300+ | none | 300+ | 150+ |
| 6 | 1 | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| 7 | 3 | 200 | odd jobs, darning clothes | n.a. | n.a. |
| 8 | 4 | 100+ | several 100/odd jobs | 400–600 | 100–150 |
| 9 | 3 | n.a. | no work | n.a. | n.a. |
| 10 | 2 | n.a. | no work | n.a. | n.a. |
| 11 | 3 | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| 12 | 3 | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| 13 | 3 | n.a. | 150 | n.a. | n.a. |
| 14 | 1 | 170 | n.a. | n.a. | 170 |
| 15 | 3 | 210 | severance pay | n.a. | n.a. |
| 16 | 3 | 150 | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| 17 | 4 | n.a. | pension/severance pay | n.a. | n.a. |
| 18 | 3 | 100 | 400/sanitation work; odd jobs; severance of pay | n.a. | n.a. |
| 19 | 3 | 80 | severance pay; odd jobs; dept. store job | n.a. | n.a. |
| 20 | 4 | 200+ | 700/pension; severance pay | 900+ | 225 |
| 21 | 2 | 200 | 200/basic allowance from work unit; odd jobs | n.a. | n.a. |
| 22 | 3 | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| 23 | 3 | 210 | 400/odd jobs | 610 | 203 |
| 24 | 1 | 120 | severance pay | 120 | 120 |
| 25 | 3 | 290 | nursemaid;80/work unit;300/sister 670+300/sister | | n.a. |
| 26 | 3 | 210 | 460/severance pay | 670 | 223 |
| 27 | 4 | 200 | odd jobs | n.a. | n.a. |
| 28 | 3 | n.a. | 600/odd jobs; 100 relatives; 100 work unit | n.a. | n.a. |
| 29 | 3 | 300 | 100/work unit; 200/brother | 600 | 200 |
| 30 | 2 | 460 | 0 | 460 | 230 |
| 31 | 3 | 420 | severance pay | n.a. | n.a. |
| 32 | 3 | 150 | small stall | n.a. | n.a. |
| 33 | 3 | 160 | 500/wages; severance pay | 660 | n.a. |
| 34 | 3 | 300 | 400/odd jobs/100 relatives | 800 | 266 |
| 35 | 3 | 180 | 400/wages;70/work unit | 650 | 217 |
| 36 | 2 | 319 | 120/housing subsidy | 439 | 220 |

Table 3.9 (continued)

| <i>Case #</i> | <i>No. of Household Members</i> | <i>dibao</i> | <i>Other incomes from</i> | <i>Total income</i> | <i>Income per capita</i> |
|---------------|---------------------------------|--------------|--|---------------------|--------------------------|
| 37 | 4 | 240 | 600/odd jobs | 840 | 210 |
| 38 | 1 | 160 | 80/work unit | 240 | 240 |
| 39 | 3 | 300 | 400/odd jobs | 700 | 233 |
| 40 | 3 | 260 | 400/wages | 660 | 220 |
| 41 | 3 | n.a. | 600/pension; odd jobs | n.a. | n.a. |
| 42 | 4 | n.a. | both adults do odd jobs | n.a. | n.a. |
| 43 | 2 | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| 44 | 3 | n.a. | sanitation work; job in a welfare company | n.a. | n.a. |
| 45 | 3 | n.a. | unstable construction work | n.a. | n.a. |
| 46 | 2 | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| 47 | 4 | n.a. | odd jobs | n.a. | n.a. |
| 48 | 4 | 100+ | 400–500/temporary work | 500–600 | 125–150 |
| 49 | 3 | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| 50 | 3 | 136 | 300/work unit | 436 | 136 |
| 51 | 3 | 234 | odd jobs | n.a. | n.a. |
| 52 | 3 | n.a. | stall; odd jobs | n.a. | n.a. |
| 53 | 2 | 200 | 195/work unit | 395 | 197.5 |

Source: 53 interviews in dibao homes in 3 districts of Wuhan, August 2007

Note: n.a. indicates that the information was not available for 1 of 3 reasons; since I participated in only 7 of the interviews (because it seemed subjects were more apt to voice complaints when I was not present), I am unable to state whether in specific cases the reason was: 1) the interviewer did not record the answer; 2) the interviewer did not ask for the information; 3) the subject refused to provide the information

About half the households (26) contained a disabled or chronically ill member, often the victim of some serious malady. In a third of the families (18) the parents were desperately worried about either the present or the future costs of educating their children. Eleven, slightly more than a fifth, spoke of the difficulties of finding work, while over half (31) confided their hopes, virtually all of which seemed to be in vain.

Fears about being able to afford minimal sustenance cropped up in five of the conversations (a tenth), especially in light of the inflation of food costs then under way; only three claimed to be surviving fine. Twelve, just over a fifth, admitted to receiving some assistance from their extended families, and another five spoke of borrowing money to help themselves scrape by. A number were pinning their futures on their children. Four acknowledged they did not want to be *dibaohu*, but saw that they had no other recourse. Three talked of feeling ashamed and seven of them, when queried about their relations with neighbours, disclosed that their situation was so dishonourable (*bu guangrong*) that they preferred not to mix with others.

Six alleged that they couldn't understand the workings of the programme, possibly an indirect form of criticism of its irrationalities and unofficial

inequities. Just one openly railed about her lack of power to convey her dissatisfactions to personnel in charge; another expressed dishearteningly that it was of no use to do so. More than a fourth (15) offered negative opinions about the programme and its workings, generally when I was not present, while only 10 families had positive things to say, nearly always – to the contrary – when I was there. Three broke down into tears with me as they described their plight.

The general impression the transcript affords is of an assortment of down-trodden cast-asides, abandoned by the community even as they wilfully absent themselves from it. This decaying fragment of Chinese society, a product of the state's – and Wuhan's – drive to develop, appears to be no more than minimally tethered to life, poised as its members are meant to be – humble tokens of the veneer of compassion celebrating China's alleged 'socialism'. That they are not prone to foment disorder – the ensuring of which appears to be the subtext underlying this shabby benevolence – is not surprising, given their hunger, their isolation, their weakened or wasted bodies, their confusion, their futile hopes and, for a tiny few, their pitiful gratitude. Quiet and subdued, these people will cause no chaos. Below I detail some of these themes.

The most urgent issues: illness, disability and schooling

Illness and disability

In all the cases where someone was in poor health the patient stayed at home, lay on a bed nearly all of the time, was unable to work and contrived to subsist, if barely, by swallowing a minimal amount of medicine, visiting a hospital only in times of dire emergency. Here are several typical examples.

First the husband speaks:

My wife [aged 44] got uremia [urine poison illness] in 2002; she's from the countryside and has never worked, for her medical funds she's completely dependent on me. Before, when she wasn't sick, she could do household chores, now she can only lie on the bed, can't do anything. The medical fees are very high, she sometimes gets dialysis. We basically despise this illness, everyday she stays home, takes a little medicine, and in this way drags on.

Soon the wife chimes in:

The doctors in the hospital would let you stay for treatment, but we haven't so much money, basically we can't afford it. Each day I can take some medicine to control the illness, and that's very good, I can't hope to cure the illness, can just live a day and write it off [*huo yitian, suan yitian*], sometimes I think if I can only lie on the bed all day like this, unable to do anything, it's the family's burden, it's not as good as dying earlier.

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As she speaks, there's a tear in her eye and the daughter quietly goes away (Interview 1).

In two other homes it is rheumatism, while elsewhere a husband down with cancer receives a petty 70 yuan from his former work unit (Interviews 6, 23, 33). One man with a vision problem never worked, while his wife's rural *hukou* (household registration) has limited her employment possibilities (Interview 48). Perhaps the most pitiful tale is one related by a young wife in tears: when she married her husband she was not aware of his schizophrenia. Having been hospitalized four times since their 2003 wedding, he takes a medication that renders him dull and stiff, his reactions slowed down, so he is routinely cheated each time he goes out to work (Interview 50).

At yet another home, twin 19-year-old sons had some media training but, without any connections, 'they basically can't find work that fits their speciality'. To raise the money for their education, their mother explains, 'I and their father worked day and night, a year ago we both got so worn out we had to go to the hospital. But as soon as we got in we got right out; it was too expensive, there was nowhere we could afford to go' (Interview 42).

Children, too, are afflicted and unattended to. In one family, a 22-year-old son was born blind and has never worked, but has no way to acquire entree into a work unit for the disabled (Interview 28); in a household that a divorced wife abandoned, a 59-year-old husband is compelled to stay at home to minister to his 26-year-old son, conceived with no upper limbs or left leg (Interview 30). In a third, the medical needs of a 'mentally deficient' daughter, now 19, have devoured the family's entire savings (Interview 47).

And then there are aged relatives limping along without a pension, as one whose body just 'gets worse and worse, always running to the hospital to see the doctor ... medical costs are too high; we feel the state should finance her medical care or give her preferential treatment' (Interview 17). Ironically, the chief *dibao* official in Wuhan proudly listed the 12 preferential benefits supposedly accruing to *dibaohu* in the city (two more than Beijing offered), though interviews such as this one clearly indicated they were far from always extended (Interview, Wuhan, 28 August 2007; Yang and Zhang 1999: 100).

Schooling

Dibao parents live in anxiety over how they can finance tuition. One mother, her husband off serving a sentence in labour reform, has become resigned to her son's having dropped out of school: 'He's 16, after finishing junior high he discontinued his studies and is staying at home. There's no money for him to go on' (Interview 39). A father of a 16-year-old boy is determined to put him through higher education: 'There's no question that he'll go on, but when I think about college I get so worried my scalp tingles. When the time comes if I can come up with a solution to this problem, that'll be good I'm considering making him study at a free teachers' college, relying on the *dibao*, but that little money is far, far from being enough' (Interview 46).

A daughter, aged 19, is doing well in senior high, and would 'like to attend a vocational school so she can go out to work sooner and lighten the household's burden. But our family basically can't pay the tuition. We hope we can borrow some money from the bank' (Interview 1). In the home where the husband has cancer the daughter is 20 and in college, but all the tuition is borrowed and her parents 'have no ability to pay it' (Interview 23).

These apprehensions exist not only in families where money must be found for financing higher education. A wife with arthritis is the mother of 10-year-old twins, considered a precious blessing at the time of their birth, when people like their parents were all employed. The mother bemoans her fate:

Now while they're at primary school it's okay, don't have to spend too much money ... later if they both go on to middle school, expenditures will be too much, their father and I are very worried, can't not let kids go to school or in the future there will be even less of a way out. And both are boys; if they were girls, and found a good marriage we could be done with it, but with boys there are more considerations. These are things we ordinarily don't want to give too much thought to, as soon as we think about them we just worry, so we just pass our days like this and then we'll think about it (Interview 8).

The father of an 8-year-old girl has not yet begun to fret; primary school is not very expensive. 'But primary school and university can't be compared,' he reasoned. 'If she continues to study later on, I don't know if we can do it' (Interview 45). In another household with a 10-year-old, however, the father already had his concerns: 'Okay, we don't need to pay tuition. But the school has so many miscellaneous fees, books, it's all a mess, each semester we have to pay a lot; in the schools today it's impossible to slack off on the fees even a little bit. Later, going to middle school the fees will definitely be higher' (Interview 5). In the family with a retarded daughter, the mother reports that:

The days are passed in tension. With all our money used up on the daughter, now the son must go to school, and that only adds to our burden. He's about to enter his last year of junior high, and we have no money but still have to help him go to school. I and his father are bitterly working and are all tired out and yet we must provide for him. With his sister in this condition, we're all counting on him and he'll have to fight to do well.

(Interview 47)

Most hard up is the wife of the schizophrenia-afflicted man, presently tending to an infant. 'Even with the *dibao*, there's still not enough money and the kid will have to go to nursery school [in a few years]. Preferential policies for school won't be enough' (Interview 50).

Even as these parents anxiously wonder how they will ever find the cash to cultivate their children, at the same time many imagine those very same

children as their saviours for their own later years. Large numbers among the recipients of the *dibao* – if not every one of them – appear as of this reading to be locked into an inter-generational trap whose long-term label must be ‘the underclass’.

Daily sustenance: work, food and borrowing

Work

If at work the woman in the household would usually be doing ‘sanitation work’ (*weisheng gongzuo*), meaning sweeping the streets. For men, it was ‘odd jobs’ (*dagong*), quite unreliable, low paid and intermittent. In either case, the take was terribly tiny. Frequently people commented despondently of grave problems getting employment or starting up businesses. Common refrains were their lack of the necessary social connections, the high level of competition among job-seekers, their deficient knowledge or skill, their age or their poor health and failing strength.

A man aged 38 began ‘going out’ to Guangdong for odd jobs not long after being laid off, prompted by plans to provide for his son’s schooling, because in Wuhan he could not get suitable work, and thought he could earn more in the east, where there were also more opportunities. ‘But after going out, his circumstances were poor, because without any ‘culture’ (*wenhua*) and not having mastered any specialized craft, the work he engaged in wasn’t secure, the situation was sometimes good and sometimes bad. At times the money he made was just enough to maintain his livelihood while he was out.’ His wife tries to accumulate a bit of income by darning clothing, mostly for neighbours, but ‘everyone’s standard of living is very low, so I can’t earn much money’ (Interview 7).

A man of 44, reflecting on his potential, despairingly offered this defeatist perspective:

We all grew up in the city, didn’t eat any bitterness and didn’t do any heavy physical labour. Now in the labour market there’s some construction work and it all demands rather a lot of such labour. They wouldn’t want us 40-year-old laid-off workers, and there’s some work that, if you give it to us to do we couldn’t manage such intensity, eventually we’d just damage our health and have to take medicine, and trying to work would become even more untenable.

(Interview 9)

Several spoke of their time as a pedicab driver, an occupation that Wuhan authorities eliminated in 2002 in the city districts for its unsightly aspect, its suggestion of backwardness, and its interruption of the modern, rapid vehicles of transport taking over the avenues. One man 39 years of age with just a junior high education made his living pedalling a cart after his layoff, but was

forced to give it up when the ban was placed. Ever since, he ‘very much has wanted to find work, but is always rebuffed’ (Interview 29).

Starting one’s own business might seem another option, yet lack of start-up capital is a significant obstacle. More fundamentally, however, where these people reside there simply is no market. As one man explained, ‘We tried in the past to sell breakfast in the community. We made some hot noodles, things like that. But where we live, the masses everywhere have low incomes, the level of consumption is really low, everyone just eats breakfast at home, so it basically didn’t work out’ (Interview 4). Another head of household, asked whether he had considered setting up a small shop, had a nearly identical reply: ‘Where we live it’s rather out of the way, many residents are the nearby state enterprise’s laid-off staff and workers. Those who found other good work have basically all moved away, so setting up a retail food and fruit stall is useless – there would be few who would buy. If they have a little money they buy some ordinary vegetables and that’s it’ (Interview 9).

A web-based analysis frames the problem within a more analytical framework:

In poor communities the economy creates social segregation, which causes economic units’ incomes to fall. So the units leave the area, and capital migrates away, only deepening the poverty. Then there’s no way to supply jobs or create tax income for the community. Purchasing power is low, and the return on investment is negligible, so outside businesses won’t enter and there’s no way internally to generate economic entities. Even if there are those with initiative, they’ll leave, so the community will lose their role as a model.

(‘Zhongguo chengshi’ 2006)

In short, there are simply no spare funds in such locales either for forming or for patronizing commercial ventures.

Eating and borrowing

With income-earning opportunities so scarce, how do the *dibaohu* manage to survive at all? Three answers emerge: they eat minimally, get handouts from family members and borrow money. Statements such as this one, from the mother of the twins, cropped up several times: ‘We usually buy the cheapest vegetables, the kids are still little, occasionally buy a little meat, and just give it to them to eat’ (Interview 8). In a household without any children, the two spouses refer to ‘the food we eat’ as ‘very dull’; ‘after all these years we’ve gotten used to it’, they disclose (Interview 10). Two maiden sisters in their forties residing together just ‘swallow the cheapest possible food to sustain [their] lives’ (Interview 53). One grandmother, raising her teenage granddaughter, occasionally treats the girl to an egg while she herself survives on nothing but vegetables, unable even to afford any fruit, much less meat (Interview 36). The bottom line here is that the

families who subsist on the *dibao* have been nearly starving themselves for over a decade (Tang 2003b).

As noted earlier, almost a third of the respondents mentioned financial assistance from friends and relatives. Twelve households had family members outside the household who provided some steady help; the other five only spoke of 'borrowing,' debts very likely to go forever unpaid. If the aid is long term and regularly received the *dibao* managers reduce the family's allowance. But if it is offered just in an emergency or to meet a specific, time-limited need there is likely to be no deduction, according to fund administrators in one community (Interview, Wuhan, Community X).

Relatives might support a child in school (Interviews 4, 12). In one case the loan amount was truly astronomical: a woman's older sister had already invested 10,000 yuan in her niece's college costs by the time we talked (Interview 25). In other cases the money is for expenses like electrical and water fees (Interview 24). Most of the time, though, the sums are trivial, in the range of one to two hundred yuan per month. Yet given their circumstances the recipients may find this small change makes all the difference (Interviews 28, 29, 34).

Taking these hand-outs, however, is by no means without its psychological cost. As one recipient confided, 'Sometimes relatives help some with our ordinary livelihood expenses, but always looking for someone to help feels very bad' (Interview 22). Neither is borrowing an adequate coping strategy, as one respondent made plain: 'We've borrowed a lot and still haven't paid it back; we're embarrassed to ask again. Now our only hope is that our family members can stay healthy' (Interview 7). The two sisters find themselves caught in the same exigency: 'In the past we borrowed money from friends, but now that's hard to do because people fear we won't pay it back' (Interview 53).

Some *dibaohu*, attempting to obtain funds they were not entitled to, falsely report their income, forge documents, or otherwise conceal their earnings or assets. There also are instances of so-called 'mistaken thinking' among the beneficiaries, as when people are said to 'take the responsibility they themselves should bear and push it off to society and to the government', demanding, for example, that the state give their old parent a supplement, 'even when there are five or six siblings who could shoulder the burden'.

One Wuhan community leader explained that without a systematic, societal-wide credit system there is no way to check whether *dibao* targets are also getting a monthly pension. She alluded to 'misinterpretation' of the programme causing inappropriate appeals. In particular, residents in ill health with necessary outlays beyond their means who 'fail to comprehend' that the *dibao* is based on income, not on expenditures, and thus is not geared to help people meet all their costs. Asked whether there were troublemakers, she was quick to affirm it: 'There are some residents who create unusual difficulties,' she reported, who 'clearly don't fit the criteria for getting the *dibao* but still press for it, often running about shouting verbal threats' (Interview, Wuhan, Community V).

Opinions and feelings towards the dibao

Positive and negative assessments

In general, voiced negative attitudes somewhat outweighed positive ones. But affirmations were often hedged with caveats and qualms, and negative views tended to include a fundamental acceptance of the system. Here are a few such ambivalent views: 'We very much support the *dibao*, feel it's a good policy, but it absolutely can't solve our family's problems. Our suggestion is that the government should base its work on each family's actual circumstances, not just rely on a household's income to determine the amount to give' (Interview 1).

Another asserted: 'The *dibao* really can solve some of our livelihood expenditures, so it's very necessary, but some of our daily life is very hard to maintain. We're rather satisfied with the *dibao*. But ordinarily the investigation and verification procedures are full of trivial details and complexities; we hope they can simplify it a little in the future' (Interview 4). A third informant, a divorced father raising a 10-year-old son, alleged: 'For use in normal matters of consumption, it's possible but a struggle. Though the money isn't much, it's better to have it than not, it can sustain our livelihood' (Interview 5).

The more purely positive appraisals were voiced with me in the room. One subject, whose mother-in-law had been lying paralysed for half a year, with me listening, stated that she felt that 'the *dibao* is a kind of display of concern for us (*zhaogu*), it's fine (*hai keyi*), the amount is ok, our needs are few' (Interview 3). And a second one, the grandmother living with her granddaughter, letting a few tears fall, expressed her gratitude: 'The government shows a lot of care for us, I really thank (*feichang ganxie*) the government and the Party. Otherwise we'd have to go to the street to beg' (Interview 36). The mother of the blind man with a six-year-old son termed the 'policy pretty good' (*zhengce bucuo*), emphasizing at the end that, 'We're all satisfied, we have no complaints,' once more in my hearing (Interview 48).

As noted, those who grumbled did so when I was not in the room. A man in poor health with a son in junior high criticized the programme thus: 'Now prices are inflating terribly, whatever you buy is very expensive, getting a little *dibao* basically isn't enough, now we're spending it ever faster, only a few days after receiving it – after buying rice and oil – it's gone. We *dibaohu* should get more than we do, it should cover our daily expenses ... they can't just consider the number of people in the family, this way it can't solve any problems' (Interview 11). Asked for their opinion, another couple had just this to convey: 'The *dibao*'s examinations are too strict, each time they come to check it's very upsetting, causes a lot of chaos, the people coming to investigate have no manners' (Interview 13).

Others carp about the insufficiencies of the supplements: 'Every year at new year's they're supposed to give us presents, but I've never gotten any' (Interview 14); and 'They should cut or cancel the kids' high school tuition costs',

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cavilled another (Interview 18). And the mother of a retarded girl noted that the family did not get the amount they ought to have, commenting that, 'Of course the *dibao* isn't enough, recently the days are very tense, all the prices went up ... having a student and a sick person in the family ... they all need money' (Interview 47).

Whether for the programme or against it, almost to a person there is little reflection over state policies' role in leading the individual and his/her family into poverty; most attribute their misfortunes to their age or inadequate strength and skill. But one rare informant, a man of 42 residing alone, places the source of his situation squarely outside himself: 'I'm dissatisfied with my present livelihood, feel it's very unfair. How I got to be living this way is mainly due to social causes [a euphemism for Party policies], otherwise I could not be without work' (Interview 14).

Hopes

The many hopes enunciated seem to lift a bit the mood of dependency and passivity. Frequently uttered are wishes for at least 'a little more subsidy' (Interviews 5, 18, 21, 22, 23, 25, 27, 34, 51, 52); improved health or funds to address sickness – as one woman plaintively put it, 'I hope for free medical treatment, otherwise only can wait to die' (Interviews 7, 17, 21, 33, 35, 42, 47, 52); discounts for children's education (Interviews 16, 18); and for help with job training or introductions to employment. Several speakers dream of having a family member assigned to a work unit for the disabled (Interviews 16, 17, 18, 21, 23, 28, 29, 32). A number of informants – no doubt the specially discontented – verbalized more than just one desire. But only a single speaker, in yearning to see the programme's implementation become fair and open, articulated a longing for an improvement addressing more than her own conditions (Interview 52).

Shame and isolation

The pluckier among the lot made it apparent that, no matter how essential to their wherewithal the *dibao* might be, they would prefer to be able to sustain themselves and their families without it. A few quotations demonstrate this stance: 'I'm a person with a rather competitive personality,' asserted a 44-year-old woman, who had received no regular education, had been unemployed for years, and whose health was poor. 'If I were healthy, I certainly would look for something to do, the family can't go on in such economic difficulty, taking the *dibao* is really no way; if I weren't ill, we all wouldn't want to be a *dibaohu*' (Interview 1). 'We didn't expect to take the *dibao*,' declared another woman. 'Mainly it's because we really don't have the ability to work, can't find stable work, so all we can do is to apply [for it]' (Interview 4).

Behind the discomfort of being a recipient lies a good deal of shame. The wife of the schizophrenic man, though in absolutely dire straits, was

‘embarrassed to go to apply, feel[s] too young to take it’. She should be supporting herself, she judged, but saddled with rearing a one-and-a-half-year-old baby, she cannot (Interview 50). And a couple in their late forties, both laid-off workers, ‘feel we as people getting the *dibao*, are not too honourable (*guangcai*); since our son got out of school for the summer he has just stayed home, won’t play with other kids, during vacation he rarely goes out, has a sense of inferiority’ (Interview 4).

Like this young man, a common sense of disgrace prevents the beneficiaries from initiating exchanges with neighbours. One relates common feelings: ‘Ordinarily *dibaohu* talk very little among themselves about how much money they get, generally keep it a secret’ (Interview 22). A 67-year-old widow without formal education still had her pride: ‘We don’t communicate with other *dibao* targets; I basically don’t know other people’s situation ... I’m also embarrassed to raise the issue with other people, after all, taking the *dibao* isn’t a very honourable thing’ (Interview 48).

Another woman in her sixties pointed out that a lot of her neighbours also receive the *dibao*, but don’t discuss it among themselves (Interview 36). The wife of the schizophrenic man replied in the negative when queried as to whether she speaks about her situation with those living in her community. ‘No,’ she responds, ‘the family’s affairs are not easy to speak of much with others, now too many people will look at you and laugh at you’ (Interview 50). Obviously, the sense of disgrace these impoverished people feel cuts off any inclination to form a grouping that might protest in unison.

Rebelliousness

Still, among the litany of sufferings – both of the body and of the heart – are the reactions of a mere handful of challengers. Only one revealed spats with the management personnel leading to her estrangement from the community. In general, what could be anger seems to come masked as mystification. A father, asked whether he had been given extra subsidies to deal with recent inflation, refrained from criticizing the system, simply claiming that, ‘I’ve heard that we *dibaohu* are to have a price subsidy of 30 yuan, but actually getting it is not too clear. Each month when they issue us our money, I also don’t know concretely how it’s calculated. They give us a certain amount, and it’s just that amount [*gei duoshao, jiushi duoshao*], haven’t inquired’ (Interview 5).

The wife of a three-person household, a junior high graduate, seems to have given up in a state of ignorance, though perhaps her perplexity belies some dissent: ‘We understand some, but not too much,’ she claimed. ‘We only know there’s some price subsidies, and in winter there’s funds for warmth. Concretely it’s really not too clear. Anyway, it’s such a small amount of money, it’s hard to calculate. However much there is, that’s it, we don’t haggle over the details’ (Interview 11).

Two other informants were more straightforward about the futility of expounding upon their grievances. One father, queried as to whether he had

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any suggestions for the system operators, offered this rejoinder: ‘Suggestions I do have, but it’s no use. I wish the government would give more money. Now ordinary people (*laobaixing*) don’t have the right to speak. Going to the doctor is expensive, studying is hard – how can we solve the problems in a short time? But raising it is useless [*tile ye shi baiti*]’ (Interview 46). In the same state of mind, a 34-year-old woman had this to say: ‘Suggesting hasn’t much use, just hope I can enter a hospital, now seeing a doctor is something I can’t afford. ... Basic-level implementation lacks supervision and guarantees, the *laobaixing* don’t know much about the actual policy, how the subsidy they issue us each month is really calculated, we’re all unclear’ (Interview 52).

In the midst of such fatalistic and phlegmatic postures, one pugnacious 67-year-old widow stands out; she dared to wrangle with the administrators in her community. Convinced that her family was not being treated fairly, she charged:

In 2003, when we got into the system, the subsidy was very transparent, the public bulletin board told how much income each household had every month, what their subsidy was, how much was deducted. But these past two years, it’s not this way. Among us *dibaohu* we don’t know how much other people are getting.

Questioned as to whether she was being given a larger subsidy after inflation set in, she inveighed, ‘It’s not like that’. Then she went on to give a fuller explanation:

Since my daughter-in-law went out to work, and the residents’ committee found out, my son’s *dibao* was cut back. Getting 100-plus yuan each month is not as good as when it first began. We’re a family with an old person [herself], my son can’t see and has no labour ability, my daughter-in-law’s little money can take care of her son, but [because of this] the residents’ committee now deducts our family’s allowance. Other families have two people going out to work and their money wasn’t deducted. Since I argued opinionatedly with the residents’ committee they said I shouldn’t compare myself with other people. But our family has no money, no connections, so things can only be this way.

Asked if she has any communication with other *dibaohu*, she ranted on: ‘Since my son’s subsidy was taken away, I very rarely go to the residents’ committee office, don’t speak to other *dibaohu*, and when the residents’ committee holds a meeting they don’t call me, so I basically don’t know other people’s situation.’ Did she get a recent increase, the interviewer wanted to know. Her answer was, again, defiant:

It increased some, but I don’t know why, the *laobaixing* are all very bewildered, sometimes more money comes and we don’t know why, when

the total is more we're very happy. I just hope to understand how this subsidy is granted, we ordinary people don't get to see the civil affairs department's documents. The residents' committee ought to treat people equally, everyone should be equal before the regulations, it shouldn't happen that because of a certain family's connections they can do whatever.

(Interview 48)

Of all the informants, only this one older subject had the nerve to give voice to her vexations. And yet, it must be underlined, hushed up among her neighbours by her feelings of humiliation, and pushed aside by her programme managers, she poses no threat to the so-precious stability of the party-state.

Conclusion

The *dibao* programme was admittedly put into place to do nothing more than meet the most minimal requirements of the targeted needy. Its recipients were to be kept alive but muted, in the interest of rendering Wuhan modern without their interference, whether that interference might transpire out on the roadways as they eke out an unsightly sustenance or otherwise venture outside, as in the act of rebelling. Above all, they were not to disturb the forward march of the city onward towards progress, which their uncultured and unwell persons were prone to sully. Given that these objectives are never far from the surface in the minds and the work of officialdom, especially in Wuhan, with its wealth of laid-off workers and its world-class aspirations – counting the *dibao* as poverty alleviation is off the mark. So it would not be surprising if those who receive it might simulate misunderstanding, as they angle for a larger allocation.

And not just the programme itself calls for an ambivalent assessment; the status of Wuhan's version of it is indeterminate comparatively, as well. Granted, placed next to Lanzhou, which receives more central government financial help, it appears harsh. But statistics suggest that its outlays are probably more or less average over time. What is clear from several dozen household chats there, however, is that the recipients of Wuhan's allocations are living on the margin between misery and maintenance, and that is where they and their offspring are apt to remain.