

The Urban *Dibao*: A Minimum Livelihood Guarantee
to Guarantee Minimal Commotion

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Introduction

In China, we allow some people to become rich first through their own efforts, but an excessive income gap will destabilize social order, and is something that needs government attention...The side effects of this huge gap are mainly seen in the following..aspects. First, as earnings increase, living standards have been generally raised, but low-income groups are slow to reap the rewards of this prosperity for a number of reasons. In the long term, this will trigger emotional dissatisfaction and affect social stability...(Wang, D. 2007)

These words concede that the regime's switch to market incentives and competition-based compensation has yielded increasing income differentials. It is no secret that 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 ("Zhongguo chengshi" 2006; Wang, Y. 2004: 71-97) leaving losers at a total loss.

In the 1990s, as the Chinese leadership became cognizant of and deeply concerned over these negative social externalities of marketization, its members agonized over the potential political impact of these deprivations on its hallowed objectives of social stability, inter-group and a successful project of state

enterprise reform. For securing all of these aims was deemed essential to the grander goal that has undergirded every undertaking of the post-Mao state: this was the modernity of the nation, particularly of its metropolises. Accordingly, the political elite initiated a novel welfare approach to handle the people most severely affected by economic restructuring.

After a half dozen years of grass-roots experimentation, in the place of the old urban work-unit-grounded, relatively universal, automatic security entitlements granted by the enterprises in the municipalities of the socialist era, the state inaugurated a discretionary, means-tested cash transfer program (Cook 2008), the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee [*zuidi shenghuo baozhang*], popularly referenced as the “*dibao*.” If not in intent at least in fallout it is much akin to what Tony Judt has written of “modern welfare reform” in Western settings, in that both introduce “conditionality” into “social citizenship” by forcing the beneficiaries to “pass certain tests and demonstrate appropriate behavior” (Judt 2007: 24). Perhaps it is most surprising to find this practice in a state that for its urban residents was once considerably egalitarian and rather munificent.

The charge of the *dibao* was to provide for urban residents whose household income failed to reach a locally-determined minimal threshold; the method was to supplement that income to the extent necessary to bring the family’s monthly wherewithal up to the level deemed requisite for basic survival in that region (Hussain et al. 2002). The project was proudly labeled by its

publicists a "standardized, legalized, social guarantee system" (Ding, L 1999: 7), a characterization more aspirational than actual, especially at the time of the plan's national promulgation in September 1999 ("Chengshi jumin" 1999: 16-17). Much like "reformed" Western welfare programs, it reeks of distrust of its objects; unlike similar schemes in democracies, however, its administrators are ably assisted by the recipients' co-residents in their community courtyards.

The idea behind the policy amounted to supplying impoverished individuals with funds that were "just enough to keep body and soul together," in the words of its leading scholar within China, Tang Jun (Tang 2002b: 4). Its upshot--intended or not--was to render the recipients, the *dibao duixiang* or the *dibaohu* [minimum livelihood guarantee targets or minimum livelihood households] politically pacified, socially marginalized and excluded, silent and discarded, the effectual detritus of the country's modern, metropolitan development. Thus a people whose plunge in plight was manufactured by a state-sponsored market incursion was set to be further manipulated by the powers-that-be.

And since the provisions of the program in many ways confine the payees and their progeny to a long-term life of penury, operatively ensuring that they all be denied any opportunity for upward mobility, it seems fair to see it as a ticket to membership in a permanent underclass. Indeed, in a number of cities that have announced their policies (and perhaps everywhere) *dibao* households are

specifically enjoined against arranging a good education for their children, owning electronic products, using too much electricity, eating decently, earning money or bearing excess offspring, in short against thriving, propagating, or living more than a bare-bones existence. An irony is that even as a drive for modernity brought this grouping into being, these now-paupers--too old, too ignorant, too unskilled, too unwell¹--are themselves set to remain as dregs of the past, debris of the old, ousted order, unable to enter the gates to the future, placed thusly, presumably, in the interest of not threatening the nation's onward progress (Bakken 2000:59-74, 433-34 has a similar logic on the linkages between stability and modernization).

Below, I examine the expressed aims of the policy; review its history; address the difficulties of estimating the numbers of the very poor and their relation to the numbers served; try to quantify the amounts of funds laid out over time; and outline the procedures for establishing eligibility and for disbursing the allocations as well as document attendant mishaps, misunderstandings, and misappropriations that attend the implementation of the program.

My research entailed interviews with 53 *dibao* recipient households in Wuhan in the summer of 2007 (people in communities to which I got connected through *guanxi*, or connections, and who were willing to speak with me and my assistants). Besides those interviews, I also talked to bureaucrats in charge of

the program in Wuhan and Lanzhou in August 2007, and to community [*shequ*] cadres at several Wuhan community offices. My documentary data come primarily from these sources: for 1996 through 2002, the pieces on the *dibao* in the Ministry of Civil Affairs journal, *Zhongguo minzheng* [*China Civil Affairs*] then. For 2003 through 2006, I consulted statistical yearbooks and annual social development "blue books" published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS); and for 2006 and 2007, I used official government work reports, 50 official articles found on the Internet,² and sundry documents collected in Wuhan and Lanzhou in August and September 2007 and elsewhere. My objective is to use my data to explore the contours of the program's effective--not necessarily deliberate--underlying agenda: to dispose of those discarded by the relentless unfolding of the market's rhythms, to purge from sight and sound the anti-modern mass produced by the Party's reforms, and to uncover how the process has begotten a new urban underclass.

Goals and History

Goals

The rhetoric of the rules for the program--especially its language of rights and self-reliance--belies its actual outcomes. The empowering 1999 Regulations proclaim that those households whose members, living together, have an average per capita income that is below that needed for a minimal livelihood in

their place of residence “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” 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 other pertinent government documents. Most critically, the program is administered such that there is no space for such possibilities, as the material just below evinces. And, as Tang Jun reported in 2002, “The idea of *dibao* as a basic right hasn’t penetrated to the recipients or to society at large yet” (Tang 2002b:35).

In 1997, during the program’s trial period, the Vice Minister the Ministry of Civil Affairs (the office in charge of the program), termed its significance to lie in “completing our social security system and promoting the modern enterprise system’s establishment (Mao 1997:4). Soon after then-Premier Zhu Rongji had signed the order authorizing the project, a specialist from the Ministry of Civil Affairs referenced the then-recent Party 15th Congress as having authorized the project in order to “perfect the traditional social relief system, to establish a wholesome modern social welfare system, and to guarantee that the economic system reform, especially the state enterprises’ reform, could progress without incident [*shunli jinbu*]” (Wang, Z.: 1999:18).

Once the program was underway the Ministry held that the measure “relates to whether or not the state’s reform and opening can penetrate and

whether or not the socialist market economic system can develop in a healthy manner"; it also made a point of advising the localities to "spend a little money to buy stability" ("Jianli zuidi" 1996: 14). Premier Zhu Rongji, reportedly an exponent of the project, visited the poorest of China's provinces on the eve of a massive injection of finances into it, and proclaimed that: "The *dibao's* support of social stability and guarantee of the reform of the state firms has important significance; we should strengthen it, should fund it. The center and various local levels must all gradually increase its funds each year, and central finance should give necessary subsidies to places in financial difficulty" (Tang 2003:243). Thus, the paired objectives of securing stability and facilitating the firms' reform lay at the core of the program's promulgation.

Urban governments, reviewing the workings of the project in their own areas, repeated these same themes. In Shijiazhuang, for one, three aims were to be achieved: "to give these people a basic stable life, to mitigate the fear of disturbances, and to get rid of long-term hidden danger" (by "tightening the relations between the masses and the Party, stabilizing the social order and eliminating unstable elements" through "soothing peoples' hearts"). The author went on to warn of the "approximately 13 million-person new mass of the urban poor who form a potential threat to the cities' economic development and social stability" (Xu, K. 1996:12).

During the years of experimentation, Chongqing leaders promoted the program for its “three benefits”: for reform and development, for economic development, and for social stability.” Reference to the system’s mission in maintaining the low-income masses’ right of basic livelihood was explicitly paired with promoting social stability (Yuan 1997: 22, 23). In Guangdong, too, while articulating the “people’s right of basic livelihood,” paired this with “guarantee[ing] social stability and the uninterrupted progress of the reform of the economic system (Xu, D. 1998: 9, 10). One writer went so far as to refer to the *dibao* as a “tranquilizer,” one that 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 1999:7).

Once the new administration of Premier Wen Jiabao had gotten underway, concern for the poor became linked to the new catchword, “harmony,” which, in essence, is just a rehashed label for stability. Thus, at the twelfth national civil affairs convention in late 2006, the Premier’s number one priority was to show special care for the low-income masses, ensuring their basic livelihood through the mechanism of the *dibao*. This, he held, would play a very important role in “constructing a socialist harmonious society” (“Di shi-erci” 2006). The next year a paper in the official civil affairs journal emphasized that “the government

demands that every place guarantee whomever should be guaranteed, to solve the livelihood problems of the urban poor *to realize social stability*' (my italics) ("Zhongguo chengshi" 2006).

Concern for the poor for their own sake is sadly missing from these pronouncements, but not altogether absent. For one example, an article in 1996 from Qingdao characterized the *dibao* and its associated grants as "being loaded to capacity with the party and government's consideration for the urban and rural poor masses, like a spring rain [or] rain after a drought, it spills into the bottom of people's hearts..some poor people call [the *dibao* certificate] a "warmth card," a "life-saving card." The authors' instrumental conclusion, however, is rather transparent, as he asserts that this care and support "wins the broad masses' trust of the party and government and their praise for the superiority for socialism" (Yuan and Lin 1998:11).

Only the director of the Ministry's Relief Office, Wang Zhenyao, put the "issue of appropriately solving urban poor residents' livelihood difficulties as an important task in the country's present economic and social development" and set ensuring the people's right to basic livelihood [*jiben shenghuo quanyi*] as, in itself, "an important component part of the government's role" (Wang and Wang 1998:18). For almost all commentators, then, to become effectively "reformed" and thus sufficiently modern, China would need to keep disciplined the new

underdogs to which its marketization had given birth. This it has achieved not by satisfying but by subduing them.

History

In early 1997, speaking with a journalist, Vice Minister of Civil Affairs, Fan Baojun reviewed the early history of the program, noting that Shanghai had successfully pioneered the "*dibao*" in 1993 (Mao 1997:4-6; Tang 2002b:20)³, after which the 1994 10th meeting of the civil affairs sector called for its popularization. Trial points were set up, and in 1995 the Ministry turned this effort into a ministerial work keypoint. By the end of that year, 14 cities--including Qingdao, Fuzhou, Xiamen, Dalian, Guangzhou, Wuxi and Haikou, all wealthy municipalities along the coast--were implementing the system as trial sites. In the next year, at the Fourth Session of the Eighth National People's Congress, the Government Work Report called for gradually establishing the *dibao* system nationwide during the period of the Ninth Five Year Plan (from 1996 to 2000). By the end of 1996, 101 cities had it underway.

The next step--probably not just coincidentally--was taken in September 1997, around the time of the Fifteenth Party Congress (where then-Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin emphasized the program twice); this was the meeting, after all, that accelerated the initiative to speed up layoffs and bankruptcies in money-losing firms (Jiang; Wang, Y. 2004:132 and Hussain 2002:52-53 draw an explicit connection between these reforms and the acceleration of the *dibao*).⁴ At that point the State Council issued a

notice entitled "On establishing the urban residents' minimum livelihood system in the whole country" and demanded the process be completed by the end of 1999 (Tang 2002b:15-16). And, indeed, as of late 1999, 2,306 cities and towns had installed the program, with over two million poor people seeing their bare sustenance underwritten, 79 percent of whom were individuals who had newly become poor (*Ibid.*:17).

Then came the publication, under Premier Zhu Rongji's signature, of the State Council's October 1999 relevant regulations, Number 271. Following that, the trajectory of the project appeared to be one of progressive generosity. In the first ten months of 1999, 1.5 billion yuan was extended to the target population. Later in the year, perhaps in anticipation of the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of the birth of the People's Republic, plus the likely impending entry of China into the World Trade Organization (WTO) - with the shock it was expected to deliver to urban employment⁵ - the Ministry of Finance arranged an extra 400 million yuan to be used as supplementary funds during the second half of 1999, and recipients suddenly received a raise of 30 percent in their allocations, 80 percent of it coming from the central government (Mao 1997:4-6; Ding 1999:7; "Chengshi dibao" 2000:22-27; Tang 2002b:17; and Tang 2002a).

By the third quarter of 2000, the numbers enrolled in the program had increased to 3.237 million (Tang 2002b:18). This history has been characterized as comprising four developmental phases: an experimental one (mid-1993 to mid-1995); a phase of extending the system, until the middle of 1997; a

universalization stage (August 1997 to July 1999); and a stage of consolidation, ending in 2000 (Hussain 2002:53). Up to that point and for another year or two thereafter, the plan's steady expansion ran precisely in parallel with the intensification of China's market reform and globalization. Thus it is possible to read its escalation in funding and scope as markers of decision makers' heightening unease with the protests that profit-chasing was promoting. The final upgrade of the program came in early 2002—jacking the numbers of participants up to 22 million—just after China had finally joined the WTO. The Tenth Plan (from 2001 to 2005) projected the system's development “from being a random and temporary sort of relief toward becoming a systematic guarantee” (Zhongguo jianli 2006).

Truth be told, however, the outlays remained marginal. Even after the big increase in the number of recipients in 2002 (a surge up to 19.3 million early in the year from just about 4.57 million people a year before), the people served still accounted for just 5.8 percent of the nonagricultural population. Yet, as I explain below, the truly indigent urban population may well be more in the range of 13 percent. In the years that followed, cities tended to raise the subsidies they gave each household at least once every two years and sometimes even more often, as the overall urban standard of living within the general population improved; at certain junctures the central government ordered an increase nationwide, as in the midst of a bout of inflation in August 2007 (“Urban

minimum" 2007). Yet the total covered never went much above the 22 million of 2002, suggesting a fundamental stinginess in the system.

The Urban Poor: Definitions, Numbers

Poverty defined; the poverty line

Poverty can be defined either "absolutely" (in terms of the cost of a specified basket of food and non-food items characterized as the minimum necessary to fill basic needs), according to Athar Hussain, while "relatively" it connotes a condition understood with reference to an average expenditure or income in a reference locality. The concept also can be measured in relation either to actual expenditure or to the income necessary for fulfilling basic needs (Hussain 2002:8-20). The cut-off line for the *dibao*, set separately for each urban unit (municipalities also set the line for their own suburban areas), amounts to a combination of these considerations, in that it aims to subsidize households whose average per capita *income* falls below the amount necessary for purchasing *basic necessities* at the prices prevailing locally.

The Regulations formalizing the system called for setting the outlays locally in accord with the costs of the amount of food, clothing, and housing needed for minimal subsistence in a particular area. Designers of the program put the local authorities in charge of the determination of the line since prices, the pattern of consumption and the average income per capita vary by area, and

also because it was the city that was to fund a sizable portion of the outlay (*Ibid.*: 64-76; Wang, H. 1996b:34).

Originally, under a policy entitled “whoever’s child it is should pay” [*shei jia haizi shei jia bao*] enterprises were to care for employees whose families had become indigent (Wang, H. 1996a:25). Yet this practice soon became unfeasible, as it was precisely those enterprises in financial distress whose staff was being dismissed, underpaid or not paid at all. By the time of the announcement of the final regulations, local financial departments, not firms, were to share responsibility for underwriting the program with the central government (Wang, Z. 1999:19).

Then the bureaus of civil affairs, labor, finance, auditing, personnel, statistics and prices, along with the local branches of the trade union, were charged with jointly stipulating and, when deemed necessary (as in times of inflation, when a city’s financial receipts have a good turn or when the standard of living among the general population of a city has risen)⁶, hiking up the local cut-off line (Lu 1998:20; Wang Z.1999: 18, 19).⁷ Other departments had other, related functions, e.g., the education bureau had to make sure that the targets’ children’s miscellaneous school fees were cut or cancelled; medical departments were to do the same for medical fees (Xu, D. 1998:10; Interview, Lanzhou 5 September 2007).⁸ Most places also created a special leadership

small group, located within the bureau of civil affairs, to take overall control (Mao 1997:5).

The line had to be set below the minimum wage and also lower than the benefits for unemployment insurance, supposedly to encourage employment. But even a recipient's acquisition of a tiny increment in income through occasional labor could result in drastic reduction in his/her household's *dibao* disbursement, so some (in my sample, though, just one of 53 admitted to this) did feel disinclined to seek employment. As summed up in an article in the civil affairs journal, "the scientific determination of the norm mainly depended on four factors: residents' basic livelihood needs; a place's price level; the degree of development in the region; and that locality's financial ability to contribute to the program.

Thus, the financial situation of the city has a determining impact upon where the poverty line is set; poorer urban jurisdictions preferred to set the standard lower to minimize the numbers for which they would be responsible, 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. Larger cities also tend to have higher living standards and prices as well as bigger budgets. While initially it was projected that the costs would be shared relatively equally between the central government and the localities, in practice the portion born by localities has varied significantly, from sites where the city pays out the bulk

or even all of the allowances to places where essential, sizable assistance from the central government means that a locale came to bear almost none of the expenses, the variance a function of a municipality's economic strength (Wang and Wang 1998:18, 19); Hussain 2002:70; Tang 2002a).⁹

Among cities, variable ratios between the municipality and its districts are also locally defined ("Jianli zuidi" 1996). To give one example, as of 1998, Wuhan divided up responsibilities such that each district got half its funds from the city government and had to supply the other half itself; in neighboring Hubei municipalities, such as Xiangfan, Shiyan and Huangshi, the ratios of city-level to district-level contributions were 6:4, 7:3, and 3:2, respectively (Meng and Tan 1996:19; Zhang 1998:24).¹⁰

The authorizing regulations divide the recipients into two types: those who fit the conditions of the old "three withouts,"¹¹ and those with some minimal income.¹² Sometimes more specific categories were created. One author, for instance draws these distinctions: the traditional "three withouts"; households in which there is a person (or persons) at work but the income is still below the standard set locally, whether because of the household's high dependency ratio or their unit's poor economic results; households in which there are one or more persons who have received unemployment insurance, but for whom the period for receiving it has terminated and no work has been found; and a category simply labelled "others" (Mao 1997:5; "Jianli zuidi" 1996). The three-without

population was to receive the full amount of funds, up to the city's poverty line, while households in other circumstances would be given the difference between the average per capita income in the household and the local poverty line times the number of members of the household who are living together (Wang Y. 2004:133). But how many really qualify for the *dibao* resources, nationwide? To answer that question, we must grapple with the indeterminacy of the numbers of the poor.

Numbers of poor

The numbers of the urban poor vary with the definition employed. Tang Jun noted that in 1995 the State Statistical Bureau had estimated that about 24.28 million people could be considered indigent, or 8.6 percent of all urban residents, at a time when the urban population was counted at about 282.3 million. He calculated that of those, about 4.4 percent of urban residents (or 12.42 million people)--figures that he labeled the "most authoritative statistics released by the government to date"(Tang 2004b:26)¹³--were in the category of the "absolute poor." Since layoffs shot into the tens of millions soon thereafter, a much higher count must soon have been realized.

Tang went on to elaborate that other tallies had been put forth, such as one of about 14 million by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, as of August 2000,¹⁴ and one by Zhu Qingfang of the Sociology Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences of over 31 million, or about eight percent of the total urban population

(Tang 2004b:26-28).¹⁵ As Artar Hussain explains, the national headcount of the poor would have ballooned from 14.7 million to 37.1 million had they been identified in terms of their expenditure instead of their income per head (Hussain 2002:34).

Alternatively, the 2003 Tenth National People's Congress reported that "20 million urban residents had become poor as a result of industrial reorganization" (Wang Y.:2004:52). Reaching an even higher total, a Party Organization Department report from 2001 disclosed that an investigation done by the National Statistical Bureau, the State Council Research office and other units, discovered that, nationwide, 20 to 30 million staff and workers had fallen into poverty in recent years. With their family members, the paper judged, altogether these people amounted to 40 to 50 million (Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu 2001:170-71) or almost 13 percent of what was considered the urban population as of that time.

Given that the maximum number served by the program was slightly over 22 million in the years since its expansion in 2002, this seems to mean that less than half the truly poor in the country have been served. Indeed, a study using data from a 2004 Urban Employment and Social Protection Survey carried out by the Institute of Population and Labor Economics in CASS showed that just 39 percent of all poor households were getting the aid of the dibao program (Wang, M. 2007:86). Much more extreme than this, research done in 2005 in 56 of

Nanjing's neighborhoods in 11 urban districts, using a multi-stage stratified sample, in which 1,370 of 1,400 questionnaires were returned, reports the poverty rate to be as high as 23.4 percent there (counting households with an average monthly income below 240 yuan per capita as poor, one \$USD per day at the time), of whom just 4.2 percent were receiving the *dibao*, or only about 18 percent of those deserving it (He, Liu, Wu, and Webster 2008). And how much funding has been committed to assisting those beneficiaries?

Funding: Amounts, Sources and Subsidies

Amounts of funds and their sources

As the numbers of recipients rose over the years the amount of money committed to the program mounted as well. According to a piece by Tang Jun, in 1999, the year of the State Council's Regulations (also the year during which the central government mandated an increase by 30 percent in the amount of subsidy for each recipient), the central government allocated more than 405 million yuan, about 27 percent of the year's total *dibao* expenditure of 1.5 billion, the remaining portion being doled out by cities. In the next year, the total outlay doubled to three billion, of which the central financial contribution remained at the same percentage. But in 2001, when the program's funds reached 4.2 billion, the center paid out more than half (55 percent), or 2.3 billion yuan (Tang 2008).¹⁶

The year 2002 saw a major jump in the quantity of funds handed out, totaling 10.53 billion yuan, of which the center paid almost 44 percent (Xinhuanet 2002).¹⁷ But even after extra funding was allocated in 2001 and 2002, an official report admitted that as of early 2002, the national average poverty line across all participating urban areas was a mere 152 yuan per person per month, equal only to 29 percent of the 2001 national average urban per capita income (“Zhongguo chengshi” 2006). In 2003, as much as 15 billion yuan was budgeted, of which the center dispensed 9.2 billion, with a notable shift in the proportions paid out by the different administrative levels: over 60 percent came from the central treasury that year.

But despite what seems to have been a new generosity, in that year the actual average per person subsidy (the supplement really allocated to each person) was just 56 yuan per month (Tang 2004:117-18; “Zhongguo jianli” 2006).¹⁸ By 2005, the average monthly per capita handout had risen to 70 yuan, with a probable annual total expenditure in the range of 19.5 billion (Tang 2006:165, 167). Even as disbursements multiplied in yuan, however, the average amount of the per capita supplement nationwide amounted to a piddling 9.2 percent of average urban per capita income (*Ibid.*: 168).

As of the end of 2007, when 22.709 million people (300,000 people more than had been served at the same point a year earlier) (“China’s subsistence allowance”), living in 10,656,000 households, were enjoying the protection of the

program, the average monthly poverty line around the country had gone up to 182.3 yuan per person, a rise of 12.8 yuan per person over the previous year. At the same time, the average subsidy nationwide had increased to 102 yuan per person per month, or 23 percent over 2006. But the funds allocated to the *dibao* nationwide each year rose from a miniscule 0.113 percent of government expenditures in 1999 to a high of 0.61 percent in 2003, even dropping down to just 0.50 percent, in 2006 (See Table One).¹⁹ Given the large increases in government revenue over these years, it is notable that the percentage of funding going to the *dibaohu* did not exhibit a greater rise over time, and that the numbers served remained more or less fixed after 2002.

In 2007, the average supplement remained only a bare 8.8 percent of the average monthly urban income nationwide (1,148.83 yuan), at a time when the norm (or, the poverty line) of 182.3 yuan per person amounted to just under 16 percent of the average urban income, in the Premier's reckoning (Wen 2008).²⁰ This average, of course, is pulled down by the millions of urbanites residing in smaller and poorer cities across the nation. It is hard to imagine that the households so aided could survive with any degree of satisfaction. It is also striking that the nourishment, educational, and health standards among the individual *dibaohu* remained remarkably unchanged and essentially abysmal over a span of 10 years, as interviewers in 2007 and 2008 found conditions identical to those described in Tang Jun's fieldwork a decade earlier.

Other subsidies

In addition to the handout of cash, the *dibao* program provides special privileges for recipients, all of which involve discounts and exemptions for the poverty-stricken. Wuhan, to give one example, offers as many as 12 separate *yuhui zhengce* [preferential policies], including reductions in rent, and in the charges for water, food, electricity, fuel, and legal services, as well as exemption from medical registration and miscellaneous school fees, in addition to various subsidies (Interview 28 August 2007).²¹ Not all informants received these benefits, however; indeed, some had never even heard of them.

In 2007, a number of extra appropriations were made, some locally and some centrally mandated, such as a one-time bonus for coping with sudden hikes in the prices of pork and other food products and a program to aid students in vocational middle schools (Youyu roujia 2007; “Xiangshou chengshi diabao” 2007). Some municipalities set aside funds for the children of *dibao* families who were attending college (“Dibao jiating” 2007). One of the districts of Guangzhou city distributed certificates for purchasing 20 yuan worth of goods (Guangzhoushi Liwanqu 2007); while Wuhan allowed poor university students to apply for loans for their schooling (“Wuhan huji pinkun” 2007). And during the summer of that year, the State Council authorized a low-income housing program, aimed at families in financial hardship (Shouzuao fabu” 2007). Beyond

the rules and periodic dispensations, how does the program operate on the ground?

Procedures and their Pitfalls

Procedures

As the Chongqing Bureau of Civil Affairs Vice-Director wrote about the city's 1996 initiation of the project, "thought work" had to precede everything else. His explanation was that, "The urban *dibao* system is a wholly new [kind of] work, [people's] hidden income is hard to estimate, the situation is complex; if the work isn't done properly, it will provoke some new unstable elements and give birth to new social contradictions (Yuan 1997:23). In other words, the program was considered likely to result in resentments, anger and jealousies if control were not exercised over people's comprehension of the plan. Regardless of cautionary measures, however, there have certainly been wrinkles in its running, whether because of dissatisfied recipients, dishonest disbursers, or any other people who have determined how to finesse the system.

Once the publicity campaign had been waged, further preparatory work in a given locale might entail several in-depth, large-scale surveys, involving checking on and verifying family incomes (including figuring out ways to do this), employment situations and consumption patterns, as well as training personnel, undertaking multiple censuses, pooling and analyzing statistics and composing

reports. In Chongqing, as many as 600,000 households were scrutinized in the process! (*Ibid.*).²² Execution of the system--as is the usual practice for any new policy in China--was generally done first in one of the larger cities in each province, to serve as an "experimental point" for the region, and other cities under the same provincial administration would later follow its example (Zhang 1998).²³ Concrete management of the program splits decision making among four urban levels: the city, the district, the street, and the residents' community (replaced by the "community" [*shequ*] in the early 2000's, a unit that usually involved the merger of a couple of residents' communities). All these jurisdictions were to share in reporting, registering, investigating, approving, issuing forms, making modifications, and filing cases (Meng and Tan 1996).

Applicants' journey toward becoming recipients begins with a written entreaty accompanied by documentary proof of their penury, to be submitted to their community office. After filing the request, community officials have a certain amount of time (set locally, from five to 10 days) to assess the candidate's needs and to attempt to verify the paperwork presented. Procedures begin with a thorough physical search of the household, along with close inquiry of its members. What follows is a particularly intrusive, sometimes even insidious, procedure, involving interviewing neighbors and visits to the candidate's place of work, if any, to make sure that the applicant has spoken truthfully.

Most embarrassing of all, the results of all the scrutiny are to be posted upon a public board [the *gongshilan*], in order to solicit the views not just of immediate neighbors but of everyone in the community acquainted with the applicant family's true state of eligibility and of everyone in a position to see the targeted family members' daily comings and goings (Interview, 30 August 2007).²⁴ This notice board is to proclaim the number of members living in every payee household; how much money each one is receiving, including any special subsidies; and how much voluntary work (such as neighborhood sanitation, public security, guarding, or gardening) its relevant members performed in a given week, such activity being a necessary condition of enjoying the allowance (Interviews, 29 August 2007).²⁵

Once the community officers have made their tentative appraisal of a case, the file goes up to the street level, where another week or so is spent reviewing the materials, with street officials' deliberations also posted on the community's board. After the same length of time has passed, the records are delivered to the district level, where managers do a reexamination. The judgments about those who so far seem to meet the necessary conditions must once again be subjected to public view. Only if there are no objections, finally the City Civil Affair Bureau gives its stamp of approval and the candidate then becomes a full-fledged "*dibaohu*."

Families admitted into the program are then extended a "*baozhangjin lingquzheng*" [certificate for collecting the funds], which their head is to carry, along with his/her household registration booklet and identification card to claim the allowance, either monthly or by quarter, depending upon the method adopted in the community. Subsequent, regular inspections (sometimes as frequently as every three months, in other cases just every six, to discover whether or not the recipients have found work (Interview, 5 September 2007²⁶) are meant to certify that the family remains qualified to enjoy the subsidy. When its situation or income changes (because of a retirement, a death in the family, a new odd job, or alterations in health), the household head is to notify the *dibao* office in its community to arrange for stopping, reducing or increasing the outlays (Wang, Z. 1999:19; Interview, 27 August 2007).²⁷

There are conspicuous variations in the approaches taken by different municipalities in administering the *dibao*. In his 1998-99 investigation, Tang Jun and his research group found that, perhaps because of the weak economic base of Lanzhou, that city adopted a more mobilizational approach to its indigent than did other cities. Officials there "emphasized arousing the *dibao* targets' activism for production, encouraging and organizing them to develop self-reliance" (Tang 2002b:25). Whether for this reason or simply as a matter of a disparate style of urban management, Lanzhou was more lenient toward sidewalk business than, for instance, Wuhan. In the latter city, a talented but hard-up woman

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 try to make sales (Interview 26 August 2007). And, unlike in the past, after 2000 nowhere in the city could shoe repair specialists be found outside, apparently banned by the authorities.

But in Lanzhou, all manner of curbside business went on unobstructed in summer 2007, including stalls for fixing footwear as well as that of young men hawking political picture posters (Observations, 3 September 2007). Reflecting this permissiveness, the section chief of the *dibao* office in the Gansu provincial civil affairs department admitted 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 5 September 2005).

Pitfalls and disempowerment: exclusions and embezzlements

The stated good intentions of the *dibao* program conceal two sorts of perverse outcomes. The first sort often means denying funding to truly needy people. It entails regulations dictating the exclusion of persons who, however poverty-stricken, are trying to (or in the past did) upgrade a totally minimal

existence, thereby turning them and their offspring into a perpetual underclass. Similar in effect are practices treating poor people "as if" they had payments coming to them that ought to have come but which have not, again disqualifying appropriately indigent citizens from receiving the allowance. These prohibitions amount to marginalization via state--even if just local state or local officials'--design.

The other sort of unintended outcome evidently occurs sufficiently frequently as to be inveighed against in both official documents and conversation with program managers. This is the result of loopholes allowing for embezzlement, deception and defrauding, usually on the part of the officials in charge but also sometimes on the part of the program's recipients. All these behaviors obstruct the achievement of the project's announced objectives, achieving marginalization by subversion of state design. Whether by dictates or by their debasement, both categories of activity produce disenfranchisement.

Exclusions: marginalization via state design

In August 2007, the city of Jinan ruled that anyone who had purchased a computer or who often uses a cell phone could not enjoy the *dibao* ("Jinan guiding" 2007). Beijing's regulations preclude persons from getting the *dibao* who had bought cell phones, arranged for their children to attend schools of their own choice or private schools, or who kept domestic pets. In Liaoning,

using a household phone more than 15 percent more than the local *dibao* norm or even having received gifts whose value was above the poverty line disqualified potential partakers. In Hainan, having births outside the plan can bar from benefits an otherwise needy household (Hainan guiding 2006). Elsewhere, some places banned people from becoming recipients if they had a family business, regardless of its profits or losses--firms losing money and incapable of supporting the family's livelihood could be known to spark quarrels between civil affairs departments and an applicant ("Zhongguo chengshi" 2006).

In Wuhan, among the circumstances that could deprive the destitute of succor were having a motorized vehicle (unless it was required because of disability); doing odd jobs for which the wages are hard to verify; using any hand-held communication device (even if having obtained it as a gift or a loan) or going on the Web (Interview 27 August 2007).²⁸ Several interviewees in Wuhan found their families' *dibao* funds cut back or cut off when a member did take on some wage-earning work. In one case a wife's street-sweeping led to deductions that left four people to survive on some 500-plus yuan per month (Interview).

Also forbidden was enrolling a child in special classes or studying with a foreigner. Grantees took that guideline 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," she fretted (Interview).

A set of "as if" ostracizations serve the same purpose of reducing a locality's financial responsibility, if by other means. Here the justification is: "Since household income is very difficult to determine, hidden employment is pervasive, and hidden income and assets [are known to exist], flexible standards are adopted everywhere" ("Zhongguo chengshi" 2006). This refers to the practice whereby families are rejected in which a member has the ability to work but has not found employment, by considering the person as having received the wages he/she would have earned had the person been on a job. In other words, such reckoning "regards as income" salary or benefits that ought to have been-- but were not--paid to a person, using the person's city's minimum wage or unemployment insurance subsidy to assess the amount of the supposedly received income or benefit and then considering it as if it were the person's actual income ("Chengshi dibao" 2000:24-5). A variant is to count the funds that a person's legal supporter ought to be giving him or her as part of that person's income, even if s/he never really gets it ("Zhongguo chengshi" 2006).

Embezzlements and other violations: marginalization via subversion of state design

Unlike the practices detailed above, which are rationalized through local regulations (though criticized in central-level documents and articles) are outright violations of the policy, committed by parties on both sides of the deal. First of all, administrators may or may not receive the funds they should, probably because some of the money disappears along the way down the hierarchy to their offices. As one analyst expressed it, "there's a black box" containing the intermediary links set up to allocate the capital (Tang 2003:247). Where there are real financial shortages provincial treasuries have appropriated some of the funds for other purposes (Tang 2002a). In the poorest and most backward places preferential policies are often ignored; even where the funds are sufficient, departments that should make the discounts do not find it in their interest to comply ("Zhongguo chengshi" 2006). Dereliction of duty can take other forms, such as playing favorites or falling into arrears ("Chengshi jumin" 1999:17). One study found that on average families obtain 36.5 yuan less than local authorities reported to upper levels (Gong 2000:34).

There are instances too of dishonesty among the targets. Some *dibaohu* falsely report their income, forge documentary evidence, or otherwise conceal their earnings or assets. There also are instances of what what civil affairs essayists depict as "mistaken thinking" among the beneficiaries, such as those 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. Others of strong body “refuse to use their two hands to work but instead play cards all day, out of love of ease and hatred for work,” or so officials claim. Then there are those who, lacking the proper qualifications, “view the *dibao* as a basic right, and want it just because others have it, stretching out their hands under the supposition that everyone should get a share.” Yet others, just because they have been laid off believe they naturally deserve the allowance, whether they have a job or not, and even if they have an adequate source of income.²⁹

One Wuhan community leader explained that without a systematic, societal-wide credit system there is no way to check on whether *dibao* targets are also getting a monthly pension. She alluded to misinterpretation of the program as the root of some inappropriate appeals. In particular, there are residents in ill health whose necessary outlays go beyond their means, but 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, such as those who “clearly don’t fit the criteria for getting the *dibao* but still press for it,” who often run about shouting verbal threats.” She judged that more detailed regulations are needed to prevent some people from taking advantage of the policy’s loopholes and thereby wasting the state’s funds.³⁰

Conclusion

The *dibao* program was admittedly put into place to do nothing more than to meet the most minimal requirements of the targeted needy. Above all, they were not to disturb the forward march of the nation onward toward progress, whether by commotion on the pavement or by dragging down the productivity of their former factories. Perhaps without actively or truly meaning to mold their situation in this way, the state has dealt with the *dibaohu* in a manner that maintains them and their children either sickly and therefore off the streets or else insufficiently schooled to advance in society; out of work and eating too little to grow strong enough to challenge the state. And those able to improve their prospects by providing extra education for their children or by using computers, or to brighten their existence by communicating on cell phones or by seeking entertainment become for these reasons ineligible. No leader of the country would be likely to acknowledge the playing out of this subtext. But this paper has demonstrated that both the regulations that shape this program and the regimens used in enforcing it--whether by design or by subterfuge--marginalize the most indigent among the urbanites. Thus, to date, we have heard nearly nothing about a new underclass in the cities. This paper is an effort to beam light on its members.

TABLE ONE

The *Dibao* as a Percent of Government Expenditures, 1999-2007

unit = billion yuan

YEAR	DIBAO EXPENDITURES	GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES	DIBAO AS % OF EXPENDITURES	GDP	DIBAO AS % OF GDP
1999	1.5	1318.77	0.113	8967.7	0.016
2000	3	1588.65	0.188	99214.6	0.03
2001	4.2	1890.258	0.22	10965.5	0.038
2002	10.53	2205.315	0.477	12033.3	0.0875
2003	15	2464.995	0.608	13582.3	0.11
2004	n.a.	2848.689	n.a.	15987.8	n.a.
2005	19.5	3393.028	0.57	18386.8	0.106
2006	20.33	4042.273	0.503	21180.8	0.096
2007	27.796	4956.54	0.561	24660	0.1127

Sources: For the *dibao*, the figures are either taken from or estimated from the following sources: Tang 2008; Xinhuanet (Beijing), July 19, 2002); Tang 2004a; Tang 2006. For government expenditures (1999-2006), Zhonghua renmin 2007:9. For GDP, *Ibid.*:57. For 2007, Wen: 2008; and Ministry of Finance 2008.

TABLE TWO
NUMBER OF *DIBAO* RECIPIENTS NATIONWIDE,
1999-2007

<u>Year</u>	<u>(unit=million)</u> <u># recipients</u>
1999 (late)	2.8
2000 (3d qtr.)	3.237
2001 (end)	11.7
2002 (July)	19.307
2002 (end)	20.647
2003 (end)	22.468
2004 (end)	22.05
2005 (end)	22.342
2006 (end)	22.401
2007 (end)	22.709

Sources: For 1999: Tang 2002b:15-16; for 2000, *ibid.*, 18; for 2001 and 2002 (July) , Hong 2002:9-10; for 2007, "National urban and rural residents, the minimum livelihood guarantee system for equal coverage," http://64.233.179.104/translate_c?hl=en&sl=zh-CN&u=http://jys.ndrc.gov.cn/xinxi/t20080..., accessed March 18, 2008. For 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 (end of year figures), *Zhonghua renmin* 2007:899.

ENDNOTES

¹According to an investigation reported in “Zhongguo chengshi,,” among adult targets, those with primary education and below represented 24.1 percent and 46.5 percent had been to junior high school, together amounting to 70.6 percent without any senior high school training. A mere 27.6 percent of these people boasted of having some sort of professional or handicraft skill, while just 2.9 percent claimed to have some work. As for their health, the Ministry of Civil Affairs announced that in a national study of 10,000 *dibao* households, 33.7 percent have disabled people, and 64.9 percent had one or more members with a chronic illness or serious illness.

²My thanks to Kam Wing Chan for introducing me to a portal on the Web containing a wealth of official articles.

³According to Tang 2002b:20, Shanghai’s motives for creating the system revolved around the transformation of the enterprises’ operational mechanism and the restructuring of the labor employment system, which, combined, had produced a large amount of unemployment and “laying off.” The city government found that the relief system aimed at the original three welfare targets or the “three withouts” (those unable to work, those without means of livelihood and those without family support) was inadequate and therefore came up with this plan.

³There, Jiang put forward two critical chores at the 1997 Congress: to adjust and improve the ownership structure, and to accelerate the reform of state-owned enterprises.
draw an explicit connection between these reforms and the acceleration of the *dibao*.

⁴There, Jiang put forward two critical chores at the 1997 Congress: to adjust and improve the ownership structure, and to accelerate the reform of state-owned enterprises.

⁵That fall, the United States signed its bilateral agreement with China, a necessary and significant prelude to China’s entry. In the intervening two years before the formal entry took place, Chinese labor economists prepared for the worst. See, for instance, Mo 2000:18-21

⁶Some cities routinely raise the line every year or, in the case of Wuhan and some other places, every two years. Interview, head of the *dibao* section at the Wuhan Civil Affairs Bureau, August 28, 2007.

⁷Lu 1998:20 notes that the 1999 Regulations stipulated that the line could only rise, not fall.

⁸The civil affairs departments provide these other offices with a namelist of the *dibaohu* in their jurisdiction, and it is then up to the offices to provide the relief. Other departments with similar charges are those who take care of housing, legal aid, coal, water, and electricity. The interview was with the head of the *dibao* office under the Gansu Provincial Civil Affairs Department.

⁹Hussain, writing in 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.”

¹⁰The Wuhan ratio was set in 1996 when the program began in that city. Figures for the other cities are in Zhang 1998. Zhang was then Director of the Hubei provincial Department of Civil Affairs.

¹¹See note 3, above.

¹²This is the eighth point in the Regulations. For the Regulations, see “Chengshi jumin” 1999:16.

¹³ Tang's source is "Wo guo" 1997.

¹⁴Tang 2002a reports that the State Statistical Bureau's urban survey group, employing a calorimetric and then a food shopping method set the poverty lines in different provinces and then estimated that the indigent population was 14.8 million at that time

¹⁵Tang 2004:27. Yang Yiyong of the State Planning Commission's Development Research Institute as noting that, since workers in firms that have cut back on production or become bankrupt may not have been counted, it is possible that even Zhu's estimate could be conservative. In Zhu 2004:88, Zhu calculates that while he estimates that about 6.5 percent of the urban population could be counted as poor, the Asian Development Bank--using expenditure as a standard--found 37 million to qualify as poor, or more like eight percent of the urban population.

¹⁶ Hussain, 2002:70 has different figures: he states that the total expenditure in 1999 was just 1.97 billion yuan, and 2.2 billion in 2000, of which the central government contributed 20.3 percent and 24.1 percent, respectively. Since I must make a choice, I intend to base my analysis on Tang's figures, since he is in Beijing permanently and works closely with official figures on an ongoing basis.

¹⁷4.6 billion yuan came from the central treasury and 5.93 billion from local governments, according to Xinhuanet 2002). Thanks to Jane Duckett for this citation.

¹⁸"Zhongguo jianli" (2006) states that the average norm in 2003 nationwide was 149 per capita per month, which had increased to 162, on average, by the third quarter of 2006, with the supplement rising from 58 to 80 yuan per capita per month, on average, over those three years.

¹⁹ These calculations are based upon the figures for governmental expenditure in Zhonghua renmin gongheguo 2007: 279. Hussain 2002:71 states that in 1999 the expenditure on the *dibao* amounted to 0.15 percent of total government expenditure.

²⁰According to Premier Wen Jiabao's annual government work report, delivered on March 5, 2008, the average annual per capita income for urbanites in 2007 was 13,786 yuan, one twelfth of which (or the monthly average) is 1148.33 yuan.

²¹The interview, was at the Wuhan Municipal *dibao* office of the City Civil Affairs Bureau.

²² In Chongqing's case, 600,000 households were inspected. The Director of Hubei's Department of Civil Affairs set down a similar set of procedures that were used in that province in Zhang 1998. Qinghai combined random sample surveys and household interviews to determine the minimum consumption expenditures common in various places, and, by late 1998 was utilizing software, automatic calculators, automatically tabulated printing, and microcomputer management ("Qinghaisheng 1999:24).

²³Zhang mentions Wuhan as having played that role in Hubei.

²⁴The interview was with officers at community W, an area with about 1,600 residents, of whom only about one percent are *dibaohu*.

²⁵The interviews were at community Y containing over 4,000 people, and community Z.

²⁶The interview with the director of the *dibao* office at the Guansu provincial Civil Affairs Department.

²⁷The interview was with *dibao* workers at community X, where there are 1,099 households, of which 7.9 percent are *dibaohu*.

²⁸The interview was at Community X.

²⁹Gong, op. cit.

³⁰Interview, Community V.

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