# Village governance, social cohesion and contentment with social assistance in Northern China

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## Abstract

The Chinese government's legitimacy rests on ensuring the contentment of its people and avoiding social instability. In achieving these goals, the government has been massively aided by rising living standards and perhaps by reduced poverty. However, little is known about the contribution of poverty alleviation to political contentment. Therefore, ethnographic research was conducted in eight villages to explore attitudes to social assistance (*dibao*), a key component in poverty alleviation. Village cadres prioritised social cohesion over poverty relief in administering *dibao*. Nevertheless, cohesion varied markedly between villages, interacting with styles of village governance, to influence villagers' (dis-)satisfaction with *dibao*. Political contentment seemed little influenced by satisfaction with *dibao*.



**Keywords:** China; poverty alleviation; social cohesion, political contentment, village governance; ethnography


## 1 INTRODUCTION

Governments can only govern effectively with the consent of the people. This is arguably as true in China, where from Confucius onwards consent has been believed to go hand in hand with contentment, as it is in western democracies (El Amine, 2015; Kim, 2014). While public policy in China is prescribed centrally, it is interpreted and delivered locally, not infrequently at village level, and officials throughout the system are highly sensitised to the need to avoid

social unrest that might result from discontent (Wang, 2015). Contentment occupies a central place in Chinese philosophy, and it is a primary concern of the Communist Party of China (CPC) that the people should be able 'to live and work in peace and contentment', the word embracing multiple meanings including satisfaction, life-satisfaction, harmony, and social stability (PRC, 2020; Chan, 2008).

The motto of the CPC is 'to serve the people'. With this aspiration, but no national elections to test the will of the people, the Chinese leadership has long emphasised the importance of renewed policies and continuing improvements in the quality of governance and service delivery (Xi, 2014; Saich, 2016). Initially encapsulated by Presidents Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao (2002–12) with populist slogans such as 'putting people first' (*yiren weiben*) and 'building a harmonious society' (*goujian hexie shehui*), this emphasis has continued under President Xi Jinping but with additional stress on the need to rid the system of corruption and institutional alienation (see Xi, 2014; Saich, 2016; Li and Walker, 2020).

The decade long campaign to eradicate extreme rural poverty, often fronted by Xi Jinping himself, was a flagship example to this approach to governance with targeted interventions at all levels of government involving infrastructure development, human capital investment and transfers to increase family incomes (IPRCC, 2020; Li and Walker, 2020).

Many of the initiatives associated with the rural poverty eradication campaign were specific and time-limited (IPRCC, 2020). Social assistance, though, has been the one sustained source of public funding targeted specifically on individuals experiencing poverty. Introduced nationally in 2007, *dibao* (低保) (formally the Minimum Living Security System (zuidi shenghuo baozhang zhidu 最低生活保障制度), is now the world's largest cash social assistance system. Administered differently in urban and rural areas, *dibao* has become a major financial resource in many villages, complementing low rural incomes and remittances attributed to migrant villagers working away in urban areas. *Dibao* has attracted much scholarly attention, a good deal of it concerned with policy efficiency and targeting errors,

and it has been reformed on several occasions with a view to improving its effectiveness (Gao, 2017; Li and Walker, 2018a). But there is a relative lack of research exploring villagers' satisfaction with *dibao* administration, the factors affecting it, or its contribution to citizen contentment (Han and Gao, 2020; Li and Walker, 2018b).

While conducting the research fieldwork focussed on satisfaction with *dibao* it became clear that this needed to be understood as an element in village governance more generally. Prior scholarship has established a link between local governance and villager satisfaction, but fieldwork pointed to social cohesion as a major mediating influence (Mok et al., 2011; 2020; Wang 2015; Tsai, 2007). Therefore, this article seeks to explore how villagers' experience and understanding of *dibao*, especially those aspects captured along dimensions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, vary among different villages and the extent to which this satisfaction and generalised contentment is shaped by, and interacts with, various patterns of village decision-making and social cohesion.

## 2 RURAL *DIBAO*, CHINA'S SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

While Deng Xiaoping's policy opening-up China to foreign investment is credited by many with stimulating an unprecedent era of economic growth (Mühlhahn, 2019: De Freitas, 2019), the associated closure of many state-owned enterprises resulted in unemployment to which Shanghai responded, in 1993, by introducing a tax-funded, social assistance scheme: Urban Minimum Living Guarantee System (UMLGS). *Dibao*, modelled on the UMLGS, was introduced to all cities by 1999 and extended to rural areas in 2007 and is recognised to have facilitated continuing economic reform by supporting laid-off workers and maintaining social stability (Leung & Xu 2009). However, *dibao* is equally much criticised (Golan et al. 2014; Li and Li 2015).

Sharing many of the characteristics of European social assistance schemes, *dibao* is nominally rights-based with persons having incomes below a specified threshold being

eligible for receipt. However, with the level of need exceeding the prescribed budget, *dibao* must be rationed locally rather than allocated which makes a pretence of the concept of an individual right to benefit. In rural areas this is achieved by village committees and the administration has frequently been co-opted for various purposes to do with village and community governance, social control, election rigging and remuneration of low-level cadres (Li and Walker, 2018a; Golan et al., 2014).

*Dibao* in rural areas has largely escaped the stigma associated with means-tested social assistance in other parts of the world, partially because it is received by many people who are not suffering from poverty (Li and Walker 2018b). Villagers experiencing poverty and who do not receive *dibao* inevitably often feel aggrieved while recipients in poverty feel stigmatised because of their poverty rather than their receipt of *dibao*. Aware that *dibao* was in practice poorly targeted – often going to persons not entitled to receive it – central government has instigated several reforms to rid the scheme of corruption (Zhu, 2012). *Dibao* distribution is largely based on two principles: social protection for the poorest and most marginalised community members as a procedure of redistribution, and social control for relieving villagers' unrest and complaints; for example, to appease troublemakers and reward active supporters of village governance (Li, 2017). Recent reforms have curtailed the scope for abuse and with it, to some degree, the scope for local discretion (Tan, 2018; Li and Walker, 2020).

Little of the research on village governance has focussed on villagers' attitudes towards *Dibao* or their satisfaction with its implementation (Wang, 2015; Lu et al., 2013; Liu and Raine, 2015). Formally, *dibao* is administered by villages according to the Organic Law of the Villagers' Committees 2010. This law asserts that 'villagers administer their own affairs, educate themselves and serve their own needs and …elections are conducted, decisions taken, administration maintained, and supervision exercised by democratic means'. Democracy should be understood not as multi--party or even local democracy in the western sense, but villagers' involvement in local decision-making either through electing named

representatives or by direct engagement necessarily under the oversight of representatives of the Chinese Communist Party.

The degree of democracy can vary markedly, and this might be expected to impact on villagers' satisfaction with *dibao* (Andreas and Dong, 2018; Xiong, 2011). After conducting an extensive review of the literature and detailed fieldwork Tsai (2007; 2002) has classified village governance in China into four types based on extensive empirical work: governance through all-villager meetings; with village representative committees; by means of authoritarian leadership, with finally, what she terms 'lax governance', meaning, in essence, the lack of an effective mode of village administration. Some representative committees are democratically elected, whereas others are comprised of appointees determined by village cadres. The village cadres are themselves nominally elected by villagers to be quasi-officials, unpaid but with prescribed duties as the lowest level within China's system of governance. Sometimes, village governance is quite autocratic with cadres forming a cabal or a single leader emerging as the dominant force. In a 'laxly governed' village, the cadres either lack ability or interest to govern successfully. Tsai's framework is one of the most influential categorisations of village governance in China and this article draws her work in the following discussion.

From the literature, therefore, the expectation on entering the field was that villagers' satisfaction with *dibao* would be mostly influenced by its administration (Figure 1). However, village cadres, no matter how autocratic, are accountable to various formal and informal institutions (village elites; industrialists and entrepreneurs; clans) while also being embedded in networks of reciprocity (*guanxi*) (Kung, Cai & Sun, 2009). Moreover, it quickly became clear that another influence on villager satisfaction was the sense of shared identity and togetherness reflecting local traditions and collective community memory. Although the term 'social cohesion' was not used by villagers, their accounts mapped well onto the three dimensions often used to define this concept in Western literature: social relations; connectedness between individuals and institutions; and attachment to the common good

(Stiftung, 2017; Mok et al., 2011). Social cohesion shares similarities with the Chinese concept of harmony, much stressed by political leaders a decade ago, and with the absence of social unrest, a key consideration for village cadres conscious of their responsibilities to town and county officials (Wang et al., 2016; Li &Walker, 2018; 2020).

**[Insert Figure 1 here]**

The research setting and the methodology adopted to profile contentment with *dibao* are described next before sharing the emergent understanding of the social interactions and patterns of village government that help to explain it.

Existing research suggests that patterns of village governance in China and the level of village cohesion are the most influential determinants of villagers' (dis)satisfaction with social policy implementation (e.g. He, 2017; Zhang, 2018; Liu, 2019). However, to what extent and how villagers' (dis)satisfaction is shaped by patterns of village governance and village cohesion remained unexplored. This article addresses this gap by exploring villagers' experiences and (dis)satisfaction concerning *dibao* decision-making and delivery in eight different village settings. It seeks to understand, in particular, how villagers' (dis)satisfaction with *dibao* is shaped by different patterns of village governance and variations in village cohesion, given that *dibao* is delivered in a similar way in all villages.

## 3 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research setting

Ethnographic fieldwork was initially conducted in eight villages administrated by two townships within a county, here termed Sky county, in northern Shanxi Province between 2015 and 2016.

The study villages ranged in size from 400 to 2,750 nominal residents, many of whom had migrated to urban areas, and drew incomes primarily from farming and remittances from

migrants. Sky County was designated as a 'state poverty county' under the 1986 'National-level poorest counties' scheme and therefore qualified for special financial transfer payments, project funding and infrastructure construction. In November 2017, 19 per cent of the rural population in Sky county were receiving monthly *dibao* payments averaging 270 yuan (£31), much higher than the national average of 175 yuan (£20).

Reforms instigated in 2014 transferred decision-making to the village level with the county *dibao* office controlling overall funding and paying individual recipients' directly through bank transfer. This increased workloads for unpaid village cadres who nominally have responsibility for promoting *dibao* and, identifying persons eligible. who, Therefore, rather than trying to maximize the number of *dibao* recipients, cadres in all eight villages tried to keep the *dibao* caseload static, minimising the number of new applications. Despite this, caseloads grew noticeably between the first fieldwork in 2015/6 and 2019 *dibao* was increasingly used in support of the poverty eradication target.

### 3.2 Fieldwork

The research team consisted of nine members, five from Beijing Normal University and four research students recruited locally with appropriate language skills and a detailed understanding of local context. Researchers from Beijing were paired with the local students to conduct household interviews and participant observation.

Villages were selected purposely with the aim of including two villages of each of the four governance styles identified by Tsai (2007). However, villages in Shanxi are relatively large and none were found to operate "all villagers" meetings (characteristic of small villages in southern China). In selecting villages, the research team relied on the knowledge and advice of county and township government officials. While advised that the sample of villages contained all types of governance, three of the villages identified by gatekeepers as

being governed by representative village committees in reality corresponded closely with Tsai's characterisation of an authoritarian style of village governance.

Participant observation was undertaken over a six-week period through which to learn how villagers, village cadres, poor and non-poor villagers, applicants, and local officials interacted during the process of implementing *dibao*. Fieldwork was completed when parallel analyses suggested data saturation. As told, 145 semi-structured interviews and eight focus group discussions were conducted concerned with understanding villager involvement in village governance, *dibao* delivery and decision-making. Interviewees included 86 *dibao* recipients and 24 village cadres, both groups being selected at random from official lists, together with 27 other villagers who were non-recipients, snowballed from initial suggestions provided by village leaders, of whom 15 were living in poverty and eligible for *dibao*, and 12 were not poor. Non-*dibao* recipients were interviewed in depth and in group interviews and served as principal informants describing village governance and villagers' attitudes rather than as individual respondents focussing on personal experiences and feelings. No cadres were present during the interviews and focus groups to ensure respondents were able to talk freely. Early interviews were based on a predesigned topic guide that was subsequently adapted and improved in the light of in-the-field analysis and reflectivity. All research materials, transcriptions, and field notes were carefully coded and linked to anonymised research participants to explore the multiple realities in social policy delivery. The research was approved and conducted in accordance with Oxford University ethical code.

In assessing villagers' satisfaction levels, the client-centred approach proposed by Hsieh and Essex (2006) was adapted to fieldwork conditions. The key feature of the approach was to assess clients' satisfaction for each service element through rating scales and then to average satisfaction scores across all service elements to represent the overall satisfaction (Hsieh, 2018). In this research, fieldnotes and transcriptions made from interviews, focus group discussions and participant observations were coded independently by nine researchers, compared and amalgamated to retrieve general themes related to villagers'

complaints and to their impressions of, and overall (dis)satisfaction with, *dibao.* While based on individual responses from *dibao* recipients and village informants, the unit of analysis was the village and the assessments underpinning the village 'dissatisfaction score' were essentially qualitative being based on the collective judgement of the research team. A further categorization was made appertaining to dissatisfaction relating to mismanagement and inequitable treatment. Without good grounds for weighting individual components, the overall score was a simple average yielding an asymmetric 0-5 scale, with 0 representing satisfaction and 5 representing extreme dissatisfaction. Given the reluctance of individual respondents to commit anything to paper or explicitly to rate village cadres, this approach enabled judgments to be distilled from discursive conversations while minimizing bias and exploiting local understanding by subjecting each decision to extensive discussion and critique.

A similar collective approach was used to assess decision-making arrangements and levels of social cohesion, the latter accounting for horizonal and vertical interactions, trust in people and institutions, attachment to - and active participation for - the common good, and expression of community identity and belonging. Cohesion each village was assessed, after extensive discussion of observation and interview transcripts as being weak, medium or strong.

Reflecting the broadly ethnographic approach to fieldwork, the reasoning presented in this article is inductive rather than deductive. Patterns are sought within rather than imposed on the data. Much weight is given to respondents' understandings, their causal reasoning, and the explanations that they give for their behaviour. However, by working across villages, and gaining insights from village cadres and county and town administrators as well as villagers, the research can identify regularities and possible causal processes not necessarily recognised by most respondents.

## 4 VILLAGE DECISION-MAKING, DIBAO AND SOCIAL COHESION

While villages have some discretion in the administration of *dibao*, differences between the eight study villages, falling under the jurisdiction of a single county, were comparatively minor. All had decided to implement *dibao* as a universal old age benefit rather than as the targeted social assistance scheme intended by central government. This strategy had been adopted to avoid the complexity of assessing income and to avoid social unrest ensuing from disputes over eligibility (Yang, et al; 2020). There were, though, differences in the age thresholds for *dibao* (usually 80) and, when aged between 60 and 79, eligible illnesses. These differences reflected variations in the resources allocated by the county.

**[Insert Table 1]**

In only one of the study villages, Ridge, were community issues including *dibao* decided by a village committee (Table 1). Satisfaction with the administration of *dibao* was high. The committee comprised five men, led by the village head and the Party secretary, and although all members could be considered representative of the village elite, being relatively well educated and well off, none was a distinguished entrepreneur (there were no large businesses in the village) or harboured great political ambitions. The literature suggests that village committees are likely to enhance direct villager participation in governance and to bring about a better representation of villager interests than other modes of governance (Jacka & Wu, 2016). In Ridge village, this tended to mean equal treatment with strict adherence to the regulations rather than flexibility in terms of responding to individuals' needs.

In marked contrast to Ridge village, satisfaction with the administration of *dibao* was low in villages Nook and Dale which were both also characterised by lax government and low social cohesion, lacking a sense of community identity, togetherness, and collective memory. This dearth of cohesion was perhaps due to both villages having been "hollowed out" by out-migration leaving few talented people of working age and no one with real

interest in managing the village. Nominally Nook operated a village committee system, but meetings were conspicuous by their absence, leaving governance in the hands of a party secretary close to retirement and a village head who was generally considered to be "too soft" to be effective. No one, including the village head, was able to provide a coherent account of the governance in Dale village which seemed to involve a quadrumvirate comprising of the Party secretary and vice secretary, the treasurer, and the village head.

The other five villages where characterised by authoritarian leadership under either the village head or the Party secretary who effectively took, or oversaw, all village decisions including those pertinent to *dibao*. All the leaders were also successful entrepreneurs but differed in their commitment to village governance which, in turn, generated or reflected varying degrees of social cohesion. Meadow village was led in a benevolent fashion by the Party secretary who had assumed the position a decade ago at the young age of 26. With relatively limited education and no further political ambitions, he had devoted time exclusively to his personal business and to village governance. Through successfully lobbying the township for funding he had sought to maximize collective as well as personal interests, benefiting villagers through public and personal largesse. Widely regarded as a "benevolent despot",[1] his actions fostered high social cohesion, a strong sense of village identity and universal support for village policies. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, this village recorded the highest level of satisfaction with *dibao*.

In contrast, social cohesion was very weak in villages Valley and Forest which differed from each other in terms of the style of authoritarian leadership. Valley village was led by a highly successful entrepreneur who delegated administration of the village to an agent. While the head had much *guanxi* with officials at up to provincial level, this was largely used to the benefit of his commercial ventures such that villagers were requested to help pay for village improvements. With three large-scale enterprises employing only a proportion of village

[1] This term is not taken directly from the Chinese discourse but accurately summarises the sentiments expressed by village respondents and informants.

inhabitants, income differentials were large which further eroded any sense of local identity in a village that felt as if was governed from afar. Forest village, which was less commercially successful and less than half the size of Valley village, was directly managed by the Party secretary and village head who effectively took all relevant decisions. However, administration was passive rather than engaged as illustrated, for example, by the fact that no attempt had been made in the previous five years to seek funding to make village improvements. Therefore, little was being done to stimulate social cohesion which was very low.

Social cohesion was somewhat higher in the final two villages, Ford and Hill. In both, Party secretaries had been in post for many years and headed large agricultural enterprises, using their status as village cadres to leverage government resources to further invest in these activities. Again, village decisions, including individual *dibao* decisions, were taken exclusively by the Party secretary with some limited input from the village head in Hill but not in Ford because the head had been imprisoned. There was little audible opposition to these arrangements since they had been the system for as long as anyone could remember. People knew who took decisions and therefore where power resided, but experience had taught them that neither protestations nor requests would generate a worthwhile response.

To recap, styles of governance varied markedly in the eight villages as did levels of social cohesion. Moreover, governance and cohesion were interconnected.

## 5 SATISFACTION WITH *DIBAO*

While recipients of *dibao* were largely content with the scheme in every village, the satisfaction levels of other villagers varied markedly from one village to another (Table 2). Issues that concerned them were lack of fairness and maladministration. Considerable dissatisfaction was expressed by residents in villages lacking in social cohesion, whereas villagers were more positive where village governance was perceived to be accessible and

responsive. It should be borne in mind that the eligibility criteria and targeting of *dibao* were materially the same across all eight villages.

**[Insert Table 2]**

The fairness or otherwise of *dibao* was a major talking point and, unsurprisingly, villagers who were convinced that they had been wrongly denied benefit were highly critical of the system. Nevertheless, most people considered that *dibao* was much fairer than it had been before the 2014 reform. Similarly, there was universal approval for using age and health condition as eligibility criteria of rather than income. This meant that everyone was likely to receive *dibao* eventually, and most were unaware – or did not take seriously the fact - that this fundamentally undermined the poverty alleviation objectives of central government. There was, though, some grumbling that the health criteria excluded many people in need and that they were powerless to change this. These views were most evident in villages lacking social cohesion.

> *I have suffered from rheumatoid arthritis and my husband needs to have his hip replaced. We have not been able to work properly for 20 years. We are the poorest household in the village. But because both of us are only in our mid-forties …I was told that our diseases were far from being fatal therefore we were not eligible for* dibao*.*
>
> Villager with disabled limbs, Ridge

> *(The real poor people) cannot rely on* dibao*, because we don't have* guanxi *to get it. It is not meant to be for the poor… The most reliable way to get oneself out of poverty, is to cultivate one's children and make them capable when they grow up."*
>
> Villager living in poverty, Nook

In addition, some people deprived benefit after 2014 continued to feel resentment especially when they had been compelled to use costly illegitimate means to meet a legitimate need. For example, a villager in Hill village, who was unable to work due to a car accident when in his early 20s, spent 3000 yuan (US$444) to "buy" *dibao* in 2012 through a relative working at the county government:

> *Because it was never possible to get it through a legal and formal process! If everybody had to pay for it, it is the dominant social practice. Then I thought it was fine for me to pay for it […] but then they cancelled it very soon. I even didn't get back the amount that I paid for!*
>
> Villager living in poverty, Hill

But the major criticism was maladministration, the belief that receiving *dibao* was conditional on having a good relationship -*guanxi* – with local cadre. "Know-how" was also important, an understanding, that is, of who took decisions and under what circumstances, whether key cadres were susceptible to good argumentation, to being bribed or to threats to make trouble by appealing to higher authorities.

The belief in the importance of *guanxi* was undoubtedly informed by memories of the corruption existing before 2014 and by an understanding of how village governance is generically practiced across a range of issues. However, the predominant view, among poor and non-poor alike, but especially in low cohesion villages with less engaged administrations, was that *guanxi* is still a necessary ingredient in obtaining *dibao*. Even in less authoritarian villages, few challenged the belief that "one is eligible for *dibao* if the village head says 'yes'; one is not if he says 'no'". Moreover, this appeared to be for good reason as illustrated by an elderly villager from Meadow, the village that attracted most positive comments:

> *If you have money to bribe the village head, it is always good. But I didn't really have the money, I visited him one night and gave him two chicks that I raised. I mentioned*

*the good relationship between his parents and myself. Then he said, "uncle, you should go back and wait for good news".*

Villager living in poverty, Meadow

In Forest, a village lacking social cohesion, a woman complained: "the richer you are, the more likely you can eat on *dibao*, the poorer you are, the less likely you get it!" A man in the same group interview then added: "A new-born baby can eat on *dibao* only if it has enough *guanxi*!".

In the four least cohesive villages, g*uanxi* may well have been sufficient for villagers who were ineligible for dibao successfully to claim it. Ironically, *guanxi* was even needed by those who would, on national criteria, have been eligible for *dibao* on income grounds but who were neither old nor disabled.

*I cannot trust any of the policy implementations in my village. We say that "the scriptures are always good but are misread!"* Dibao *is good but it has been messed up by local cadres. One can never get any benefits without* guanxi*... There should be criteria for receiving* dibao*. But the criteria are all controlled by the village head. You are qualified [eligible] when he [the village head] is happy with your bribes!*

The one limitation was lack of knowhow which was difficult to acquire in the villages of Nook and Dale because they were also characterised by lax and non-transparent governance.

*We also want to offer bribes to get* dibao *just like people do in other villages. But our village is managed so chaotically that people never know how* dibao *is operated and decided, who is really in charge and who really cares about us. "One has to find the temple before one can worship the god!"*

Villager living in poverty, Nook

A borderline applicant might also have been able to negotiate *dibao* in Meadow village but by appealing to the benevolence from the leader who was keen to promote the well-being of

villagers. However, someone living in Ridge village with its active *dibao* committee would have found it difficult to circumvent the regulations, not only because the *modus operandi* of the committee was the strict application of rules, but also because more *guanxi* was required to impress a committee than to turn a single individual.

> *Some people received* dibao *simply by complaining to upper-level governments. But it's never worked in this village. The village head is too tough to be threatened... You have to explain your hardship in order to get his compassion.*
>
> Villager in Meadow

> *As a poor person in another village, you might convince the village head or bribe him or threaten him to get* dibao*. But in this village, they (village cadres) would tell you that all decisions are made by a group of people in the village committee.*
>
> Villager, Ridge

The prevalent presumption that *guanxi* was always salient in village decisions accommodates *dibao* within traditional Chinese culture while placing a ceiling on satisfaction levels. Recipients were tarnished by suspicion that their claim was illicit, those receiving *dibao* through *guanxi* were at risk of exposure while non recipients were resentful or simply assumed that the whole system was corrupt. Such views created the lens through which villagers evaluated the village administration of *dibao*. Beyond Meadow village with a "benevolent despot" as leader and Ridge village with its active *dibao* committee, villagers believed that *dibao* decision taking was non-transparent and management unresponsive. The perceived lack of transparency is well captured by the following observations offered by villagers from Forest and Dale, both villages low on cohesion, the latter with a demonstrably lax form of governance.

> *We [villagers] neither know when/how the* dibao *application process starts every year; nor the explicit criteria for eligibility… it is all very unclear to us. We know* dibao*, like everything else in this village, must be decided by the village head but we*

*don't know how it is decided. Village cadres don't explain it to the villagers. Those who eat on* dibao *also tend to avoid talking about it.*

Villager, Forest

*I have no idea about the* dibao *policy at all. There has never been any villagers' meetings or propaganda to explain it. I just heard about the thing called* dibao*, but what it is for? Who is eligible for it? How can people get it? I have no knowledge about it therefore I dare not speak about it on any occasion.*

*Villager, Dale*

All villagers, except those in Ridge who benefited from the active *dibao* committee, were ignorant about the application and decision-making processes for *dibao*, whereas the national intent was that they should be actively involved as a means of controlling corruption. This equally meant that potential applicants were unclear about eligibility or even how to apply. An example was Huang XY who lived in Nook, a village with limited cohesion and weak governance. Aged 61, she and her husband were dependent solely on what they could eek out from their 5-mu farmland and were in debt due to monthly medical bills of 4000-5000 yuan (£460-570). Although "convinced" that they were eligible for *dibao*, they did not know how to apply.

*Everybody in the village knows that I am the poorest. But whom should I talk to about* dibao *eligibility? I went to the village committee, they simply replied, "you are not eligible for* dibao *yet. We will give it to you when you are eligible. No need to come and ask for it."*

Unsuccessful *dibao* applicants similarly complained that they were not told the reasons for their rejection despite repeatedly asking. Such complaints, made loudly in Hill, Ford, Dale, Valley and Nook villages, were not without substance; like the practice of rigid adherence to age criteria adopted by authoritarian cadres in the two moderately cohesive villages (Hill and Ford), the lack of feedback reflected a desire by cadres to avoid additional work and difficult

decisions. Often cadres simply did not know how to respond to people who were clearly in need but below the age threshold, a purely discretionary threshold albeit one fixed at county level. Moreover, keeping villagers in ignorance reduced demand for *dibao* but also enabled weak cadres to hide behind higher authority as Nook's village head inadvertently admitted:

> *[When villagers come to complain about* dibao], *I tell them it is government policy, I am making decisions in line with the* dibao *policy […] the policy is not in a written form. I am doing what I am told by the upper-level governments.*
>
> Village head, *Nook*

To summarise, villagers' understanding and evaluation of *dibao* and its administration were driven less by direct experience and more by structural characteristics: the style of village governance; and the social cohesiveness of the community (Table 1). Hence, villager satisfaction with *dibao*, across a range of characteristics, was highest in the village (Meadow) led by a benevolent head and in Ridge, the village with a functioning *dibao* committee, and lowest in the two villages (Dale and Nook) characterised by lax governance and low social cohesion. While it was generally believed, rightly or wrongly, that *guanxi* was necessary for receipt of *dibao*, which inevitably meant that *dibao* was allocated unfairly, this was more tolerated by villagers in Meadow and Ridge who rated other aspects of administration more highly. In villages lacking cohesion and good governance, general dissatisfaction tended to cloud people's perception of the entire *dibao* scheme:

> *The whole* Dibao *process is unfair and unequal. The village head needs to be replaced in this village. A "good" man can never be a good village cadre. It takes a bully to govern the village so that all villagers are afraid of him and respect his decisions […] Our village head is incapable; nobody would listen to him and he cannot lead the* Dibao *process at all.*
>
> Villager*, Nook*

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The sensitising expectation that villagers' satisfaction with social assistance, *dibao*, might be influenced by different modes of delivery reflecting the style of village governance was confirmed (Figure 1). However, social cohesion also emerged as a major influence on satisfaction that was itself shaped by governance practices and additionally seemed to affect the style of governance (Figure 2). Social cohesion and governance style both appeared to be more important determinants of satisfaction than did the particularities of the *dibao* scheme which was similar across the eight villages. Dissatisfaction was greatest in villages lacking social cohesion and with lax governance, while high satisfaction was only recorded under a benevolent authoritarian regime and in a village with an active representative committee (Tables 1 and 2).

**[Figure 2 here]**

All villages had, in delivering *dibao* as a universal old age benefit, prioritised social cohesion above the national goal of targeting extreme poverty, thereby undermining the national poverty alleviation campaign. However, the ethnography reveals that the degree of social cohesion varied markedly between villages. It also confirms the existence of radically different styles of governance and points to relationships between governance style and social cohesion that help to explain why dissatisfaction with specific policies such as *dibao* did not manifest as generalised discontent. For example, an engaged style of governance, even if authoritarian, can symbiotically build a sense of communality and collective interest; this, in turn, finds expression in terms of generic satisfaction and a willingness to overlook deficiencies in the targeting of *dibao* and in the probity of the administration. Rightly or wrongly, *guanxi*, manifest as corruption to the extent to it led to illicit receipt of *dibao*, was thought still to be ubiquitous, but was only a cause of complaint in villages lacking in cohesion. Indeed, *guanxi* may itself be an expression of social cohesion (Fei, 1992). Lax government, though, seemed to engender negative attitudes towards many aspects of village life, including the administration of *dibao*.

The relationship between social cohesion and village governance is moderated and mediated by a host of other factors. While social cohesion appears to be heavily influenced by the effectiveness, fairness, transparency, and collective participation of village governance, it also reflects villagers' collective memory, communal industrial development, conflicts between villagers. Elsewhere in China, it is shaped by powerful families, clans and even by the existence of collective ritual or religious activities (See He & Tong, 2002; He, 2019; Tsai, 2007). Recursive causality is also possible. Village identity appeared to be affected by factors such as outmigration and economic development that shaped a shared history and memory, influenced social cohesion and, in turn, served to facilitate or frustrate an engaged style of governance.

In the light of such evidence the initial presumption that democratic committees would uniquely and necessarily foster strong cohesion seems overly simplistic. A democratically elected committee might fall foul of individual rivalries, play only a limited role, or have its positive impact on village cohesion offset by other factors. Moreover, with five combinations of governance styles and cohesion identified among just eight study villages and other combinations possible, associations between benevolent policy and public contentment, not to mention social unrest and the people's consent, are far more complex than allowed for in top-down formulations that assert good policy ensures political support and social stability.

To return, then, to the initial question of the importance of social assistance and the high-profile poverty alleviation campaign in fostering social contentment, the evidence suggests that they may not have been material in rural China. Even within a poverty-designated county most people were ineligible for *dibao* – the most important individual component of poverty alleviation - nor were they involved in *dibao* decisions given the absence of villagers meeting in most villages. While recipients valued it, the majority were sceptical, suspicious, and, if ever refused benefit, antagonistic. The legacy, perhaps the continuation, of corruption in its administrion was also disliked. However, for most villagers *dibao* was not

separated out from their overall assessment of village governance which was in turn influenced by multiple factors including social cohesion (Figure 2).

In drawing conclusions, it is important to recognise the limitations of the research. Designed to study satisfaction with *dibao* administration and based primarily on samples of *dibao* recipients, it became clear that *dibao* could only be understood as part of village governance more generally. Future work might directly compare *dibao* with other aspects of village governance, draw more balanced samples, include individual level assessments of satisfaction, and introduce measures of generalised political contentment to complement the ethnographic approach adopted in this research.

However, while no study is definitive and further research is required to establish its generalizability, three findings warrant re-statement and further investigation in villages elsewhere in China. First, further evidence is offered that, though *dibao* social assistance is a foundation element in China's poverty alleviation strategy, its implementation can serve to frustrate rather than to foster poverty eradication (Li and Walker, 2018a, 2020). Secondly, differing styles of village governance are revealed to have important ramifications for policy outcomes and for individual and collective well-being (Tsai, 2007). Thirdly, it appears that there is much dissatisfaction with *dibao* administration and village governance more generally but no sign of political discontentment and unrest. Local cadres certainly sought to avoid discontent and division by paying *dibao* as an old-age supplement, although this failed to guarantee social cohesion at the village level. As reported in other studies, discontent was also directed towards local rather than central government: to paraphrase the respondent from Valley village, "the scriptures… are misread; good policy is delivered badly!" (Liu and Raine, 2015; Li & Walker, 2018).

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**Table 1: Variations in village decision-making arrangement and in the strength of village social cohesion**

| The strength of village social cohesion | Village decision-making arrangement | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Type A: Village committee | Type B: Authoritarian | Type C: Lax governance |
| Type 1: Strong | | Meadow | |
| Type 2: Medium | Ridge | Ford, Hill | |
| Type 3: Weak | | Valley, Forest | Nook, Dale |

**Table 2: Rating (dis-)satisfaction with *dibao* among non-recipients in eight villages (poor[non-poor])**

| *Dibao* Dissatisfaction | | Dale | Nook | Valley | Forest | Hill | Ford | Ridge | Meadow |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Dibao* Unfairness | Corruption and *guanxi* dominate | 5[5] | 5[4] | 5[4] | 5[4] | 5[4] | 5[4] | 4[3] | 3[1] |
| | Inappropriate criteria | 5[4] | 5[4] | 4[2] | 4[2] | 5[2] | 4[1] | 3[2] | 2[0] |
| | Mis-targeting | 5[4] | 5[4] | 5[2] | 5[3] | 5[1] | 5[2] | 4[1] | 4[0] |
| Mis-management | Poor responsiveness/ management | 5[5] | 5[4] | 4[2] | 4[3] | 4[3] | 4[]2 | 3[2] | 0[0] |
| | Authoritarian decision-making | 4[2] | 4[3] | 5[3] | 5[2] | 5[4] | 5[2] | 2[2] | 3[3] |
| | Non-transparent | 4[4] | 4[3] | 4[4] | 3[4] | 4[4] | 4[4] | 3[1] | 1[0] |
| Overall dissatisfaction | | 5[4] | 5[4] | 5[3] | 4[3] | 5[3] | 4[2] | 3[2] | 2[1] |

Note: ratings are made on a 0-5 scale where 0= satisfaction and 5= extreme dissatisfaction.

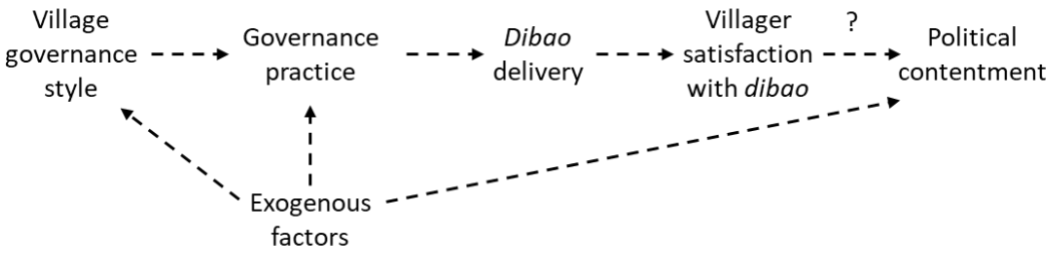


**Figure 1: *Dibao* and contentment: initial expectation**

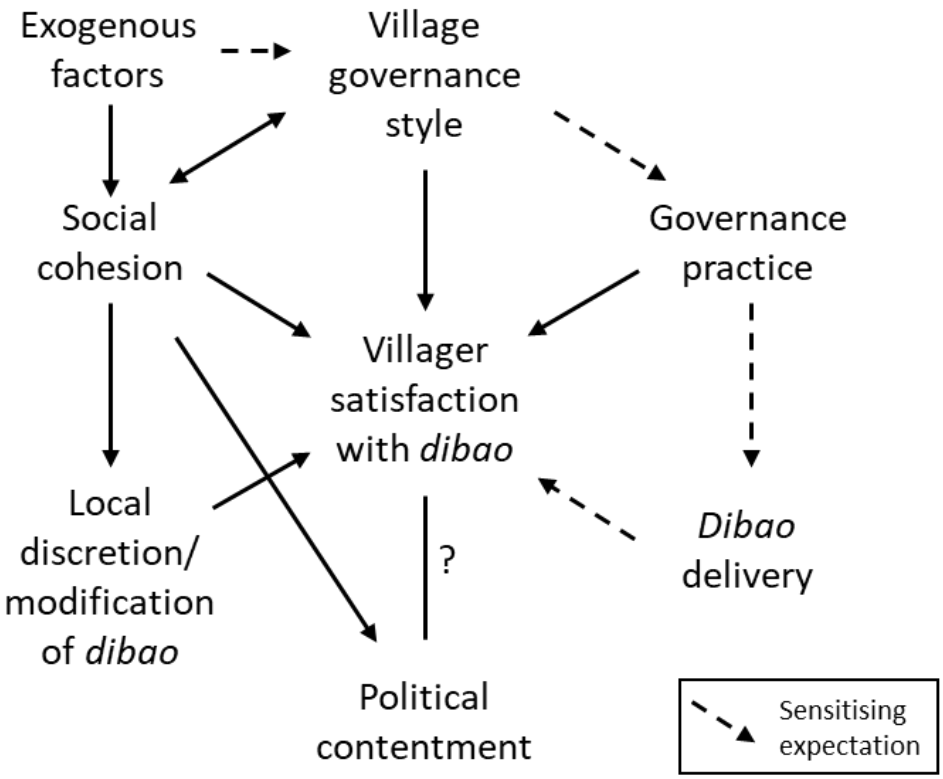


**Figure 2: Understanding *dibao* satisfaction and contentment: a schematic model**