

Shame, Face and Social Relations in Northern China: Ramifications for social assistance provision

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Abstract:

While it is increasingly recognised that shame is a pernicious component of the experience of poverty, the stigma generally associated with social assistance provision is less marked with respect to China's Minimum Living Security System, also known as *dibao*. This enigma is explored and illuminated drawing on two streams of indigenous Chinese scholarship and qualitative fieldwork in eight villages in Shanxi province. Economic and political changes prioritising economic growth and individual wealth have increased the shame associated with poverty, manifest as loss of face, low *mian* (status) and lack of *lian* (integrity). However, this shame does not transfer to *dibao* because the scheme has been transformed locally into a universal age supplement that partially fulfils the demands of filial piety and which is seen to reflect and contribute to *guanxi* (social influence).

Introduction

Globally, there is increasing recognition that poverty is multidimensional with ramifications extending beyond material deprivation to include psycho-social stress, social isolation and powerless as well as poor health and limited access to education and other services.¹ There is also evidence, both from China and elsewhere, that social assistance systems can either contribute to, or ameliorate, the psychosocial consequences of poverty and may themselves reflect the social forces that shape perceptions of poverty.² Drawing on qualitative fieldwork research in villages in the northern Chinese province of Shanxi, this article explores how the implementation of social assistance interacts with local culture to fashion the experience of poverty in this part of rural China.

One dimension of poverty that has attracted much attention recently is that of poverty-related shame. As long ago as 1983, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argued that shame lay at the 'irreducible absolutist core in the idea of poverty' but only recently have studies begun to reveal the pervasive and destructive nature of poverty-related shame.³ The pioneering World Bank *Voices of the Poor* research on the experiences of 40,000 people in 23 countries revealed daily humiliation experienced by people in poverty⁴ while a more recent in-depth study of seven countries showed that the shame and its debilitating consequences attached to poverty were as

¹ Robert Walker et al., "Poverty in Global Perspective: Is Shame a Common Denominator?" *Journal of Social Policy* 42, no. 2 (2013): 215-33; World Bank, *Monitoring Global Poverty: Report of the Commission on Global Poverty* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2017); Scott Wisor, Joanne Crawford, Sharon Bessell and Janet Hunt, *The Individual Deprivation Measure: A gender-sensitive approach to poverty measurement* (Melbourne: International Women's Development Agency, 2016).

² See, e.g. Chen, Y., Walker, R. and Hong, L., "Subjective Experiences of Older People in Poverty in Urban China and the Role of Social Policy," *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development* 28, no. 1 (2018): 1-14; Li, M. and Walker, R., "Shame, Stigma and the Take-up of Social Assistance: Insights from Rural China," *International Journal of Social Welfare* 26, (2017): 230-238; Baumberg, B., Bell, K. and Gaffney, D., *Benefits Stigma in Britain*. (London: Turn2Us, 2012); Chase, E. and R. Walker, "The Co-construction of Shame in the Context of Poverty: Beyond a Threat to the Social Bond," *Sociology* 47, no. 4 (2012): 739-754.

³ Amartya Sen, "Poor, relatively speaking," *Oxford economic papers* 35, no. 2 (1983): 153-69.

⁴ Deepa Narayan, Robert Chambers, Meera K. Shah and Patti Petesch, *Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change*, (New York: World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2000).

real in urban China as they were in rural Uganda or India or, indeed, in urban Norway.⁵ In China, Chen et al. (2017) have identified shame as a powerful element in the experience of poverty among low-income elders in Beijing,⁶ while Li & Walker have explored the social dynamics of poverty-related shame in a village in South West China and the stigma associated with receipt of certain social assistance benefits.⁷

China's Minimum Living Security System (*zuidi shenghuo baozhang zhidu* 最低生活保障制度), also known as *dibao* (低保), is China's most important social assistance scheme.⁸ Reflecting the urban-rural dualism in Chinese public policy based around its unique household registration system (*hukou* 户口), *dibao* has urban and rural components. Official statistics indicate that at the end of 2016, *dibao* was received by 45.9 million rural and 14.8 million urban citizens.⁹

As the world's largest cash social assistance system, *dibao* has received considerable attention from policy makers and researchers, much of it examining the policy design, implementation, targeting and efficiency.¹⁰ Most relevant to the present concern is the work of Li and Walker conducted in a single village in South West China. They confirm the commonly reported finding that much *dibao* fails to reach those for whom it is intended but explain this in terms of 'institutional alienation', the scheme being co-opted by local decision makers to foster social cohesion and prevent social unrest.¹¹ They show that, consequently, the degree of stigma attaching to *dibao* is less than might have been anticipated for a scheme targeted on poverty. Instead, *dibao* confers status, first because it goes to many people who have high social standing and high interpersonal connections (*guanxi* 关系) – influence – among village elites and secondly, because *dibao* is seen as a social resource that may be received by anyone, not just by people experiencing poverty. In this they find *dibao* contrasts with another social assistance benefit, "five guarantees" (*wubao* 五保), which is heavily stigmatized because it is received only by a culturally much-despised group: childless elders.¹² They also found that poverty itself was considered shameful by people experiencing poverty and others alike, that the shame has increased as poverty levels have fallen, and that those who received *dibao* truly because of their poverty were doubly stigmatized, being both poor and needing to rely on state assistance.¹³

There is growing evidence of substantial geographic variation within China in the informal institutions that shape local attitudes and influence policy implementation.¹⁴ These include

⁵ Robert Walker, *The shame of poverty*, (USA: Oxford University Press, 2014); Robert Walker et al., "Poverty in Global Perspective: Is Shame a Common Denominator?" *Journal of Social Policy* 42, no. 2 (2013): 215-33.

⁶ Yanyan Chen, Robert Walker, and Hong, L., "Subjective Experiences of".

⁷ Mianguan Li and Robert Walker, "Targeting Social Assistance: Dibao and Institutional Alienation in Rural China," *Social Policy and Administration* (2016); Mianguan Li and Robert Walker, "Shame, stigma and the take-up of social assistance; insights from rural China," *International Journal of Social Welfare* 26, no. 3 (2017): 230-38.

⁸ Jennifer Golan, Terry Sicular and Nithin Umapathi, *Unconditional cash transfers in China* (2015).

⁹ Ministry of Civil Affairs of PRC, 2017.

¹⁰ Jennifer Golan, Terry Sicular and Nithin Umapathi, *Unconditional cash transfers*; Mianguan Li and Robert Walker, "Targeting Social Assistance".

¹¹ Mianguan Li and Robert Walker, "Targeting Social Assistance".

¹² Mianguan Li and Robert Walker, in press.

¹³ Mianguan Li and Robert Walker, "Targeting Social Assistance".

¹⁴ See, for example, Qingshan Tan, "Why village election has not much improved village governance," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 15, no. 2 (2010), 153-67; Graeme Smith, "The hollow state: rural governance in China," *The China Quarterly* 203 (2010): 230-38; Beibei Tang, "Not rural but not urban': community governance in China's urban villages," *The China Quarterly* 223 (2015): 724-44; Xuefeng He, "Lijie cunzhuang xingzhi de erwei kuangjia" (Two-dimensional framework to understand the nature of the village), *Shehui kexue jikan* [Social Science Journal] 4 (2000), 34-40; He Xuefeng and Tong Zhizhi, "Lun cunzhuang shehui guanlian—jianlun

macro-influences such as clan structures, lineage and the role of religion as well as micro factors such as village hierarchies and variations in social cohesion and collective memory. Whereas Li and Walker's research was based in one village in South West China, the study reported here draws evidence from eight villages located in Northern China (*Shanxi* 山西).

For the most part, Li and Walker were working with concepts derived from western research. In contrast, this article draws on two streams of indigenous Chinese scholarship. The reason for doing so is that the experience of shame is deeply imbedded within social relationships and that the relational structure in China is arguably unique. The first stream of scholarship concerns the notion of 'face', a close Chinese approximation to shame which is illustrated by the work of David Ho (1976) who has emphasized two variants of face: *lian* (脸) and *mian* (面).¹⁵ The second literature is represented by Fei Xiaotong's work to characterize the everyday practice of social relationships (*chaxu geju* 差序格局 translates as 'differential mode of association').¹⁶

Therefore, the aim of this article is not to provide a policy analysis of *dibao*, or to evaluate policy efficiency or effectiveness; rather, it seeks by applying the lenses of *lian*, *mian* and *chaxu geju* to enrich understanding of the expression of poverty-related shame in the context of China's social assistance system.

To preview the findings, post marketization, in 'the new era' (*rujin zhege shehui* 如今这个社会), financial considerations have become very important in shaping social relations (*chaxu geju*) and in determining *mian*, while the moral content of *lian* has declined compared to either the 'the old society' (*jiu shehui* 旧社会) or the Maoist era.¹⁷ Most villagers, both *dibao* recipients and non-recipients, attached shame and loss of face to poverty but not to receipt of *dibao*. Whereas, lack of money was deep shameful, involving the loss of both *mian* and *lian*, receiving *dibao* was generally regarded as 'glorious'. This is consistent with the observations reported by Li and Walker although, as is to be explained, for somewhat different reasons. Moreover, at first sight, it is at odds with the consensus of experience in the West, namely that that social assistance receipt is heavily stigmatized. Again, though, the reality is more complicated for *dibao*, it turns out, is less a benefit targeted on need and more a statement of a person's embeddedness in social relationships.

In the reminder of this article, the key concepts are first defined, and the research methodology and policy context explained, before examining the intersection of shame and loss of face with poverty and receipt of *dibao*, and then reaching some tentative conclusions.

Poverty, shame and social relations: introducing concepts

cunzhuang zhixu de shehui jichu" (Exploring village social relations—and the social basis of social orders), *Zhongguo shehui kexue* [China Social Sciences] 3 (2002), 124-34.

¹⁵ David Yau-fai Ho, "On the concept of face," *American Journal of Sociology* 81, no. 4(1976): 867-84.

¹⁶ Xiaotong Fei, Gary G Hamilton and Zheng Wang, *From the soil, the foundations of Chinese society: a transition of Fei Xiaotong's Xiangtu Zhongguo, with an introduction and epilogue*, (University of California Press, 1992).

¹⁷ "This era" in local accounts refers to China's marketization since 1978; while "old society" refers to the feudal Chinese society before the foundation of People's Republic of China in 1949.

The Chinese government is committed to eradicating poverty by 2020 and claims to have lifted 700 million people out of poverty since marketization.¹⁸ Rural poverty fell from 96.2% in 1980 to 5.7% in 2015 and urban poverty has nominally been eliminated.¹⁹

These are unprecedented achievements by any standards but reflect a limited conception of poverty. The rural poverty line of CNY2300 per year equates to approximately \$2.10/day, only a little above the corresponding World Bank standard of \$1.90 for extreme poverty. Set in 2011 at 2010 constant prices, this poverty standard is an absolute rather than a relative measure and reflects nominal remittances from family members who may be away working in urban areas. Moreover, with rural incomes averaging just \$8.22/day in 2014, escaping poverty certainly does not guarantee prosperity.²⁰ The official presumption that urban poverty has been eradicated ignores the higher living costs in cities and estimates that reflect urban living costs suggest that poverty may be higher than in rural areas.²¹ With poverty lines fixed to equate with *dibao* thresholds (which, when adjusted to compensate for variations in provincial resources ranged from \$3.50/day in Henan to \$4.60/day in Shanghai), urban poverty in 2014 varied from just 2.9% in Shanghai to 28.5% in Gansu.

Low income is an inadequate indication of poverty. Not only is it difficult to measure, especially in rural economies and where large-scale migration exists, it fails to capture the multi-faceted nature of poverty. To an extent this is recognized by the Chinese authorities who increasingly emphasize the importance of education, employment and good health. Moreover, 195,000 party secretaries have recently been deployed in 'poor villages' in response to the idiosyncratic nature of much poverty and the pressing nature of the 2020 eradication target.²² However, the policy focus remains on the immediate causes of low income rather than its individual and structural ramifications. Hence, the debilitating consequences of the shame and stigma that so often accompanies poverty has largely been ignored in China's policy discourse, although a number of academic studies have begun to document their importance.²³

Shame itself however is a prevalent and important notion in Chinese culture receiving much academic attention.²⁴ Recent anthropological and sociological research on shame has highlighted the importance of 'face' that brings together dignity, honour, authority, standards of behaviour, status, and prestige. 'Loss of face' is considered to be a cause as well as manifestation of shame.²⁵ The concept of 'face' can be further refined with respect to *mian* and *lian*. *Mian* generally refers to a reputation acquired through social success and adherence to a moral code, whereas *lian* reflects society's confidence in the individual and the integrity of their moral character, 'the loss of which makes it impossible for them to function properly within the community'.²⁶ *Lian* represents respect conferred on a person who has demonstrated himself to be 'a decent human

¹⁸ Xinhua, "Stability, reforms, people: focus of China in 2017," *China Daily*, December 24, 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2016-12/24/content_27763449.htm.

¹⁹ Ben Westmore, "Do government transfers reduce poverty in China? Micro evidence from five regions," *OECD Economics Department Working Papers*, No. 1415 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2017). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/e5b343c1-en>

²⁰ Jacob L. Shapiro, "China Is Still Really Poor," September 16, 2016, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/china-is-still-really-poor/>

²¹ Ben Westmore, "Do government transfers".

²² Xinhua, "Stability, reforms, people".

²³ Elaine Chase and Robert Walker, "The co-construction of shame in the context of poverty: beyond a threat to the social bond," *Sociology* 47, no. 4 (2012): 739-54; Mianguan Li and Robert Walker, "Targeting Social Assistance"; Yan-yan Chen, Robert Walker and Liu Hong, "Subjective experiences of".

²⁴ Hsien Chin Hu, "The Chinese concept of 'face'", *American Anthropologist* 46 (1944): 45-64; Chung-Ying Cheng, "The concept of face and its Confucian roots", *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (1986): 329-48; David Yau-fai Ho, "On the concept", 867-84; AYC King, "Face, shame and the analysis of behavior patterns of Chinese," *The Psychology of the Chinese* (1988): 319-45.

²⁵ For example, Hsien Chin Hu, "The Chinese concept"; David Yau-fai Ho, "On the concept"; AYC King, "Face, shame and".

²⁶ Hsien Chin Hu, "The Chinese concept": 45.

being' by fulfilling their moral obligations irrespective of circumstance; it is 'both a social sanction for enforcing moral standards and an internalized sanction'.²⁷ While loss of *lian* and shame are intimately related through their association with morality, *mian* is not altogether devoid of moral content. Furthermore, the meanings of *lian* and *mian* vary but cannot be completely differentiated from each other because the terms are interchangeable in some contexts.²⁸

Face is a dynamic concept, which means losing or gaining face are associated with criteria that change over time and which reflect the everyday practice of social relations. The criteria for judging face reflect the prevailing morality of the times and can be among the causes of social change as well as being manifestations of it. The Chinese saying "the poor are laughed at, but not prostitutes" (*xiaopin bu xiaochang* 笑贫不笑娼) which refers to a morally decayed society well illustrates the relationship between face, morality and culture.

In the 1930s, Fei Xiaotong characterized traditional Chinese social relations as comprising an egocentrically orientated social network with the dyadic relationships being differentially categorized according to proximity, mutual obligations, moral expectations and other content. In the term that Fei used to describe this system, *chaxu geju*, *cha* refers to social relations within the same social class, while *xu* highlights hierarchical power relations between different social classes (*geju*, simply means pattern of arrangement). Fei defines three further concepts necessary to comprehend the nature of the relationships described under *chaxu geju*: *gang*; *chang*; and *guanxi*. *Gang* specifies the principal relations between emperor and official, husband and wife and father and son, while *chang* underlines the immutable hierarchical nature of these relationships. *Guanxi* refers to the 'dyadic relationship between individuals that is based implicitly (rather than explicitly) on mutual interest and benefits'.²⁹

The concept of 'self' in *chaxu geju* refers to the family oriented self³⁰ rather than the western notion of the individual self and may not be absolute with the boundary and definition varying according to circumstance. Within 'self', relationships are typically based on kinship; outside the boundary of 'self', relationship is defined by *guanxi*, an implicit social currency based on mutual interest and benefits.³¹ In the resultant system:

'People evaluate ongoing action by considering the specific relations among actors. What is considered moral behaviour depends on the situation and on the social categories of the actors, rather than on abstract standards pertaining to autonomous individuals'.³²

Therefore, under the social arrangement of *chaxu geju*, moral obligations, order and *guanxi*, rather than law and institutions, predominate. *Mian* and *lian* represent measures of a person's performance within this system, performance that typically has direct ramifications for the standing of the family-self.³³

²⁷ Hsien Chin Hu, "The Chinese concept": 45; Lichao Yang and Robert Walker, forthcoming.

²⁸ David Yau-fai Ho, "On the concept", 867-84.

²⁹ Shanhua Yang and Hongrui Hou, "Xueyuan, yinyuan, qinqing yu liyi—xianjieduan zhongguo nongcun shehui zhong 'chaxu geju' de 'lixinghua' qushi" (Kinship, marriage, affection and interests—the rational trend of 'chaxu geju' in contemporary Chinese rural society), *Ningxia shehui kexue* (Ningxia Social Science) 6 (1999): 51-58.

³⁰ Changli Bu, "'Chaxu geju' de lilun quanshi ji xiandai neihan" (Theoretical explanation and modern implications of "chaxu geju"), *Shehuixue Yanjiu* (Sociological Research) 1(2003): 21-28.

³¹ Shanhua Yang and Hongrui Hou, "Xueyuan, yinyuan, qinqing".

³² Xiaotong Fei, Gary G Hamilton and Zheng Wang, *From the soil*.

³³ Xiaotong Fei, Gary G Hamilton and Zheng Wang, *From the soil*; Yunxiang Yan, *Private life under socialism: Love, intimacy, and family change in a Chinese village, 1949-1999*, (Stanford University Press, 2003).

China has of course changed fundamentally since Fei's specification of *chaxu geju* in the 1930s.³⁴ The ethical principles linked to kin and local geography that characterised *chaxu geju* were largely incompatible with Maoist systems of redistribution systems and at odds with subsequent market orientated mechanisms.³⁵ Marketization, the decline of collectivization, the rise of living standards and the resultant consumerism may well have caused economic benefits to be prioritized over moral obligations and hierarchy in defining social relationships.³⁶ Within rural areas, the old 'moral economy' based on the priority of subsistence, with the associated moral vision, sense of justice, obligations to charity and moral obligation,³⁷ is under threat with social relations, *guanxi*, increasingly being deployed instrumentally to secure economic benefits terms 'instrumental-personal ties'.³⁸ A by-product of social change is that individuals are able to accumulate *guanxi* through action and class position that often attracts the envy of others. Moreover, in the context of government and bureaucracy, *guanxi* is often an illegal backdoor connection with government officials and a source of corruption. And yet, *chaxu geju* is still recognizable in rural areas and has mutated rather than ceased to exist in urban ones. *Guanxi* retains positive connotations of closeness and there is a persistent belief, for example, that allowing decisions to be taken through open competition rather than using well-established *guanxi* is inefficient, ineffective and even disloyal.³⁹ But, while the structures and obligations of *chaxu geju* remain, the moral content has evolved with implications for face and for poverty-related shame.⁴⁰

With these developments in mind, *dibao* serves as an ideal setting in which to explore the modern expression of face and *chaxu geju* in rural China. Paraphrasing the legal Notice of Establishment, *dibao*, consolidated as a national scheme in 2007, is intended, 'to secure a sustainable solution to problems of insufficient food and inadequate clothing'.⁴¹ This is to be achieved by providing unconditional cash transfers to people in households below an income threshold or a de facto poverty line as used by Westmore and cited above.⁴² The scheme therefore has the trappings of a rights-based system of provision, but this is undermined by budget constraints which mean that resource allocations in many parts of China are insufficient to meet the needs of those with incomes below the threshold. As a scheme of last resort with receipt ostensibly based on demonstrable need but where the outcome of an application is uncertain, international evidence would predict that *dibao* would be heavily stigmatized.⁴³ The

³⁴ Junjie Chen and Zhen Chen, "Chaxu geju zai sikao" (Rethinking "chaxu geju"), *Shehui Kexue Zhanxian* (Social Science Front) 1 (1998): 197-204.

³⁵ Liping Sun, "'Guanxi', shehui guanxi yu shehui jiegou" ("Guanxi", social relations and social structures), *Shehuixue Yanjiu* (Sociological Research) 5 (1996): 20-30; Changli Bu, "'Chaxu geju' de"; Shanhua Yang and Hongrui Hou, "Xueyuan, yinyuan, qinqing"; Yunxiang Yan, *Private life under*.

³⁶ Changli Bu, "'Chaxu geju' de"; Shanhua Yang and Hongrui Hou, "Xueyuan, yinyuan, qinqing".

³⁷ For discussions about moral economy, see James C Scott, *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*, (Yale University Press, 1977).

³⁸ See Andrew G Walder, *Communist neo-traditionalism: Work and authority in Chinese industry*, (University of California Press, 1988). For case studies on this, see Linping Liu, *Guanxi, shehui ziben yu shehui zhuanxing: Shenzhen 'pingjiangcun' yanjiu* (Guanxi, social capital and social transition: the research of "Pingjiang village" in Shenzhen), (Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe [China Social Science Press], 2002).

³⁹ Xiaotong Fei, Gary G Hamilton and Zheng Wang, *From the soil*; Katherine K Xin and Jone L Pearce, "Guanxi: Connections as substitutes for formal institutional support", *Academy of Management Journal* 39, no. 6 (1996): 1641-58.

⁴⁰ Andrew Kipnis, *Anthropological approaches to self in contemporary China*, (Contemporary China Centre, the Australian National University, 2003); Lichao Yang and Robert Walker, forthcoming.

⁴¹ The State Council, *Guowuyuan guanyu zai quanguo jianli nongcun zuidi shenghuo baozhang zhidu de tongzhi* (Regulation on establishing the minimum living standard allowance in rural China) (2007). http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2007-08/14/content_716621.htm

⁴² Ben Westmore, "Do government transfers".

⁴³ Robert L. Walker, *Social Security and Welfare: Concepts and Comparisons*, (Open University Press, 2005); Lutz Leisering and A. Barrientos, "Social citizenship for the global poor? The

fact that *dibao* is often seen as ‘glorious’ rather than stigmatizing can best be understood with reference to the concepts of *lian*, *mian* and *chazu geju*.

Research methods and local policy context

This research draws on qualitative fieldwork research in eight villages managed by two townships within a county administration in northern Shanxi that we call Sky County. Designated as a State Poverty County under the 1986 ‘National Level Poorest Counties’ scheme,⁴⁴ Sky County has been prioritized for financial transfer payments, project funding and infrastructure construction. Ironically, achieving this poverty status is a source of pride for County governors and officials since the scheme is competitive. The research villages were selected to cover a range of administrative arrangements thought likely to affect the type and level of shame associated with *dibao* receipt.

Fieldwork was undertaken between 2015 and 2016 and comprised participant observation, 145 depth interviews, and eight focus group discussions. The participant observation took the form of ‘observer as participant’, in which process researchers observed interactions between villagers and village cadres, poor and non-poor villagers, *dibao* applicants and local officials. Depth interviews were conducted with 86 *dibao* recipients and 24 village cadres, both groups being randomly selected from official lists, and with 27 other villagers not receiving *dibao* who were purposively chosen, snowballed from initial suggestions provided by village leaders. Some 31 of the villagers interviewed, 15 of whom received *dibao*, were considered by village leaders to be ‘exceptionally poor’. Ten of the 15 poorer *dibao* recipients were aged over 80. In addition, we interviewed six lower and medium ranking officials working for townships and three county-level officials. Finally, two sets of focus groups were conducted, one comprising meetings with three groups of villagers in two villages, the second involving discussions with a group of lower and middle ranking officials working in each of the two townships.

Dibao was introduced to Sky County in 2007 at the time of the national consolidation and is jointly-funded through a central government grant and contributions from local governments based on their financial capacity.⁴⁵ Initially payments were too low to justify the local terminology ‘eating on *dibao* (*chi dibao* 吃低保)’ implying an adequate subsistence income, but from 2011 onwards payments moved ahead of the national norm and became an increasingly important source of household income (Tables 1 and 2). By November 2016, *dibao* covered 23,221 individuals, 18.2% of the rural population in Sky County with monthly payments *dibao* averaging 232yuan,⁴⁶ much higher than the national average of 164yuan.

Table 1: Rural *Dibao* in China 2008-2017 (Data from Ministry of Civil Affairs and State Statistics Bureau of PRC)

Data in November of the year --	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<i>Dibao</i> coverage (%)	5.9	6.6	7.8	8.1	8.3	8.5	8.4	8.1	7.7	

worldwide spread of social assistance,” *International Journal of Social Welfare* 22 (2013): S50-S67; Ben K. Baumberg, K. Bell and D. Gaffney, *Benefits stigma in Britain* (2012).

⁴⁴ In 1986, the state government initiated a “National Level Poorest Counties” Scheme, 331 counties across the whole country were identified as the “national level poorest counties”; in 1994, the number increased to 592 and in 2001, all the counties in the coastal areas were removed and more counties from middle and western China were added to the list to make it 592. The poorest counties scheme has been one of the main national strategies for poverty alleviation.

⁴⁵ Jennifer Golan, Terry Sicular and Nithin Umaphathi, *Unconditional cash transfers*.

⁴⁶ 1 yuan= 0.15 US Dollar.

<i>Dibao</i> recipients (Ten thousand)	3957	4631	5179	5302	5302	5370	5201	4933	4562	4137
Number of <i>Dibao</i> household (Ten thousand)	1840	2229	2498	2637	2777	2902	2916	2854	2628	2337
Overall <i>Dibao</i> monthly transfer (billion)	1807	2867	3425	4972	6002	6256	6990	7782	8638	6723
Average monthly transfer per person (yuan)	44	59	62	86	103	106	120	139	164	

Table 2: Rural Dibao in Sky County 2008-2017 (Data from Ministry of Civil Affairs of PRC)

Data in November of the year --	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<i>Dibao</i> coverage (%)	8	7.2	15.8	16.7	16.5	16.6	17.6	14	18.2	
<i>Dibao</i> recipients	12702	16260	22446	23366	22684	22399	23363	23004	23221	24239
Number of <i>Dibao</i> household	6598	9005	12068	14156	12628	14156	15152	14970	14859	12302
Overall <i>Dibao</i> monthly transfer (thousand yuan)	3956	5040	9040	22014	37571	37261	48542	39850	56287	36387
Average monthly transfer per person (yuan)	37	32	40	87.6	148.5 4	150.5 6	190.2 5	156.9 7	232.3 2 ¹	247

1. Benefits were reassessed in 2014 and many people only paid in 2015.

Sky County was not unusual in that the early implementation of *dibao* was characterized by rent-seeking and abuse such that, for the most part, *dibao* could only be obtained through established interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*) with county government officials.⁴⁷ It was unusual in that in 2012 the abuse was exposed in the national media as a consequence of which new applications for *dibao* in the county were suspended until the national program was reformed in 2014.

Thereafter, to eliminate corruption at the township and county level, *dibao* decision-making and management was largely devolved to village level. The provincial-level Civil Affairs Bureau specified that a *dibao* management committee should be established in each village comprising seven to nine members who would be responsible for implementing *dibao* including the selection of *dibao* recipients. In fact, in seven of the eight villages, *dibao* implementation and decision-making was largely controlled by the members of the village Party cell (*cun dangzhibu*) and the village committee (*cunweihui*), with decisions either being taken by the Party Secretary or by a slightly larger group of village cadre. Villagers were often not *au fait* with these decision-making structures and often village cadres, to avoid local conflicts, in fact claimed that *dibao* decisions were made by the township and county governments.

The 2014 reforms also included attempts to regulate eligibility criteria and standardize working practices with computer-based assessments while retaining scope for local flexibility, which was a characteristic of the initial program design. In practice, local flexibility meant a radical departure from the national scheme resulting in a major differentiation in function. Rather than eligibility for *dibao* being based on individuals' current need, villages chose to make awards for life and to keep the same number of awards each year; this meant that the number of new awards available annually was dependent of the deaths of incumbents. A second major deviation from the national scheme, the imposition of an age criteria, transforms *dibao* from a selective needs-based system into a universal old age and disability benefit. In most of the villages, people with long-standing illness became eligible for *dibao* from age 60, while other people would receive it at a later age, most commonly 80. Decisions on age thresholds and health conditions were generally fixed based on the number of villagers perceived to be deserving of benefit rather than by independently determining eligibility criteria.

⁴⁷ Anna L. Ahlers, *Rural Policy Implementation in Contemporary China: New Socialist Countryside*, (New York: Routledge, 2014).

These additional criteria served largely to supplant the economic criteria included in the computer-based assessment, not least because income proved so difficult to establish, as neatly explained by a cadre in one village:

In a village, household income is often diversified that it is hard to know how much a migrant worker can bring home. It is also hard to know how much they receive from their son or daughter.

However, the criteria did not entirely remove the role of *guanxi*. Indeed, anyone having well-established *guanxi* with cadres at county, township or village level effectively guaranteed receipt of *dibao*, certainly if they fulfilled the nominal criteria and often when not. According to local village cadres, one mechanism by which this was achieved was through emergency payments where approval was in the gift of the village head or committee.

Poverty, loss of face and shame

In all eight villages, being poor was often thought to be associated with the break-up of social relations and was viewed as shameful both by villagers experiencing poverty and by others who were not.

Villagers, expressed in comparison to what was considered the typical, or average, standard of living locally, generally defined poverty in relative terms. On this basis, local cadres and villagers irrespective of their economic circumstances, identified as 'poor' people who were disabled and/or seriously sick; widowed elderly without income and support; and people in their mid-forties and early fifties needing simultaneously to pay for their children's education and support elderly relatives (*shang youlao xia youxiao*). About two thirds of the poorest 31 respondents were elders and/or sick or disabled and about half lacked stable employment, instead working in agriculture or seasonal occupations. Just one in three received *Dibao*. While their accommodation was invariably supplied with electricity and running water, it generally comprised a single bedroom and, being old, was rarely weather-proof. Although food was generally sufficient, the poorest villagers generally could not afford a varied diet and frequently found themselves in debt. All those aged over 60 received the standard rural pension of 80 yuan per month (USD 12.43) but many were financially dependent on their children, sons more than daughters, especially for the cost of hospital treatment.

Poverty, shame and personal responsibility

If that is the local context, what does it mean for the experience of poverty? With poverty no longer ubiquitous as in living memory it once was, villagers have come to see poverty as the result of personal failure and a personal responsibility; traditionally they might have viewed poverty as the 'bitter lot' in life's gamble⁴⁸ or as the result of exploitation by capitalists and landlords. In the Maoist era, poverty was even presented as a virtue, potentially attracting high *lian*: 'the poorer you are, the more glorious you become'.⁴⁹ Non-poor villagers explained poverty in terms of 'being lazy', 'being less smart than the others', 'being sick', having 'extremely high family burdens' and occasionally on 'being unlucky'. Once poverty was individualized in this way, communities' attitude towards people in poverty turned to indifference such that poverty, people in poverty and the difficulties that they faced all became largely invisible. As a village cadre explained,

In general (non-poor) villagers do not despise those poor. They just don't care about you (the poorest households in the community). When villagers chat, they may gossip you. But after all, it is all your fault— being lazy or just bad luck; you haven't grabbed the opportunity to make money. Other than gossip, no one can help nor really cares about you... People only care about themselves and the other members in their social network... Once

⁴⁸ Qing Liu, *Chuangye Shi* (Business history), 1961.

⁴⁹ Maureen Fan, 'Cashing in on communism', *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2007.

you become poor, you drop from your existing network. No one remembers the pity ones and it is your destiny.

In this process, villagers experiencing poverty were constructed as 'others' separate and separated from the mainstream community and largely omitted from village social networks. They were referred to as 'those poor (*naxie qiongren* 那些穷人)' and 'the pitiful ones (*kelian ren* 可怜的人)', who had low *mian* in the community because of their economic situation. Villagers in poverty were aware of this discourse and, indeed, could hardly escape it. Moreover, they saw it not as benign but maligning especially the comparisons they heard or suspected were being made. For them, the hurt associated with being poor went beyond *mian* to loss of *lian*. As 'poor villagers', it felt almost as if they were being accused of being 'bad village citizens' not being able to fend for themselves or to contribute appropriately as villagers to the village community:

*I, of course, know how the others think about me (although) they don't talk in front of me. But once I turn my back, I feel them pointing at me and whispering... I feel I have no *lian* to counter other people's gossip.*

---Zhang, JH (Male, 55)

Respondents facing poverty generally described their loss of *lian* in terms of being looked down on, excluded or marginalized. If non-poor villagers were casually dismissive of 'the poor', people in poverty were passionate about the negativity of poverty. They felt that they had no choice but to accept the values and attitudes of the society that in effect linked a person's integrity to their economic success and failure. Therefore, they hated being poor, not solely the financial hardship that they necessarily endured, but more particularly the loss of *lian* which both reduced their agency and meant that their ability to function effectively in society was under constant challenge. Feeling marginalized and neglected, they frequently resented their treatment by the mainstream community. The views of Chen, JM, a woman, were typical:

After spending the whole day in the village head's greenhouses picking tomatoes, I cannot walk properly because of 10 hours of kneeling. My patched clothes are all dirty and even more shabby than before. I often slip along the village sidewalk back to home, like a mouse. I hate being seen like this by others. But then I ask myself: 'Who cares? Who really cares about us poor?' People only greet me if they are in mood; otherwise I am neglected like a mouse. Nobody sees me as a human... I hate myself and I hate others... Maybe I hate the whole thing.

--- Chen, JM (Female, 46)

The loss of *lian*, expressed as self-hatred, corresponds closely with internalized shame and felt-stigma discussed in Western literature.⁵⁰ Apart from Chen, quite a few other respondents living in poverty described themselves as 'mice' or 'rats' (Mandarin makes no distinction). An elderly bachelor defined himself as a 'useless food bucket'. Others were depressed and disgusted by their circumstances. Thus, a man with kidney disease was ashamed and resentful at being unable to pay for a urine bag. Another man, injured at work on a construction site a decade ago, felt that he was even stigmatized by his wife and family because he could not provide for the education costs of his children; he had no *lian*, his dignity denied:

*I must be the most incapable man in the world. My wife says I am not a man. I don't want to learn how other people think about me. I don't dare to talk – before I start talking, other people would say, 'What do you know - you know nothing!'... But I have to survive. People cannot hurt me anymore. A person like me has no *lian* to lose!*

Lian was further eroded when people in poverty were denied social assistance. (Only 15 of the 31 persons identified as the poorest in the village received *dibao*.) This seemed to be because people felt that they lost public recognition of their needs when they were refused, or were

⁵⁰ Robert Walker, *The Shame of Poverty*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Baumberg B., Bell K. and Gaffney D.,

otherwise excluded from, *dibao*. They, in effect, became undeserving and the resultant shame was often accompanied by anger and feelings of desperation. Li CS, a woman in her late fifties, elaborated on this process:

I've had diabetes for twenty years. They said diabetes is not a major disease and therefore I cannot eat on dibao. I went to village committee, the township government and the county civil affairs bureau. But the officials told me: 'Unless you are stuck in bed, eating and discharging in bed, your disease is not serious'. I have no guanxi with officials. I am incapable of eating on dibao. I feel people all look down upon me. So I avoid crowds and refuse to cry in front of the others... I feel I have no lian; I don't want to be seen by the others.

To summarize, loss of *lian* has traditionally been associated with immoral behaviour. However, marketization and the prioritization of economic success, has led to the emergence of social hierarchies (*xu*) based on economic status. Prosperity confers high *mian* while poverty bestows low *mian*. With poverty now attributed to individuals' deficiencies, to behaviour and circumstance, poverty is also associated with loss of *lian*, which serves as a social punishment for economic failure and results in social exclusion and further disempowerment.⁵¹

Poverty, shame and social relations

Returning to the concept *chaxu geju* and how this is affected by poverty, most of the people in the deepest poverty (26 out of 31) reported that they were also socially isolated. In many cases they were alienated from their close family and hence from the traditional concept of a family-oriented self.⁵² The reason has to do with poverty-related shame, loss of *lian* and the process of allocating blame within the collective family self. Parents blamed themselves for not being able to provide better living conditions and education for their children, while sons felt ashamed that they were unable to fulfil their obligations as demanded by filial piety. Women censured their husbands because they were demonstrably poor breadwinners. Young people blamed parents for the bad financial start that they had in life, while parents feared that they would be blamed in this way and that their offspring would punish them by not abiding by the expectations of filial piety. In this way, poverty causes the familial-self to become 'schizophrenic', members share the loss of *lian* that poverty conveys but try to reapportion blame away from the individual self:

My son went outside for paid work when he was only 16, because I couldn't afford for him to go to a secondary training school after he graduated from high school... He rarely comes back and doesn't even phone home... I am wondering whether he blames me for that.

---Lin, JY (43, male)

I have two brothers and four sisters, and I am definitely the poorest. I know I am the least filial son of my parents... My siblings don't come to my house at all and I know they are dissatisfied with me because I don't give as much as they do to parents... I have been doing my best to give more personal care to parents (than the other siblings) because I cannot give them much money. But I feel that parents don't treat me with much respect, because I am poor.

---Wang, FG (49, male)

Poverty has similar ramifications beyond the immediate family. For example, poverty frequently it impossible for people to engage in the implicit reciprocity that fuels *chaxu geju*. Almost all the respondents experiencing poverty reported either being neglected or excluded from wider networks or else chose not to participate in them for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they wanted to avoid the humiliation that they foresaw in not being able to reciprocate in kind. Some did not want to become, or be seen to be, an economic burden, and yet others sought to avoid passing on the loss of *lian* and *mian* to the entire extended family. As Wang FG explained,

⁵¹ Lichao Yang and Robert Walker, forthcoming.

⁵² Changli Bu, "Chaxu geju de".

I am the oldest but also the poorest one among my siblings. In the old days, my younger brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces would all show great respect to me. But now it is all very different—they don't see me as a brother and uncle to be respected. They don't deal with me much. Maybe they are worried that I would borrow money from them, but I would never do that—I would rather go begging on the street if I had to. They don't come close to me as if I am stinky... Nowadays only money matters. Your family is not family; relatives are not relatives if you are poor.

Li CS also put it,

I haven't cleared the debts for diabetes. Nowadays it is so hard to borrow money from the others. People would think that you are old and cannot repay. Even your sisters and brothers are not willing to lend. I have six younger brothers and sisters. One of my sisters clearly empathized with me and my sick husband; and lent some to me, but the others didn't because they felt I was not able to repay. I felt my face was totally lost to the ground when I asked for money but was refused by my younger brothers and sisters. Siblings are not siblings when you talk about money.

Underlying these experiences is a profound change in the nature of *chaxu geju* alluded to above, namely substitution of the moral reciprocity that previously bound people together with financial reciprocity. This inevitably means that people in poverty, who are thus unable to reciprocate, are cut-off from the wider society as explained by a township official, Zhao L:

Previously, people tend to group themselves into various social categories, for example, patriarchal clans, party membership. Within the same category, people tend to be closer to each other... But now, all the other categories become less important. There are only the rich and the poor!

Some people in poverty did their best to conceal their perilous financial circumstances, aware that poverty not only meant loss of *lian* but denied them access to the supports traditionally inherent in the *chaxu geju* system. Zhang Jinwang was a case in point. A man in his late fifties, he was in debt because of longstanding sickness but concealed this fact:

If I don't pretend to be rich, I will lose more... The rich look down the poor. I feel uneasy talking to rich people and there is no reason for them to talk to me. They have everything they need. They have a great deal of mian in the society. Because they are rich, society favours them. They have guanxi and money to buy dibao. The poor can only hide like mouse.

These findings are consistent with the initial speculations that, even in rural China, *chaxu geju* has mutated from a system built on moral obligations to one based on financial reciprocity in which social class is challenging family as the preeminent mode of association. The implication for those experiencing poverty is that they are now excluded from support mechanisms that would in earlier times have served as an informal system of social protection. As important, while poverty may always have negatively affected *mian*, though to a lesser extent than in today's materialistic world, it has not necessarily resulted in a loss of *lian*. Today, however, poverty is construed as a moral failing which necessarily affects *lian* and risks bringing shame and loss of face to the entire family-oriented self.

Dibao and the absence of shame

Given that poverty generally means the loss of *lian* as well as *mian*, the puzzle is why the receipt of *dibao* does not. Indeed, as noted above, villagers generally consider that 'eating on *dibao* is glorious'. The reasons for this are complex but, explicable in terms of the changing nature of *chaxu geju*, they are of two kinds: ones relating to financial status, the others to social relations.

Money, guanxi and face

First, *dibao* adds to a person's income and now serves to enhance *mian*. This was not the case when *dibao* was initially introduced because the sums offered in payment were insultingly small, had little impact on living standards and failed to acknowledge the degree of financial hardship experienced. One *dibao* recipient, Li Z, speaking for others, was emphatic:

In the very beginning ...dibao was so little, nobody wanted it. People would say, 'You are eating on dibao! It is such a loss of lian'. Gradually the payments grew larger. People wanted it. But you had to have guanxi to buy dibao. 'You have to find the temple first in order to worship the Buddha'... Now that dibao is 2000- 3000 yuan per year, nobody laughs at you for eating on dibao. On the contrary, it only increases your mian. People envy you because you have an additional income without doing anything and it is all for free... Now only the capable people can eat on dibao. If you are poor but not covered by dibao, people will look down you and won't want to have any dealings with you (because it indicates that) you have no money or guanxi.

This quotation reveals the sophisticated interaction of *lian* and *mian*: lack of *lian* reflecting both the humiliation attached to squalor and the absence of social recognition; increased *mian* attributable to higher income but also to the status attached to being able to work the system and use *guanxi* to receive *dibao*.

The presumption that *guanxi* rather than need per se was the reason for *dibao* receipt may or may not be a legacy of the historic abuse of the system that the 2014 reforms were intended to tackle. It was, however, ubiquitous and a source of envy rather than disapproval as the following quotations illustrate:

If you have money, you can make the devil push the millstone for you (youqian nengshi gui tuimo). This society is all run by money. You said dibao is for poor people and you asked whether eating on dibao is shameful? But who cares about fame and lian mian⁵³? Only money is real. Eating on dibao simply indicates that you are rich and have guanxi with the officials. That's all adding to your mian.

---Chen, D (45, male)

In any circumstances, having money is glorious. We are all jealous of people who can eat on dibao. I hope that dibao is still there when I become older (and eligible for it)... My cousin has been eating on dibao since he got a proof of diagnosis of heart disease through a school friend who works in the city hospital. He is so lucky and capable.

---Wang, CH (42, female)

Therefore, it seems that the social priority attaching to money has eroded the moral distinctions evident in loss of face, *mian* and *lian*. Traditionally both *mian* and *lian* were associated exemplary behaviour somewhat irrespective of financial status: *mian* increased by demonstrable competence and knowledge especially when accompanied by modesty; *lian* lost by immoral behaviour.⁵⁴ Use of *guanxi* was discrete, a natural component of reciprocity which if used with exploitative intent could lead to loss of *lian*. As seen with respect to *dibao*, the presumption is that receipt is due to *guanxi*, and receipt adds to *mian* with no loss of *lian*. Indeed, *lian* may even be enhanced to the extent that receipt of *dibao* tacitly signifies approval by the village elites. As a further consequence, persons in poverty who did not receive *dibao* were doubly stigmatized, losing *mian* on account to their poverty and *lian* because they lacked *guanxi* and social recognition.

Social hierarchy, self-interest and the family-oriented self

If the priority given to economic status is new, the other factors contributing to the lack of stigma associated with *dibao* reflect the extent to which its implementation has been moulded in accordance with traditional notions of fairness and social relations: *gang*, *chang* and the principles of filial piety.

⁵³ *Lian mian* is an expression for face in local dialect.

⁵⁴ David Yau-fai Ho, "On the concept".

As already noted, the villages in Sky county all chose to direct *dibao* towards elderly, sick and disabled people while allocation decisions were taken not by village committees, as legislators had anticipated, but by the party secretary. This top-down administration was justified on grounds of efficiency and paternalism. The following statement by, a village secretary, Wang, ZG, is typical:

The village is an acquaintance community. We all know each other so well therefore there is no need to select dibao recipients through villager representative meeting. Usually we (village leaders) nominate a few people as candidates; then we visit them in their household and ask whether they want to eat on dibao. If the answer is yes, we will fill out all the forms, put together all the application documents, and write the application letter on their behalf.

Xue, Z, the head of committee in another village was explicit about paternalism:

Village leaders are parents-like. We must watch all steps in dibao process to make sure that applicants don't make a mess.

The fact that there was so little opposition to this strategy, at odds with legislative expectations to stem abuse, was due to the traditional acceptance of the immutable hierarchy (*gang* and *chang*) of the state and officials, as representatives of the state, exerting power over people, people's associated ignorance as to the details of *dibao*, and their general contentment that benefit should be indeed directed at the elderly and sick.⁵⁵

Targeting elderly, sick and disabled persons, rather than people in poverty per se, had the tacit approval of the Sky County Civil Affairs Bureau. For local officials, it simplified working procedures by removing any requirement accurately to assess need. Moreover, the effect of universalizing the benefit based on age was to minimized village conflict as explained by the Vice Director of the County Civil Affairs Bureau:

Although it is not a written down regulation, our county is not a single case [dibao implemented as pension]. I have heard that it is a common practice in all neighbouring counties including Inner Mongolia. As said by Confucius, 'we are not troubled with fears of scarcity, but are troubled with fears of unequal treatment'. Every household has older members and everybody will get old. [In addition], we respect older people and they should get more help. People who are seriously ill also need more money... These arrangements are all based on people's willingness. People don't oppose the government giving assistance to the older people and sick people. Giving dibao [to older people and the sick people] is a sign of caring and respecting people in real need in our society.

In generally accepting the hierarchical ordering of entitlement - with elders placed ahead of people who were seriously ill who, in turn were above all others - villagers were following precepts derived from *chaxu geju* and the interpretation given to 'the poor' (*kelian de ren*) in traditional Confucian ethics. Some people linked the pension function of *dibao* with filial piety and believed that it reduced the burden of supporting elderly parents and thereby increased the *mian* of the older generation and the *mian* and *lian* of the younger one, as explained by one village secretary:

One should always support one's parents until they drop. It is considered as appropriate filial piety. Now a majority of older people are covered by dibao, the government is taking responsibility for caring for your parents on your behalf. [Therefore] the government is saving your lian and adding your mian through dibao.

The approach to *dibao* allocation adopted by villagers might be characterized as self-centred. Every villager believed that one day, when they were old, they would receive *dibao*. One villager, was even more explicitly self-interested, remarking:

⁵⁵ Yunxiang Yan, *Private life under*.

I don't care about the others at all. It is fair only if I can eat on dibao.

However, the individual self and the traditional family-orientated self were frequently conflated in people's minds. Families often found principles of filial piety coming under threat as monetary exchanges increasingly replaced obligations made in kind. Traditionally the welfare of older family members has been the responsibility of sons and this presumption was nominally applied in the allocation of *dibao* in all eight of the villages studied; this meant that older people with evidently well-off sons working in the urban sector were supposedly denied benefit. However, the strong sentiment among older villagers was that they could no longer expect to receive regular support from their children who often had families of their own to support. Therefore, most considered that *dibao*, as a secure pension on top of the 80 yuan per month, was crucial to maintaining face. As Zhang JW, an 83-year-old *dibao* recipient, put it,

A few years ago, I fell and broke my left leg. My younger son sent me to hospital and my children spent 4000 yuan for me... I don't want them to spend money on me. Their wives may complain. They have rarely complained in front of me, but I still feel embarrassed. It is so hard for me to open mouth to ask for money from my children. I would never do it sometimes even when I am really in need. Children all have their own families and they have their children to support. Life is never easy for anyone. I am not in a position to bother them... I have been eating on dibao since two years ago. I didn't apply but the village head put me on the list. I am so happy that I don't need to rely on children. Eating on dibao is the least embarrassing way to get money.

Finally, many villagers perceived *dibao* as state largesse dating back to the tradition of the benevolent Confucian emperors and the subsistence payments dispensed in the era of People's communes.⁵⁶ In addition, there was a widespread sense that, at a time of growing inequality, when *guanxi* was being used exploitatively and when corrupt officials were drawing resources from the state, it was only fair that people at the bottom should benefit in some small way from state provision. One villager, Wang QS, forcibly articulated this commonly shared view:

The (dibao) money comes from the state; therefore, everyone deserves it without shame. Think about it-- would you feel shameful to take money from your wealthy parents when you are in need? We should of course take it for granted... Compared to the corrupt officials, dibao is trivial. If the officials are not shameful for what they received from their bad conduct, why should we feel shameful for this small amount (of money)?

In sum, eating on *dibao* was thought by villagers to be 'glorious' because they believed that money was 'glorious', a preeminent source of *mian*. Moreover, to the extent that *dibao* was acquired through *guanxi*, that no longer carried stigma, loss of *lian*, although it may well have provoked envy among those unable to access *lian*. However, everyone had the hope that they would live long enough to become eligible for *dibao* and the belief, that if so, this would enable the family better to fulfil the obligations explicit in the principle of filial piety. For this, they were generally grateful to the state.

Discussion and conclusion

Small in scale, this study nevertheless has both international and national significance. It adds to recent international literature which suggests that shame contingent on poverty is a painful component of the experience of poverty and has further detrimental consequences, eroding the sense of agency of people in poverty and reducing their social capital. The study findings demonstrate, too, that poverty-related shame is not simply an individual emotion but one that reflects the judgments and exclusionary behaviours of those in the wider society. The processes involved which result in the social exclusion of people in poverty are culturally bound and, in China, have been shown to reflect both recent changes in political and social priorities, and long-

⁵⁶ Mianguan Li and Robert Walker, "Targeting Social Assistance".

standing cultural practices that frame social relationships in ways that are perhaps globally distinct.

No one study can of course provide a definitive account of social processes as complex as these in a country as diverse as China. Readers are therefore encouraged to reflect on the resonance of these findings with their own experience and knowledge. Hopefully they feel moved to undertake further research the poverty-shame nexus to add to the discussion of the findings below.

Turning to *dibao*, as an example of a social assistance scheme that happens to be the world's largest, the study provides evidence that the provision of cash benefits is not necessarily stigmatising for those who receive them. However, equally this does not demonstrate that China has discovered the means of destigmatising social assistance because the reasons why *dibao* did not attract stigma were also reasons why *dibao* fails to have much impact on poverty rates; namely it does not reach the people for whom it is intended.⁵⁷ Earlier studies conducted in the village of Stone-bridge in South West China found that *dibao* had been co-opted for the purposes of village governance, with payments made in return for political support, as rewards for good behaviour and to 'quieten' potential 'trouble makers'. A different rationale for provision is evident in the eight villages studied in Sky county in Shanxi province. There *dibao* has effectively been converted from a social assistance scheme based on demonstrable need to a tax-based, universal pension that ostensibly also responds to age-related disability. The result is a system that is simpler to administer, and which attracts popular support because it is perceived to be available to everyone and assists families in coping with the obligations of filial piety in a rapidly changing world.

In both Sky County and Stone-bridge, social harmony, or social control, was prioritized over the eradication of poverty; significant numbers of villagers who were eligible for *dibao* according to the national criteria were denied it locally. In both cases, the local cadres followed the Confucian logic that inequality is politically more dangerous than poverty. If replicated widely, as statistics suggest is the case, this is likely to frustrate China's attempt to end extreme poverty by 2020.

Interestingly *dibao* in Sky County was destigmatized in a very different way from in Stone-bridge. In the latter, local cadres thought that it was important to maximise the turnover of benefit. This, it was considered, avoided the creation of a static welfare class that might attract the opprobrium of the local community while also offering the villagers that hope that they might soon themselves be receiving benefit. Cadres in Sky County have chosen a long-term strategy that might succeed in fostering intergenerational solidity and which reflects traditional Confucian values in terms of favouring elders. Both strategies rely on top-down governance and on *guanxi*. As noted above, *guanxi* is interpreted as social recognition, at least by recipients of *dibao*, and may even add to their *lian*. Historically, this might not have been so. Either strategy could be deemed to counter the Confucian code that demanded the highest ethical standards from public officials. It will be recalled that in 2012 Sky County was pilloried in the national press for corrupt *dibao* administration. Technically, mal-administration is still rampant. Whether this should count as corruption is a moot point and, politically, may depend on whether the Xi Jinping government truly prioritises poverty eradication over social stability.

Returning to poverty-related shame and its manifestation in Chinese society, the indigenous concepts of face, *lian*, *mian* and *chaxu geju* proved powerful explicantia when linked to recent political and social trends. The socialist market economy initiated under Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s is credited with the sustained economic growth that China has enjoyed and the historically unprecedented fall in poverty. It ended collectivism, prioritises individualistic advancement, rewards the accumulation of individual wealth and has stimulated a culture of conspicuous consumption. Economic success is demanded and rewarded with high *mian*. Loss of *mian* is an unavoidable concomitant of poverty. Moreover, the study showed that, even in rural China, poverty is now considered to be due to individual failure amounting to a lack of integrity that

⁵⁷ Jennifer Golan, Terry Sicular and Nithin Umapathi, *Unconditional cash transfers*; Lutz Leisering and A. Barrientos, "Social citizenship for"; Mianguan Li and Robert Walker, "Targeting Social Assistance".

results in the loss of *lian*. Moreover, the effects of *chaxu geju* and family-orientated self is that the loss of face is unbounded, spreading by a form of social contagion. Individuals resist this loss of face by seeking to apportion blame and by avoiding interaction with those whose economic status is worse. Whereas *chaxu geju* once meant relationships were ordered by kinship and place, the ordering is increasingly according to economic status. Furthermore, *guanxi*, once the result of tacit reciprocity based on moral behaviour, is progressively a measure of economic influence and, as such, people with limited means are automatically excluded from the possibility of any reciprocity. This is itself a further source of shame.

To conclude, focussed on poverty and shame, the research has also illuminated the changing structure of social relationships in China. With respect to poverty, politically its continued existence is recognised by the political leadership to be a tacit criticism of the socialist market economy and must so be eradicated by 2020 through top-down policies. But how times have changed. Under Maoism, people in poverty were deemed to be making an economic sacrifice to benefit China's future development. Confucius saw poverty as evidence of a poorly run society and it was rulers who nominally lost *lian* as a result. In today's China, people in poverty are blamed and shamed. They have no *lian* and little *mian*; their 'face is on the ground'.