

# **Poor and Lazy:**

## **Understanding middle-class perceptions of poverty in China**

**Xu, Mengnan<sup>1</sup>**

**Robert Walker<sup>2</sup>**

**Yang Lichao<sup>3</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

In moving to address relative rather than absolute poverty, China will need to redistribute income from the middle class to persons experiencing poverty. The challenge is that policy rhetoric has recently prioritised laziness as causing poverty, a view seemingly shared by most of China's middle class. Drawing on a convenience sample of 2,449 middle-class respondents, binomial and multinomial logistic regressions relate beliefs on the attribution of poverty to personality, and ideological and individual socialisation. When presented with two typical response-options, most respondents chose laziness over unfairness but selected 'modern progress' when given more choice. Respondents prioritising laziness were prone to exhibit extravert and authoritarian personalities and have more faith than others in government policies. They were less well educated, and less likely to have studied social sciences. Respondents subsequently attributing poverty to modern progress had similar characteristics but were not extrovert. Building support for redistributive policies could therefore prove difficult.

**Key words:** Poverty, laziness, personality, values, middle class, China

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<sup>1</sup> School of Social Development and Public Policy, Beijing Normal University

<sup>2</sup> China Academy of Social Management/School of Sociology, Beijing Normal University; Oxford University.

<sup>3</sup> China Academy of Social Management/School of Sociology, Beijing Normal University

## Poor and Lazy: Understanding middle-class perceptions of poverty in China

China's assault on poverty has been remarkably successful, accounting for half the global reduction in poverty during the period of the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015), with President Xi Jinping formally announcing the abolition of extreme, rural poverty on 25<sup>th</sup> February 2021. Moreover, under the 14<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan China is, from 2021, to target relative rather than absolute poverty and to extend coverage to urban as well as rural poverty<sup>4</sup>.

This change has profound socio-political repercussions for, while absolute poverty can be reduced by economic growth alone, relative poverty will require a redistribution of resources.<sup>5</sup> This necessarily means some form of increased taxation on China's burgeoning middle class to fund enhanced welfare provision, extend opportunities and reduce inequalities, this at a time when labour market incomes are likely to be rising less quickly than in the recent past. While less constrained by public opinion than in a democracy, the Chinese government cannot afford to alienate large segments of the middle class<sup>6</sup>.

A particular challenge is that the Chinese middle class are reported typically to view poverty as the product of personal failing rather than structural causes.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, a discourse that laziness is the root cause of poverty emerged in China as it developed its social assistance system in the first decade of this millennium.<sup>8</sup> At that time, according to the World Values Survey, almost six out of ten Chinese believed that laziness was the 'main cause of poverty', a proportion exceeded only in the United States, the Philippines and Puerto Rico.<sup>9</sup> By 2019, following reports that benefits were 'going to the poor and lazy', the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress was suggesting, 'ideological and cultural education, cuts in benefits for people unwilling to work, and punishment to eliminate undesirable attitudes that hinder the eradication of poverty'.<sup>10</sup> In that year, benefit sanctions were introduced for social assistance recipients turning down job offers and the People's Daily, mouthpiece of the Communist Party, ran an article headed 'Support the poor not the lazy'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Research Report of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on the Work of Poverty Alleviation — The Ninth Meeting of the Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress on 26 February 2019].' [http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/2019-02/26/content\\_2072766.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/2019-02/26/content_2072766.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Walker and Lichao Yang, L. *China's move to measuring relative poverty: implications for social protection*. (Geneva: ILO Working Paper 23, 2021)

<sup>6</sup> Sun Yu and Yuan Yang Why China's economic recovery from coronavirus is widening the wealth gap, *Financial Times* (18th August 2020)

<sup>7</sup> Xiao Zhang Wang and Ting Feng, 'Elites' Perception of Poverty and their Social Consciousness (jingying dui pinkun wenti de renzhi he jingying de shehui yishi)', *Jiangsu Social Sciences* 4 (2009): 61-69.

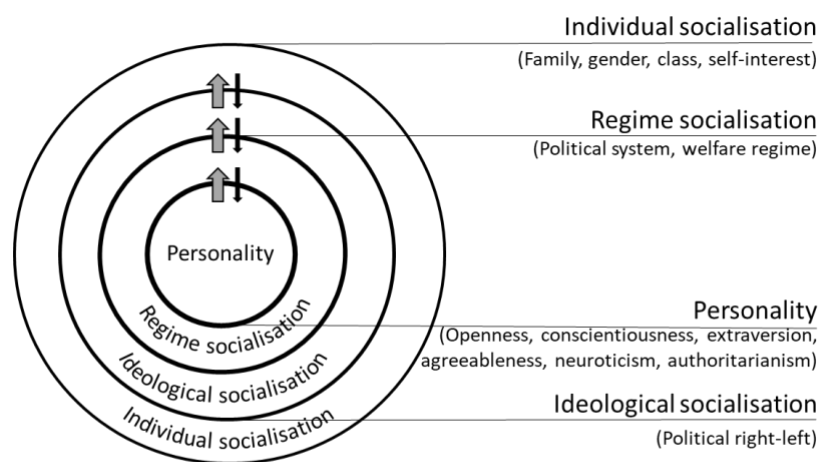
<sup>8</sup> Z. Chen, '低保养懒人': 由指控低保户而显露出的福利体制问题 {The Minimum Standard of Living Scheme Was for Lazy People!}, The Problems of the Existing Welfare System Revealed from Current Welfare Allegations}, *Social Security Studies* 1: (2007) pp. 128-137

<sup>9</sup> Robert Walker, *The Shame of Poverty*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

<sup>10</sup> NPCSC (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress), 'Research Report of the Standing Committee of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on the Work of Poverty Alleviation — The Ninth Meeting of the Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress, (26 February 2019)'. [http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/2019-02/26/content\\_2072766.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/2019-02/26/content_2072766.htm); Robert Walker and Lichao Yang, L. Anti-poverty Policies and Discourses of Blame in China, *Made in China*, 4(1) (2019) p 49.

<sup>11</sup> People's Daily, 扶贫先扶志 兜底不兜懒, 31st October. (2019)

There is much evidence, international and Chinese, that notions of deservingness affect public support for welfare provision and the willingness to fund services and benefits for others.<sup>1213</sup> Moreover, recognition of work effort and laziness as its antonym are major determinants of deservedness in China as elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, as China moves to a relative definition of poverty, it becomes urgent to understand the factors that shape middle class perceptions of poverty. Reviewing the literature on the formation of social attitudes and policy preferences, Tepe and Vanhuyse<sup>15</sup> have likened the multiple influences to the rings of an onion (Figure 1). At the core, and least well understood, are personality traits that appear quite stable. Still deep and relatively stable is ideology framed by ‘early political regime experiences’, and more towards the surface and variable are ‘differential socialization experiences’ and ‘material self-interest, some of which is determined by one’s position in the income distribution or age profile’.



Source: adapted from Tepe and Vanhuyse 2020

**Figure 1 An adaptation of Tepe and Vanhuyse's onion model of socialisation**

Taking forward this metaphor, the intention in this article is to tease out factors associated with people believing that poverty is due to laziness: personality and regime, ideological and individual socialisation. The empirical evidence is derived from an internet survey of a convenience sample of 3,200 members of the Chinese middle-class conducted in July 2019.

### Perceptions of the causes of poverty

A large international literature explores attitudes towards welfare provision and within it, people's perceptions of the causes of poverty,<sup>16</sup> which Babjaková and colleagues group into

<sup>12</sup> David Attewell. 'Deservingness perceptions, welfare state support and vote choice in Western Europe', *West European Politics* 44(3), (2021) pp. 611-634,

<sup>13</sup> Zhouyi Wen and Kinglun Ngok 'Governing the poor in Guangzhou: Marginalization and the neo-liberal paternalist construction of deservedness'. *China Information*, 33(2), (2019).

<sup>14</sup> Trude Sundberg, *Welfare Attitudes in East Asia*. (Bristol: Policy Press, 2020)

<sup>15</sup> Markus Tepe and Pieter Vanhuyse. 'Taking social policy personally: How does neuroticism affect welfare state attitudes?' *Social Policy and Administration* 54, (2020) pp. 699–718. P. 702

<sup>16</sup> Joe Feagin, *Poverty: We still believe that God helps those who help themselves*. *Psychology Today*, (1972, November). 101–129. Peter Taylor-Gooby and Benjamin Leruth (eds.) *Attitudes, Aspirations and Welfare:*

three kinds: structural factors - blaming the system and/or government; individualist reasons - blaming the person; and fatalistic causes.<sup>17</sup> Structural reasons were typically favoured by women, people with low incomes, older respondents and those committed to left of centre politics, while individualistic ones were differentially selected by men, the less educated and those with a rightist ideology. There were no characteristics consistently shared by among people ascribing poverty to fate.

### **Personality**

The above review<sup>18</sup> did not consider personality for, as Tepe and Vanhuysse<sup>19</sup> note, while it might be the root source of attitudes, its impact is the least well understood influence. Hence, this is a major focus of this article. Personality comprises many traits frequently conceptualised and measured along five dimensions with the mnemonic: OCEAN.<sup>20</sup> Openness, which includes facets such as adventurousness, emotional awareness and artistic interests, is widely reported to be associated with a liberal ideology, while conscientiousness, defined with respect to qualities such as being driven, cautiousness, dutifulness, and self-discipline is strongly correlated with conservative ideology.<sup>21</sup> Extraversion, characterised by traits such as energy, assertiveness, gregariousness and cheerfulness, is also widely reported to be associated with political views. However, the associations seem to be context and issue specific, perhaps linked also to the egotistical content of extraversion; some studies find a leaning towards right-wing parties and the espousal of views consistent with both economic and social conservatism<sup>22</sup> while other studies report the opposite.<sup>23</sup> Agreeableness, indexed by the facets of altruism, sympathy, empathy and trust has been found to correlate positively with social conservatism in the USA, but negatively with economic conservatism,<sup>24</sup> while, in Europe, it seems to be positively associated with left wing parties promoting liberal economics.<sup>25</sup> Finally, neuroticism, now usually referred to as ‘emotional range’, is characterised by anxiety, depression and vulnerability and is less clearly associated with

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*Social Policy Directions in Uncertain Times* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Walker (2014); Barrientos and Neff (2010).

<sup>17</sup> Jaroslava Babjaková, Jozef Džuka and Jonathan Gresty. ‘Perceived causes of poverty and subjective aspirations of the poor: a literature review’. *Československá psychologie* 63(3), (2019) pp.325-336;

<sup>18</sup> Babjaková et al. (2019)

<sup>19</sup> Tepe and Vanhuysse (2020)

<sup>20</sup> Courtney Ackerman, *Big Five Personality Traits: The OCEAN Model Explained*.

<https://positivepsychology.com/big-five-personality-theory/Home> (visited: 20<sup>th</sup> August 2019)

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Soldz and George Vaillant, ‘The Big Five personality traits and the life course: A 45-year longitudinal study’. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 33(2), (1999), 208-232; Gian Caprara, Claudio Barbaranelli, Philip Zimbardo, ‘When Parsimony Subdues Distinctiveness: Simplified Public Perceptions of Politicians’ Personality’. *Political Psychology* 23(1), (2002), pp. 77–95; Dana Carney, John Jost, Samuel Gosling and Jeff Potter ‘The Secret Lives of Liberals and Conservatives: Personality Profiles, Interaction Styles, and the Things They Leave Behind’. *Political Psychology*, 29, (2008), pp. 807–40.

<sup>22</sup> Caprara et al., (2002); Carney et al., (2008)

<sup>23</sup> Peter Rentfrow, John Jost, Samuel Gosling, Jeffrey Potter, ‘Statewide differences in personality predict voting patterns in 1996-2004 U.S. presidential elections’. *Social and psychological bases of ideology and system justification*, eds., John Jost, Aaron Kay and Hulda Thorisdottir (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). pp. 314–347.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Gerber, Gregory Huber, David Doherty, Conor Dowling and Shang Ha, ‘Personality and political attitudes: relationships across issue domains and political contexts’. *The American Political Science Review*, 104(01), (2010), pp. 111-133; Steven Ludeke and Stig Rasmussen, ‘Personality correlates of sociopolitical attitudes in the Big Five and Eysenckian models’. *Personality and Individual Differences* 98(1), (2016), pp. 30–36.

<sup>25</sup> Aidt and Rauh, (2017)

political ideology; it has been linked with social and, especially, economic conservatism in the USA, left wing parties in Europe and support for, but dissatisfaction with, welfare provision in Germany.<sup>26 27</sup>

Not all personality traits are captured the ‘Big Five’ dimensions. Authoritarianism, strongly linked with social conservatism, it has long been a good predictor of support for the US Republican Party.<sup>28</sup> Authoritarians prefer order, conformity, and security rather than freedom, autonomy, and change.<sup>29</sup>

Few studies in China have tried to link personality with politics. However, the Big Five are widely used in applied psychology to explore topics as wide-ranging as job-satisfaction, empathy of doctors and cortical activation.<sup>30</sup> Some scholars have argued for an indigenous Chinese approach to personality and the Chinese Personality Assessment Inventory (CPAI) exists comprising of: harmony; *ren qing* (relationship orientation); modernization; thrift versus extravagance; *ah-q* mentality (defensiveness); and face, but these are arguably cultural traits rather than core dimensions of personality.<sup>31</sup>

### **Regime socialisation**

Tepe and Vanhuysse<sup>32</sup> argue that the political system and welfare regime, the organisation of institutions and policies to meet individuals’ needs, have a profound influence on attitudes; they instil beliefs about the nature of need and the most appropriate means of meeting it. Esping-Andersen’s<sup>33</sup> foundational work on regime theory postulated three coherent and relatively stable regimes: social democracy based on equitable treatment with a preference for the state not the market in welfare provision; the liberal model promoting individual achievement, the state’s role limited to prevent it undermining private provision; and the Christian democratic model fostering social cohesion through insurance provision by which some income redistribution is achieved. Later authors added further regime types, the most relevant being the East Asian model, based on Confucian traditions.<sup>34</sup> This prioritises the

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<sup>26</sup> Gerber et al. (2010); Aidt and Rauh (2017)

<sup>27</sup> Tepe and Vanhuysse (2020)

<sup>28</sup> Bart Duriez and Alain Van Hiel, The march of modern fascism. A comparison of social dominance orientation and authoritarianism. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 32(7), (2002), pp. 1199–1213; Authoritarianism and American Political Behavior from 1952 to 2008

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Anne Cizmar, Geoffrey Layman, John McTague, Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz and Michael Spivey, ‘Authoritarianism and American Political Behavior from 1952 to 2008’. *Political Research Quarterly*, 67(1), (2014), pp. 71–83.

<sup>29</sup> Ludeke and Rasmussen (2016); Gizem Arikan and Eser Sekercioglu, ‘Authoritarian Predispositions and Attitudes Towards Redistribution’. *Political Psychology*, 40(5), (2019), 1099–1118.

<sup>30</sup> Qingguo Zhai, Mike Willis, Bob O’Shea, Yubo Zhai and Yuwen Yang ‘Big Five personality traits, job satisfaction and subjective well-being in China’. *International Journal of Psychology*, 48(6), (2013), pp. 1099–1108; Yang Song and Meng Shi ‘Associations between empathy and big five personality traits among Chinese undergraduate medical students’. *PLoS ONE* 12(2), (2017), 1–13; Jie Luo and Xiao-yang Dai, ‘Meta-analysis of Big-five factor personality tests in China’, *Chinese Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 19(6), (2011), pp. 740–752.

<sup>31</sup> Fanny Cheung; Kwok Leung; Jian-Xin Zhang et al., ‘Indigenous Chinese personality constructs: Is the five-factor model complete?’ *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 32(4), (2001), pp. 407–433; Xinyue Zhou, Gerard Saucier, Dingguo Gao and Jing Liu, ‘The Factor Structure of Chinese Personality Terms’. *Journal of Personality* 77(2), (2009), 363–400.

<sup>32</sup> Tepe and Vanhuysse (2020)

<sup>33</sup> Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

<sup>34</sup> Christian Aspalter, ‘The East Asian welfare model’, *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 15(3), (2006), 290–301; Kam Chan, Deconstructing the Asian welfare model: social equality matters, *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 1(3), (2008) pp. 302–312; Toikko and Rantanen, (2017).

family as the principal provider of security and adds an attachment to social stability, patriarchal structures, a broadly benevolent state and, according to some, economic growth as the predominant indicator of development.

The abstract ‘institutional logic’ associated with welfare regimes has been found to affect people’s notions of deservingness and their willingness to make provision for others.<sup>35</sup> Within the East Asian regime, deservingness, for example, is widely judged with respect to contribution and demonstrable hard work but is affected by national institutions.<sup>36</sup> Kongshøj<sup>37</sup> links the extremely high proportion of Chinese believing that ‘the government should spend less on benefits for the poor’ to *hukou*, the system of household registration, and to social assistance (*dibao*). He argues that the highly selective nature of *dibao* requiring applications to be public validated automatically draws attention to dishonesty, undermining deservedness, and adding to the divisive ‘us-them’, ‘entitled-non-entitled’ nature of *hukou*. Wen and Ngok,<sup>38</sup> though, offer an additional or alternative systemic mechanism, noting that the previously benevolent Chinese state has moved to increase ‘welfare conditionality to instil a greater sense of responsibility in the poor’ which has simultaneously served to marginalise and stigmatise recipients.

### ***Ideological socialisation***

Political scientists have explored the role of individual ideology, personal values and especially the importance of partisanship. As confirmed by the Babjaková review,<sup>39</sup> persons leaning to the political right are typically more likely than those on the left to attribute poverty to individual rather than structural failings and not to support unconditional cash benefits to address poverty.<sup>40</sup> However, in China, Kongshøj<sup>41</sup> found that the intense aversion to the ‘undeserving poor’ swamps all other factors including ideology, as measured by commitment to redistribution. A similar phenomenon is evident in the USA where poverty is often equated with ‘Welfare’, a heavily stigmatised form of social assistance (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), which is received disproportionately by people of colour and hence is racialised.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Individual socialisation***

The Babjaková review reports consistent evidence that men, younger people, the more affluent but also the less educated are more likely than other groups to blame poverty on individual characteristics.<sup>43</sup> Knowledge, self-interest and attribution error (over-emphasising

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<sup>35</sup> Tijs Laenen, Federica Rossetti and Wim Van Oorschot (2019). ‘Why deservingness theory needs qualitative research. Comparing focus group discussions on social welfare in three welfare regimes’, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 60 (3), 190-216

<sup>36</sup> Shih-Jiunn Shi, *Micro-foundations of Welfare Restructuring in East Asia: Pension Reforms in Comparative Perspective*, Paper given at the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference of the International Political Science Association, Paris, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2019)

<sup>37</sup> Kristian Kongshøj, ‘The undeserving poor in China: the institutional logic of the minimum living standard scheme and the hukou system’, *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 10:2, (2017) pp. 128-142.

<sup>38</sup> Zhouyi Wen and Kinglun Ngok ‘Governing the poor in Guangzhou: Marginalization and the neo-liberal paternalist construction of deservedness’. *China Information*, 33(2), (2019), p. 215.

<sup>39</sup> Jaroslava Babjaková et al. (2019)

<sup>40</sup> Halman and van Oorschot (1999); Dunn (2018).

<sup>41</sup> Kongshøj (2017)

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Hopkins, ‘Partisan Reinforcement and the Poor: The Impact of Context on Explanations for Poverty’, *Social Science Quarterly*, 90(3), (2009), 744-64; Harrell Rodgers, Jr. ‘The Multidimensionality of Public Opinion About Poverty and Welfare Populations’, *Social Science Quarterly*, 90(3), (2009), pp. 765-769; Dunn (2018).

<sup>43</sup> Jaroslava Babjaková et al. (2019)

personal rather than structural causation) have all been proffered as explanations for the relationship with income.<sup>44,45</sup>

International evidence on the extent to which people's attitudes towards poverty are influenced by knowledge, direct or indirect, is complex and somewhat tangential in that many studies concern views on welfare benefit recipients. Reports from Scandinavia indicate that people having close relatives or friends belonging to stigmatised groups have more empathy than others towards them,<sup>46</sup> and the same is true in Australia except when protagonists live in areas where negative views predominate.<sup>47</sup> In Britain, those currently experiencing poverty are less critical of benefits than others but there is less evidence that this engenders any lasting empathy.<sup>48</sup> There, public discourse has become increasingly hostile towards welfare benefits due to a mutually reinforcing dynamic in which a competitive press exaggerates differing political ideologies and social values.<sup>49</sup> A contrasting dynamic has applied until recently in China where news media speak the positive respectful words of government that may hide negative private attitudes and discriminatory policies.<sup>50</sup>

Given that most scholars agree that the causes of poverty are largely structural, people with more education and those with direct experience may better appreciate the structural nature of poverty.<sup>51</sup> The tendency of those on high incomes to ascribe poverty to personality or behaviour is characteristic of attribution bias<sup>52</sup> in which individual traits are exaggerated at the expense of situations; 'blaming the poor' it may be self-serving, justifying protagonists' own affluence and supporting the status quo.<sup>53,54</sup>

## Expectations and hypotheses

No research is known that has sought to explain beliefs about the causes of poverty in China. However, the following expectations that might be construed as hypotheses are taken from the literature.

**Personality:** belief in laziness as the cause of poverty should be higher among people with authoritarian<sup>55</sup> and conscientious<sup>56</sup> personality traits who expect order and good

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<sup>44</sup> Norman Feather, Explanations of poverty in Australian and American samples: The person, society, or fate?' *Australian Journal of Psychology* 26(3), (1974), pp. 199-216.

<sup>45</sup> Lee Ross, 'The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in the attribution process'. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 10, (1977), pp. 173-220.

<sup>46</sup> Marjolein Jeene, Wim van Oorschot and Wilfred Uunk, 'Popular Criteria for the Welfare Deservingness of Disability Pensioners: The Influence of Structural and Cultural Factors', *Social Indicators Research*, 110, (2013), 1103-1117; Bengt Furåker and Marianne Blomsterberg 'Attitudes towards the unemployed. An analysis of Swedish survey data', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 12, (2003), pp. 193-203. Troels Fage Hedegaard The Policy Design Effect: Proximity as a micro-level explanation of the effect of policy designs on social benefit attitudes, *Scandinavian Political Studies* 37(4) (2014) pp. 366-84.

<sup>47</sup> Timothy Schofield and Peter Butterworth, 'Are negative community attitudes toward welfare recipients associated with unemployment? evidence from an Australian cross-sectional sample and longitudinal cohort', *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 9(5), (2018), pp. 503-515.

<sup>48</sup> Ben Baumberg Geiger, The stigma of claiming benefits: a quantitative study. *Journal of Social Policy*, 45 (2). (2015) pp. 181 -199

<sup>49</sup> Walker (2014)

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Babjaková et al. (2019)

<sup>52</sup> Ross (1977)

<sup>53</sup> Stuart Carr, *Anti-Poverty Psychology*, (New York: Springer, 2013)

<sup>54</sup> Hedegaard (2014)

<sup>55</sup> Ludeke and Rasmussen (2016)

<sup>56</sup> Soldz and Vaillant (1999), Carney et al. (2008)

behaviour and possibly among extraverts<sup>57</sup> with limited empathy. It should be lower among those with open and agreeable personalities characterised by being non-judgemental and empathetic.

**Regime:** within one country, regime theory helps little in explaining differences in individual behaviour. It is salient, though, to acknowledge that the widespread attachment to laziness as the cause of poverty in China might reflect the emphasis on hard work embodied in Confucianism and developmentalist rhetoric.<sup>58</sup>

**Ideology:** People believing in the effectiveness of government poverty alleviation policy might presume that those remaining poor must have failed to take up the opportunities provided by the state and therefore be lazy.<sup>59</sup>

**Individual:** people who themselves have experienced poverty, or know others that have, may be more empathetic and less likely to attribute poverty to laziness.<sup>60</sup> Better educated people, especially social science graduates should realise that poverty is largely structural while those with an arts or humanities background may have the understanding and imagination to appreciate the suffering caused by poverty and therefore be unlikely to ascribe poverty to laziness.<sup>61</sup>

## Method

The data derive from a survey administered through the WeChat communication platform using a 40 item self-completion questionnaire hosted by Wenjuanxing (Questionnaire Star) with confidentiality assured. The main convenience snowball sample was seeded by two senior academics, one based in northern China and one in the south with a supplementary sample seeded by 10 associated graduate students. The survey was run in July 2019 and a total of 3,322 questionnaires were returned over six days of which 3301 were useable.

Estimates of the size of the Chinese middle class vary according to definition from 109 million to the official count of 400 million persons.<sup>62</sup> The consensus among Chinese scholars is that class is best defined with respect to occupation<sup>63</sup> with middle class defined to include senior and mid-level managers (高级和中级管理人员), senior and intermediate professional and technical personnel (高级和中级专业技术人员) and general staff (一般科室职员).<sup>64</sup> The sample was therefore trimmed for analysis by removing persons reporting other occupations. Since only 116 responses were received from people who had retired, retirees were also excluded from the sample. Initial analysis indicated that students, comprising 34 percent of the sample, differed from other middle-class respondents only with respect to age and income and therefore they were retained in the final sample of 2449 with controls for student status included in all analyses.

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<sup>57</sup> Caprara et al., (2002); Carney et al. (2008)

<sup>58</sup> Aspalter (2006); Toikko and Rantanen (2017).

<sup>59</sup> Kongshøj (2017)

<sup>60</sup> Hedegaard (2014)

<sup>61</sup> Babjaková et al. (2019)

<sup>62</sup> Xin Zhou, 'The question mark hanging over China's 400 million-strong middle class', *South China Morning Post*, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018

<sup>63</sup> Zhong, Ye and Zhao Miaoxi.. Evolution of jobs-housing spatial mismatch in Guangzhou-- from the perspective of social differentiation. *Urban Planning*, 43(1), (2019), pp.100-108.; Yan, Dongdong, Zhu, Junjie, and He Weiwei. Generational inheritance, professional transition and acquisition of social status of peasants-- A historical study of 71 age groups based on CGSS. *Agricultural Technology and Economy*. 8. (2020). (In Chinese).

<sup>64</sup> Ying Miao, *Being Middle Class in China: Identity, Attitudes and Behaviour*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).



### ***Dependent variables***

Respondents' beliefs as to the causes of poverty were gathered twice, once close to the beginning and then near the end of the questionnaire, both in response to the same question:

Why, in your opinion, are there people in this country who live in need? Here are X opinions: Which comes closest to your view?

On the first occasion, following the example of the World Values Survey cited above, just two responses were offered:

'They are poor because of laziness and lack of will power' and

'They are poor because society treats them unfairly'.

These options were expanded to four on the second occasion plus 'none of these' and 'don't know' adopting wording used by the UK Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey, Eurostat, and Gallup namely:

'Because of laziness and lack of willpower';

'Because they have been unlucky';

'Because there is much injustice in our society'; and

'It's an inevitable part of modern progress'.

Two formulations of a composite 'poverty as laziness' variable were considered. One a multinomial variable, distinguished between respondents who chose laziness in response to both forms of the question; those who selected it once and those who never chose it. The other, a binary variable, differentiated between those who ever selected laziness (assigned the value 1) and those who did not (assigned, 0). Both formulations generated identical results and therefore, for reasons of parsimony, only analyses using the binary variable are reported below.

An additional multinomial dependent variable was constructed retaining more information and distinguishing respondents who chose laziness on two occasions (14 percent of sample), those choosing 'unfairness' and 'injustice' (12 percent), those changing from 'laziness' to 'modern inevitability' (32 percent), those changing from 'unfairness' to 'modern inevitability' (21 percent), and those choosing other responses (21 percent)

### ***Independent variables***

Personality was captured using the Mandarin version of the five two-item OCEAN personality inventory indexing openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Annex A).<sup>65</sup> In practice, the internal consistency of all the dyads, as measured by Cronbach's Alpha, was not high,<sup>66</sup> and all analyses were repeated with the component variables separately entered in the equations. However, the fundamental structures of the models were invariant and for reason of parsimony only analyses using the composite personality scales are reported. One other personality trait, authoritarianism, was included in the analysis using a four-item inventory comprising of four binary preferences in response to the question: 'For a child, which of the following personality traits do you find more important?': Independence or respect for elders? Curiosity or good manners? Obedience or

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<sup>65</sup> Richard Carciofo, Jiaoyan Yang, Nan Song, Feng Du, Kan Zhang, 'Psychometric Evaluation of Chinese-Language 44-Item and 10-Item Big Five Personality Inventories, Including Correlations with Chronotype, Mindfulness and Mind Wandering', *PLoS ONE* 11(2), (2016), e0149963.

<sup>66</sup> R. Luo, C. Lee, K. Hsu, et al. The Correlations between Chinese Personality Traits and Cortical Activation. Pp. 158-159 in Lackovic I. (ed.), *1st Global Conference on Biomedical Engineering & 9th Asian-Pacific Conference on Medical and Biological Engineering, IFMBE Proceedings*, 47. (2015)

self-reliance? Being considerate or well behaved?<sup>67</sup> The third and fourth items produced extremely unbalanced (skewed) responses and were therefore dropped and, since Cronbach's Alpha for the remaining two items was insufficiently high, these two items were included separately in analyses.

Directly assessing respondents' knowledge is always challenging in survey work since it is difficult to avoid leading questions. Knowledge was therefore assessed indirectly. Experiential knowledge was established by questions related to respondents' experience of poverty as a child, and their contact with friends and relatives that they considered to be poor. Academic knowledge was assessed by reference to whether they majored in: the social sciences and management; arts and humanities; biological or medical sciences; or other disciplines.

Given the official control of mainstream media in China, and prior research pointing to the importance of collective social values over idiosyncratic individual ones, political values were assessed by questions relating to the perceived success of the government's poverty alleviation strategy. Using a five-point scale, respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed that: 'China would eradicate poverty as planned by 2020'; and that 'social assistance was successfully targeted on people in poverty' (the empirical evidence is that it is not).<sup>68</sup>

Basic descriptive analysis was followed by a series of binomial and multinomial logistic regressions with the dependent variables summarising respondents' perceptions of the causes of poverty. The analysis was undertaken with SAS 9.4 Version using the LOGISTIC procedures. In accordance with best-practice advice, the sample was not reweighted to try to create a nationally representative sample.

While the sample included respondents from all China's 33 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions (except Macao), reflecting the initial seeding it was disproportionately drawn from prosperous Beijing (6.7 percent) and Hebei (5.6 percent) and from two of the poorer provinces Guizhou and Shanxi (15 percent and 16 percent respectively). Leaving aside students, the analysed sample comprised 19 percent senior and mid-level managers, 36 percent senior and intermediate professional and technical personnel, and 45 percent general staff, proportions that fall between corresponding estimates from the 2010 and 2015 China General Social Surveys<sup>69</sup>. Compared to the China Family Panel Survey, incomes spanned the full range associated with the middle class but included a disproportionate number with annual incomes above 200,000 yuan (36 percent versus 11 percent). Fifty percent of respondents were aged under 35 older (including students, 90 percent of whom were aged under 26) and sixty-six percent were women. In sum, the sample represents the affluent middle class but includes a disproportionate number of female respondents.

Turning to substantive findings and responses to the World Values Survey (WVS) question, 59 percent of respondents attributed poverty to laziness and lack of willpower, and 41 percent to 'much injustice in our society' (Table 1). The proportion believing laziness to be the reason for poverty is close to the national estimate of 58 percent reported in 2001,

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<sup>67</sup> Cizmar et al., (2014); Boris Bizumic, and John Duckitt, Investigating Right Wing Authoritarianism With a Very Short Authoritarianism Scale, *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 6(1), (2018), 129–150.

<sup>68</sup> Li, Mianguan and Robert Walker, 'Targeting Social Assistance: Dibao and institutional alienation in rural China', *Social Policy and Administration* 52(3), (2018), pp.771-789.

<sup>69</sup> Wu, Qiong and Michael Wallace: Hukou stratification, class structure, and earnings in transitional China, *Chinese Sociological Review*, (2021) DOI: 10.1080/21620555.2021.1878019; Liu, Xin, Class structure and income inequality in transitional China, *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* (2020), 7(4)

although lower than the 68 percent recorded for high income respondents in that year.<sup>70</sup> However, when the question was repeated towards the end of the questionnaire with a larger response frame, the proportion citing laziness fell dramatically to 14percent; the majority (53 percent) responded that poverty was ‘an inevitable part of modern progress’. This clearly raises questions about the stability and validity of responses to the WVS question since the original two options account for only 29 percent of responses to the second expanded question. This result initiated a change of modelling strategy with an attempt first to identify the personal attributes associated with respondents ascribing poverty to laziness and, subsequently, to explain the complex pattern of responses to both questions.

**Table 1**

## **Results**

### *Laziness as the cause of poverty*

Table 2 reports a series of logistic regression models with the dependent variable distinguishing between respondents who suggested that poverty was caused by laziness in response to either question from those who did not. Sets of independent variables are added incrementally to test hypotheses outlined above in line with Tepe and Vanhuysse’s model (Figure 1). In each case, controls are added for age, gender, current student status and educational attainment and all models appear robust in terms of overall efficiency (Likelihood ratio, Score and Wald tests) and goodness of fit (Hosmer & Lemeshow).<sup>71</sup> Of the controls (Model 1), only education is consistently associated with beliefs about poverty: being a graduate reduced the odds of respondents explaining poverty in terms of laziness which is consistent with prior literature

In line with hypotheses (Model 2), respondents with authoritarian and extravert personality characteristics were more likely than other respondents to blame poverty on laziness, whereas respondents with personalities characterised by openness were least prone to select laziness as the cause of poverty. The coefficients for these variables are consistent across all models. Contrary to expectations, conscientiousness and agreeableness proved not to be associated with beliefs about the causes of poverty.

**Table 2**

In the Chinese context of a (virtual) one party state, the notion of partisanship is alien, but it was hypothesised that those believing in the effectiveness of the government’s poverty alleviation strategy would be more likely than others to believe that poverty was due to laziness. Model 3 confirms this hypothesis. The odds ratios (OR) associated with belief that poverty would be eliminated in 2020 and that social assistance reached the poor were 1.17 and OR:1.18 respectively in the full model (6).

Knowledge, academic and experiential, is added in Model 4. Social science and humanities graduates, as hypothesised, were less likely than others to identify laziness as the cause of poverty (OR: 0.52; 0.55). However, contrary to expectations, beliefs about poverty were unrelated to any indicator of experiential knowledge of poverty, either direct or indirect (Model 4).

Models 5 and 6 extend the analysis beyond that which was hypothesised and so the relationships should be considered as more speculative. Model 5 points to consistency in

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<sup>70</sup> Walker (2014).

<sup>71</sup> Chao-Ying Peng, Kuk Lee and Gary Ingersoll, ‘An Introduction to Logistic Regression Analysis and Reporting’, *The Journal of Educational Research*, 96(1), (2002), 3-14.

respondents' beliefs in that those who believed that the rich become rich because of hard work (OR: 1.21) or because of intelligence (OR: 1.22) were correspondingly more likely to believe that poverty was a product of laziness than those who cited social origin as the source of wealth. Model 6 indicates that those who considered the existence of poverty to be inevitable also tended to believe that it resulted from laziness.

### ***Respondents changing their attribution of poverty***

Having demonstrated that people saying that poverty was caused by laziness and lack of willpower differed from others in terms of personality, political attitudes, and academic knowledge, it is also clear that some people will change their mind when confronted by a different set of alternative reasons.

The model presented at Table 3 seeks to understand why this should be. It takes, as the dependent variable, a multinomial variable that organises responses to the two cause-of-poverty questions into five response categories. Two categories relate to people who persisted with their original response: one (14 percent) comprising those believing that the cause of poverty was laziness; the other (12 percent) that it resulted from unfairness/injustice. The second two response categories represent respondents who changed their mind saying on the second occasion that poverty was an inevitable part of modern progress; one group had previously attributed poverty to laziness (32 percent); the other to unfairness (22 percent). The final category captures the 21 percent of respondents who offered other combinations of answers. The reference category in the model is people persisting in their view that poverty resulted from unfairness. The same variables were included in the analysis as in the models presented in Table 2 but, to simplify presentation, Table 3 includes only variables with significant coefficients.

**Table 3**

Comparison is made first between two groups of respondents who were consistent in their responses, choosing either 'laziness' or 'unfairness/injustice' on both occasions (Table 3, Column 7). Personality, ideological beliefs, education attainment and friendship with people in poverty, though not other forms of knowledge, discriminated between the two groups. Respondents exhibiting authoritarian (OR:1.72 and 1.71) or extravert personality traits (OR:1.19) were more likely consistently to say that laziness rather than 'unfairness' was the cause of poverty. This was also true of people who had faith in the government's poverty alleviation strategy (OR:1.36); believed that to become rich simply needed intelligence (OR:1.30) and/or hard work (OR:1.34); and who considered that poverty was inevitable (OR:1.45). Respondents who had friends living in poverty were similarly more likely than those without to repeat that poverty was due to laziness (OR:1.77), a finding at odds with the initial hypothesis. In contrast, respondents with characteristics of an open personality (OR:0.86), and/or who had attended university (OR:0.55) were less likely to persist in responding that laziness was the cause of poverty.

Fifty-four percent of respondents who initially attributed poverty to laziness, subsequently described it 'an inevitable part of modern society', an option not previously available. Recalling that the reference group in Table 3 is respondents twice ascribing poverty to unfairness, women were more likely than men to change their response from laziness to modern progress (Column 6, OR: 1.4), whereas respondents majoring in social science were less likely to do so than those studying other subjects (OR: 0.45).

Respondents who initially selected laziness as the cause of poverty, both those who subsequently gave a different response and those that did not, shared many similarities distinguishing them from people who chose unfairness on both occasions (Table 3, Column 6 c/f Column 7): extravert characteristics (OR:1.09 for those changing their response from

laziness and OR:1.19, for those not doing so); authoritarian traits (ORs:1.83 and 1.68; and 1.72 and 1.71); belief that social assistance reached most people in poverty (ORs: 1.24 and 1.25), and that the rich get rich through hard work (1.34 and 1.35).

Considering respondents who initially linked poverty with unfairness, personality and ideological socialisation again distinguished those who, when given more choice, changed their response from those who did not (Table 3, Column 5). Respondents exhibiting the authoritarian personality trait of prioritising respect for the elderly over independence (1.49) were more likely than others to select ‘modern progress’ when able to do so. The same was true of respondents believing that wealth was a product of hard work (OR:1.19) (OR:1.72), that poverty was inevitable in any society (OR:1.72) or, a little incongruously, that the government would succeed in eradicating poverty in 2020 (OR:1.17).

A comparatively small group of respondents chose neither laziness nor injustice in response to the second cause of poverty question, instead electing: luck (1.7 percent); family circumstances (9.3 percent); or ‘something else’ (7.0 percent). Social scientists (OR:0.47) were unlikely to choose any of these options in preference to injustice (Table 3, Column 2). This contrasts with respondents prioritising: politeness in children over curiosity (characteristic of someone with an authoritarian personality; OR:1.49); expecting the government to eradicate poverty (OR:1.29); believing that poverty was inevitable (OR:1.32); thinking that wealth was a product of hard work (OR:1.20) and having friends who were poor (OR:1.56): they were all more likely to choose luck, family circumstances or something else as a cause of poverty rather than injustice.

## Discussion

The analysis underlines the importance of question formulation when exploring beliefs and attitudes. While the convenience sample of middle-class Chinese drawn in 2019 generates results consistent with those of the representative 2001 World Values Survey (WVS) in finding that most respondents cited laziness as the cause of poverty, it also demonstrates the sensitivity of responses to the options offered. In seeking to distinguish between individualistic and structural causes of poverty, the WVS juxtaposes ‘laziness and lack of will-power’ against ‘society treats them [people] unfairly’ but, when given a wider choice of options, only 28.6 percent of the 2019 sample chose either of the initial alternatives. Therefore, in response to the first question, most respondents were effectively having to choose between the less inappropriate of two inappropriate options. While the national comparisons based on the WVS may still be instructive, since respondents in all countries were confronted with the same options, the point estimates for China may be of little value.

### *Choosing between laziness or unfairness*

That said, it remains valid to ask what differentiates people choosing between the two options, not least because of the current saliency of the poverty-laziness couplet in Chinese policy discourse and the need to engage the middle class in tackling relative poverty<sup>72</sup> The answers are part-consistent with prior theory and literature, and part not. Literature, albeit exclusively Western in origin, points to authoritarian, extravert and conscientiousness personality traits, in contrast to openness and agreeableness, being commonly associated with individualist rather than structural explanations of disadvantage.<sup>73</sup> While there was no evidence among the sample respondents in China that agreeableness shaped beliefs about

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<sup>72</sup> People’s Daily (2019).

<sup>73</sup> (Aidt and Rauh (2017); Arıkan and Sekercioglu (2019); Caprara et al. (2002); Carney et al, (2008).

poverty, those who were more authoritarian (OR:1.28 and 1.57 respectively), extravert (OR:1.11) or less open (OR:0.91) than their peers were, as predicted, more likely to select laziness as the cause of poverty rather than unfairness (Table 2, Model 6) .

Consistent with expectations relating to ideological socialisation, respondents believing in the success of government policies were also more likely than others to think poverty was caused by laziness. Perhaps such respondents reasoned that if policy was working, those remaining poor must have been behaving inappropriately; alternatively, they may simply have accepted government rhetoric about the need to eliminate undesirable attitudes.<sup>7475</sup> Clearly, though, while most respondents were sceptical about the claims of policymakers those believing poverty was caused by laziness were less so. (Just 22 percent of respondents believed that the poverty alleviation target would be achieved [nominally it was] and only 32 percent thought that most people in poverty received social assistance.)

Turning to individual socialisation, respondents trained in the social sciences (OR:0.52) and humanities (OR:0.55) were less likely than others to blame poverty on laziness, arguably because they were more aware of the structural causes of poverty and possibly more humanistic in their sensibilities than those trained in other disciplines. Counter to expectations, there was no evidence of experiential knowledge reducing belief that poverty is due to laziness.

### ***Committed to laziness***

Similar associations appertaining to personality and ideological socialisation were evident in relation to the 14 percent respondents who, given greater scope to express their beliefs about the causes of poverty, continued to stress the importance of laziness. However, care is needed in comparing the models presented in Tables 2 and 3 since, in the former, the reference group appertains to respondents who never mentioned laziness as a cause of poverty while, in the latter case, it comprises the slightly smaller group of respondents (12 percent) who consistently linked poverty to unfairness.

Therefore, in Table 4 (Column 10), respondents who selected laziness as the reason for poverty on both occasions are compared directly with the 32 percent of respondents who changed from laziness to modern progress when given the opportunity to do so. The pattern of relationships is somewhat different to that deduced from Table 3 on account of the precise model specifications. This direct comparison is the first to identify an association with conscientiousness (OR:1.18), the personality trait most often associated with political conservatism in the West; as might be expected, people exhibiting this trait, along with those identified as extraverted (OR:1.09), were more likely to hold onto the belief that poverty was caused by laziness. Other personality traits, though, dropped out of the story.

**Table 4**

The unanticipated observation from Table 3 that people having friends who were poor were more likely to persist in attributing poverty to laziness is repeated in Table 4. The odds ratios in Columns 9 and 10 indicate that respondents having friends experiencing poverty were less likely than others to change answers from laziness to modernisation (OR: 1.50), or to believe poverty was due to unfairness (OR: 1.77). The implication then is, if laziness is not a major reason for poverty as the empirical evidence suggests, then friendship does not engender empathy.

There are accounts in the international literature of othering and distancing by middle-class individuals who, after escaping from poverty, justified their success in terms of hard

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<sup>74</sup> Wen and Ngok (2019).

<sup>75</sup> Communist Party membership was omitted as a measure of ideology to ensure high response.

work relative to the laziness of others.<sup>76</sup> The fact that respondents with friends who were poor were more likely to have been poor as children is supportive circumstantial evidence of this. Alternatively, the finding (Table 2) that respondents with friends experiencing poverty were more likely to choose combinations of factors other than unfairness or laziness as reasons for poverty, may point to a more complex story that might include a nuanced response to the experience of friendship. It might also evidence intellectual rather than practical empathy on the part of respondents who, without friends suffering poverty, nevertheless advocate injustice as the cause of poverty.<sup>77</sup>

### ***Initially choosing unfairness***

While both groups initially selecting laziness as the cause of poverty shared common political beliefs (Table 3), this was not true of those originally choosing unfairness. Indeed, differences in political views were predictive of those who subsequently gave modern progress as the cause of poverty when allowed to do so (Table 4, Column 6). Respondents believing that the government would reach its goal of eradicating poverty (OR:1.18), that wealth is attributable to hard work (OR:1.19), and/or that poverty was inevitable (OR:1.73) were all more likely to change their initial response to modern progress. This suggests that people altering their response were more supportive of government than those of respondents committed to injustice as the cause of poverty; as already noted, they were also more likely to exhibit authoritarian personality traits.

Equally telling is the comparison between respondents who initially identified unfairness as the cause of poverty and those convinced that laziness is the reason. The comparison (Table 4, Columns 8 and 9) indicates that persons with a strong preference for independence over respect (a non-authoritarian personality) were particularly committed to injustice as a cause of poverty while extraverts persisted in attributing poverty to laziness.

### ***Choosing modern progress***

Finally, it important to recall that, when given chance, most respondents linked poverty to modern progress. Comparing respondents who chose modern progress after giving contrasting responses to the first cause-of-poverty question emphasises the factors associated with their first response (Table 4, column 7). Respondents who studied the social sciences (OR:0.47) or humanities (OR:0.50) were more likely than others initially to have given unfairness as the cause of poverty, whereas those believing that the government's poverty target would be achieved (OR:1.19) and/or that wealth was the product of intelligence (OR:1.19) more often first chose laziness.

Women are more likely than men to change their initial response and to choose modern progress (Table 4, Columns 8 and 10). It is unclear why. Possibly women were more constrained by the restricted response set of the first question, or maybe men were more reluctant to change their answer having already once committed themselves. Compared to respondents believing poverty resulted from injustice, those citing modern progress as the reason for poverty were more likely to see poverty as inevitable. They were also more likely

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<sup>76</sup> Samara Ali, Carolina Ohls, Gary Parker and Robert Walker, 'Rationalizing poverty in New York: Tales from the middle class', *Journal of Poverty*, 22(4), (2018), pp. 310-333; Lister (2004).

<sup>77</sup> A. Bauman, J. Gale, and K. Milton, 'Are "armchair socialists" still sitting? Cross sectional study of political affiliation and physical activity'. *British Medical Journal*; 349 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.g7073> (11th December 2014)

to have faith in government policies and the benefits of hard work, beliefs consistent with their exhibiting authoritarian personality traits.

### ***In summation***

The beliefs of middle-class respondents in China about the causes of poverty are much as would have been predicted by theory, albeit few studies have simultaneously considered the role of personality, political values, and individual socialisation. Exhibiting authoritarian and extravert personality traits rather than openness, believing in the government's poverty alleviation policies, having limited education, and never having studied the social sciences or humanities were all predictive of respondents believing that poverty is caused by laziness. Correspondingly, respondents without an authoritarian personality and not believing in the effectiveness of government policies, the inevitability of poverty and/or the sanctity of the work ethic were most likely consistently to state that poverty resulted from injustice. Women, though, seemed less assured that poverty was due to either laziness or unfairness and more likely to change their response to modern progress when allowed to do so. Finally, contrary to expectations, respondents with direct knowledge of poverty were more likely than others to associated poverty with laziness. This may be because the experience of endemic poverty is so recent in China: 75 percent had experienced poverty as a child and 72 percent of respondents claimed to have relatives still living in poverty.

### **Conclusion**

As the target date for eradicating extreme, rural poverty in China approached in 2020, policy rhetoric emphasised the importance of laziness as a cause of poverty. While this rhetoric appeared to be consistent with longstanding public opinion, the above analysis suggests otherwise. Albeit relating only to a convenience sample, it suggests that the World Values Survey finding that 68 percent of the Chinese middle class attributed poverty to 'laziness and lack of willpower' was an artefact of the response options, the alternative being: 'society treats them [people in poverty] unfairly'). In China, society is often equated with the government and the Chinese government never presents itself as acting unfairly.<sup>78</sup> While 59 percent of study respondents initially chose laziness over unfairness, when given the chance, 53 percent opted for poverty being 'an inevitable part of modern progress'.

The middle-class respondents initially stating that poverty was due to laziness were more likely than others to have faith in government policies, less likely to have studied social science or the humanities, and more prone to exhibit extravert and authoritarian personality traits. The small minority who continued to link poverty to laziness even when presented with more options were additionally less likely to have attended university or to exhibit traits of an open personality, but more apt to have friends who were poor and to explain people's wealth in terms of higher intelligence.

These findings justify the premise of this paper that, in understanding the tendency of people, despite evidence to the contrary, to blame poverty on laziness, it is important simultaneously to take account of personality and ideological and individual socialisation. Moreover, the analysis has mostly confirmed the hypothesised relationships although direct

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<sup>78</sup> Michael Swaine and Ryan Devries Chinese State-Society Relations: Why Beijing Isn't Trembling and Containment Won't Work. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2019), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/14/chinese-state-society-relations-why-beijing-isn-t-trembling-and-containment-won-t-work-pub-78596>



experiential knowledge has proved less important than anticipated. This finding warrants further investigation. Most studies hitherto have found that proximity to poverty, through experience or friendships, tends to shift the attribution of poverty from the individual to the system. Yet variables included to capture this effect proved to be insignificant except for friends experiencing poverty which unexpectedly increased the odds of reporting that poverty resulted from laziness. Several potential reasons present themselves for further study. China's transition from mass poverty within a generation means that most respondents may have had some contact with poverty which could have reduced the discriminatory power of social proximity. Status insecurity among those respondents with friends who were poor might have caused them to adopt a self-justifying discourse distancing themselves from the predicament of their friends.<sup>79</sup> In addition, those without friends experiencing poverty may simply have projected onto the topic of poverty their global understanding of structural social processes that, in turn, reflected their ideology and personality.<sup>80</sup>

The study findings reveal a marked disjunction between recent government rhetoric, 'eliminate laziness and eradicate poverty', and the majority opinion among respondents that poverty was both 'an inevitable part of modern progress' (54 percent) and 'unavoidable in any society' (79 percent). With this degree of passivity, it is unsurprising that less than one in four respondents believed that extreme poverty would be eradicated in 2020, but that those that did were more likely to believe that poverty was due to laziness.

The government's revised policy agenda, moving from absolute to targeting relative poverty, a manifestation of inequality, will necessarily entail a shift to policies that are explicitly redistributive. This means that, in future, some at least of the middle class will need to contribute to the policy goal by foregoing personal income.<sup>81</sup> While 57 percent of respondents already thought of poverty in relative terms, with only 15 percent of respondents attributing poverty to inequality, the governmental logic would appear to be running well ahead of middle-class opinion.

However, much depends on the beliefs of the 53 percent of people's who attributed poverty to modern progress. They were drawn proportionately from those initially mentioning laziness or unfairness as causes of poverty such that three-fifths were initially apt to blame poverty on individuals rather than on structural factors. Adding these to those respondents who continued to blame poverty on laziness suggests that at least 46 per cent of respondents might attribute poverty to personal failings and therefore be reluctant to forego income on their behalf. These respondents were more supportive than others of past government policies and possibly the recent rhetoric on tackling laziness; they were also less well educated and more likely to exhibit extrovert or authoritarian personality traits. Another 18 per cent of people attributed poverty to other causes including both family needs and ill-luck. Although less likely to be extravert, they shared many characteristics with respondents committed to laziness as the cause of poverty. Therefore, convincing most of the Chinese middle class that they ought to contribute resources to tackling relative poverty could prove challenging.

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<sup>79</sup> Ali et al., (2018); David Attewell. Deservingness perceptions, welfare state support and vote choice in Western Europe, *West European Politics* 44(3), (2021), pp. 611-634

<sup>80</sup> A. Bauman et al., (2014)

<sup>81</sup> Walker and Yang (2020).

Clearly, there are limitations to the current study: the convenience sample; the limited range of questions demanded to achieve a high, though unmeasurable, response rate; and the weak scaling of the internationally derived personality scales despite their widespread use in China. There is also a presumption in the analysis that respondents all conceptualised poverty similarly. Most respondents (57 percent) did think of poverty in relative terms, but a measurable minority (22 percent) conceptualised of poverty as the failure to satisfy basic needs, while 19 percent defined poverty as a denial of freedoms. There is also much more to understand about the formation of middle-class beliefs concerning poverty; the most complex models only explained 20 percent of the variance in respondents' views. Finally, Tepe and Vanhuysse's onion model implies dependencies between personality, regime type, and ideological and individual socialisation which are not tested in the current analysis (other than to note a lack of collinearity in all the models). Therefore, further research using structural equation modelling is foreseen.

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### **Declaration of interest statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Table 1 Responses to the question: Why, in your opinion, are there people in this country who live in need?**

Second question		First Question						
		Laziness and lack of will-power		Society treats them unfairly		Totals		
Options:		Column %	Row %	Column %	Row %	Column %	Row %	Sample
Laziness and lack of will-power	Column %	23.3		0.7		14.1		
	Row %		98.0		2.0		100.0	344
Social inequality	Column %	3.8		30.0		14.5		
	Row %		15.5		84.5		100.0	356
Inevitable modern progress	Column %	53.8		53.0		53.4		
	Row %		59.4		40.6		100.0	1309
Family burden	Column %	10.3		7.8		9.3		
	Row %		65.6		34.4		100.0	227
Bad Luck	Column %	0.8		3.0		1.7		
	Row %		71.4		29.6		100.0	42
None of the above	Column %	8.0		5.6		7.0		
	Row %		67.2		32.8			171
Totals	Row %		59.0		41.0		100.0	
	Column %	100.0		100.0		100.0		
	Sample	1445		1004				2449

**Table 2 Binary logistic regression models with respondents ever choosing laziness as the reason for poverty set to 1**

Variables	Parameter estimates						Odds Ratio
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 6
<b>Intercept</b>	1.118*** (0.1693)	0.067 (0.4535)	-0.831 (0.4715)	-0.508 (0.524)	-0.833 (0.566)	-1.533** (0.5893)	
<b>Gender</b>	-0.067 (0.0887)	-0.08 (0.0923)	-0.034 (0.0938)	0.056 (0.0986)	-0.005 (0.1004)	-0.007 (0.101)	
<i>0=male</i>							
<b>Age</b>	0.211* (0.1021)	0.208 (0.108)	0.156 (0.1099)	0.144 (0.112)	0.145 (0.1134)	0.138 (0.1141)	
<i>0=&lt;45</i>							
<b>Educational attainment</b>	-0.777*** (0.149)	-0.62*** (0.154)	-0.546*** (0.156)	-0.407* (0.1607)	-0.428** (0.1629)	-0.463** (0.1639)	0.629
<i>0=nongraduate</i>							
<b>Student status</b>	-0.098 (0.0996)	-0.086 (0.1026)	0.064 (0.1041)	-0.123 (0.1065)	-0.124 (0.1078)	-0.135 (0.1084)	
<i>0=Student</i>							
<b>Extraversion</b>		0.109*** (0.0237)	0.11*** (0.024)	0.111*** (0.0243)	0.110*** (0.0246)	0.112*** (0.0247)	1.118
<b>Agreeableness</b>		0.017 (0.0271)	0.007 (0.0275)	0.009 (0.0279)	-0.002 (0.0284)	-0.001 (0.0286)	
<b>Conscientiousness</b>		0.012 (0.0262)	-0.004 (0.0266)	-0.012 (0.027)	-0.01 (0.0274)	-0.012 (0.0275)	
<b>Neuroticism</b>		-0.033 (0.0247)	-0.024 (0.025)	-0.027 (0.0253)	-0.024 (0.02)	-0.023 (0.025)	
<b>Openness</b>		-0.109*** (0.0259)	-0.104*** (0.0262)	-0.088** (0.0268)	-0.088** (0.0271)	-0.091*** (0.0273)	0.913
<b>Authoritarianism 1</b>		0.312*** (0.0946)	0.274** (0.0956)	0.252** (0.097)	0.247* (0.0983)	0.248* (0.0987)	1.281
<i>- Independence v. respect for elders?</i>							
<b>Authoritarianism 2</b>		0.452*** (0.09)	0.419*** (0.091)	0.429*** (0.093)	0.461*** (0.0944)	0.45*** (0.094)	1.568
<i>- Curiosity v. good manners</i>							
<b>Govt. assistance reaches poor</b>			0.202*** (0.0397)	0.206*** (0.0404)	0.189*** (0.041)	0.168*** (0.0414)	1.183
<b>Absolute poverty to end in 2020</b>			0.143*** (0.0365)	0.147*** (0.037)	0.142*** (0.0375)	0.153*** (0.0378)	1.166
<b>Art/humanities major</b>			-0.646*** (0.1672)	-0.566*** (0.1695)	-0.605*** (0.1715)	-0.604*** (0.1721)	0.546
<i>0=other major</i>							
<b>Social science major</b>			-0.663*** (0.1541)	-0.638*** (0.1563)	-0.656*** (0.1582)	-0.658*** (0.1589)	0.518
<i>0=other major</i>							
<b>Science/biology major</b>			-0.083 (0.16)	-0.011 (0.163)	-0.029 (0.1648)	-0.004 (0.1655)	
<i>0=other major</i>							
<b>Some relatives poor</b>				-0.012 (0.1116)	-0.008 (0.1131)	-0.023 (0.1136)	
<i>0=No relatives poor</i>							
<b>Some friends poor</b>				0.02 (0.1031)	0.038 (0.1046)	0.062 (0.1052)	
<i>0=No friends poor</i>							
<b>Know poor professionally</b>				-0.066 (0.0582)	-0.051 (0.059)	-0.071 (0.0595)	
<b>Poor as a child</b>				0.04 (0.0452)	0.047 (0.046)	0.047 (0.0462)	
<b>Rich due to intelligence</b>					0.201*** (0.0524)	0.202*** (0.052)	1.224

<b>Rich due to hard work</b>					0.196*** (0.0508)	0.194*** (0.051)	1.214
<b>Rich due to luck</b>					0.054 (0.0535)	0.069 (0.053)	
<b>Rich due to opportunity</b>					0.022 (0.051)	0.031 (0.0513)	
<b>Rich due to contacts (guanxi]</b>					-0.055 (0.052)	-0.047 (0.0526)	
<b>Poverty inevitable, anywhere</b>						0.208*** (0.0447)	1.231
<b>Fit P: Hosmer &amp; Lemeshow</b>	0.874	0.101	0.529	0.055	0.548	0.586	
<b>R-Square</b>	0.015	0.054	0.075	0.092	0.110	0.118	
<b>Max-rescaled R-Square</b>	0.021	0.073	0.101	0.124	0.148	0.159	
<b>Likelihood Ratio</b>	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	
<b>Score</b>	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	
<b>Wald</b>	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	
<b>Notation:</b> Brackets: (Standard Error); *:P<0.05; **:P<0.01;*** P<0.001;							

**Table 3 Multinomial logistic regression model; reference category: respondents twice choosing unfairness as the reason for poverty**

Variables	Parameter estimates				Odds ratios			
	NoLazymod 1	LazyMod 2	LazyLazy 3	Allother 4	NoLazymod 5	LazyMod 6	LazyLazy 7	Allother 8
<b>Intercept</b>		-2.252* (0.987)	-3.861*** (1.13)					
<b>Gender</b> <i>0=male</i>		0.339* (0.1653)				1.403		
<b>Educational attainment</b> <i>0=nongraduate</i>			-0.605* (0.2975)				0.546	
<b>Extraversion</b>		0.090* (0.0406)	0.173*** (0.0478)			1.094	1.189	
<b>Openness</b>			-0.151** (0.0521)				0.860	
<b>Authoritarianism 1</b> <i>- Independence v. respect for elders</i>	0.401* (0.1832)	0.604*** (0.1757)	0.541** (0.1979)		1.493	1.829	1.717	
<b>Authoritarianism 2</b> <i>- Curiosity v. good manners</i>		0.521** (0.1622)	0.536** (0.1861)	0.398* (0.169)		1.685	1.710	1.489
<b>Social science major</b> <i>0=Other major</i>		-0.803** (0.2743)		-0.766** (0.283)		0.448		0.465
<b>Govt. assistance reaches poor</b>		0.226** (0.0701)	0.216** (0.0805)			1.253	1.241	
<b>Absolute poverty to end in 2020</b>	0.163* (0.0685)	0.249*** (0.066)	0.304*** (0.0739)	0.255*** (0.068)	1.177	1.282	1.355	1.291
<b>Some friends poor</b> <i>0=No friends poor</i>			0.571** (0.203)	0.444* (0.181)			1.770	1.559
<b>Rich due to intelligence</b>			0.259** (0.1)				1.296	
<b>Rich due to hard work</b>	0.176* (0.0897)	0.3*** (0.0872)	0.29** (0.1005)	0.182* (0.0907)	1.1939	1.349	1.337	1.199
<b>Poverty inevitable, anywhere</b>	0.545*** (0.0719)	0.629*** (0.0704)	0.373*** (0.0793)	0.28*** (0.0685)	1.725	1.875	1.452	1.323
<b>Fit P: Hosmer &amp; Lemeshow</b>	0.560				<b>Notation:</b> <i>Brackets: (Standard Error); *:P&lt;0.05; **:P&lt;0.01; *** P&lt;0.001;</i> <i>Variable names</i> <i>1. LazyLazy: Responded laziness twice; 2. LazyMod: Responded laziness then modernisation; 3. NoLazyMod: Responded inequality then modernisation; 4.NoLazyInequal: Responded inequality twice;</i> <i>5. Allother: Responded differently.</i>			
<b>R-Square</b>	0.193							
<b>Max-rescaled R-Square</b>	0.202							
<b>Likelihood Ratio</b>	<.0001							
<b>Score</b>	<.0001							
<b>Wald</b>	<.0001							

**Table 4 Five multinomial logistic regressions with varying dependent variables and reference categories but identical independent variables**

Variables	Parameter estimates					Odds ratios				
	NoLazyMod c/f NoLazyInequal 1	LazyMod c/f NoLazyMod 2	LazyLazy c/f NoLazyMod 3	LazyLazy c/f NoLazyInequal 4	LazyLazy c/f LazyMod 5	NoLazyMod c/f NoLazyInequal 6	LazyMod c/f NoLazyMod 7	LazyLazy c/f NoLazyMod 8	LazyLazy c/f NoLazyInequal 9	LazyLazy c/f LazyMod 10
<b>Intercept</b>			-1.998* (0.973)	-3.861*** -1.13						
<b>Gender</b> <i>0=male</i>			-0.416* (0.1633)		-0.427** (0.1487)			0.66		0.653
<b>Educational attainment</b> <i>0=nongraduate</i>			-0.915*** (0.2543)	-0.605* -0.2975	-0.47* (0.1985)			0.4	0.5462	0.625
<b>Extraversion</b>			0.143*** (0.0416)	0.173*** -0.0478	0.084* (0.0386)			1.154	1.1893	1.087
<b>Conscientiousness</b>			0.117* (0.0463)		0.165*** (0.0429)			1.124		1.18
<b>Openness</b>			-0.143** (0.0445)	-0.151** -0.0521				0.867	0.8602	
<b>Authoritarianism1</b> <i>Independence v. respect elders</i>	0.401* (0.1832)			0.541** -0.1979		1.493			1.7171	
<b>Authoritarianism2</b> <i>Curiosity v. good manners</i>		0.394** (0.1245)	0.408** (0.1564)	0.536** -0.1861			1.482	1.505	1.7097	
<b>Art/humanities major</b> <i>0=Other major</i>		-0.693** (0.2306)	-0.603* (0.291)				0.5	0.547		
<b>Social science major</b> <i>0=Other major</i>		-0.752*** (0.2146)	-0.521* (0.2645)				0.471	0.594		
<b>Govt. assistance reaches poor</b>		0.174** (0.0542)	0.164* (0.068)	0.216** -0.0805			1.190	1.179	1.2412	
<b>Absolute poverty to end in 2020</b>	0.163* (0.0685)		0.141* (0.0606)	0.304*** -0.0739		1.177		1.151	1.3554	
<b>Some friends are poor</b> <i>0=No friends poor</i>				0.571** -0.203	0.408* (0.162)				1.7695	1.504
<b>Rich due to intelligence</b>		0.171* (0.069)	0.293*** (0.0846)	0.259** -0.1			1.187	1.34	1.2961	
<b>Rich due to hard work</b>	0.176* (0.0897)			0.29** -0.1005		1.193			1.3368	
<b>Poverty inevitable, anywhere</b>	0.545*** (0.0719)		-0.172* (0.0769)	0.373*** -0.0793	-0.256*** (0.0715)	1.725		0.842	1.4521	0.774
<b>Hosmer &amp; Lemeshow</b>	0.560	0.232	0.232	0.560	0.730			<b>Notation:</b>		
<b>R-Square</b>	0.193	0.193	0.193	0.193	0.193			Brackets: (Standard Error); *:P<0.05; **:P<0.01; *** P<0.001;		
<b>Max-rescaled R-Square</b>	0.202	0.202	0.202	0.202	0.202			Variable names:		
<b>Likelihood Ratio</b>	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001			1. LazyLazy: Responded laziness twice; 2. LazyMod: Responded laziness then modernisation;		
<b>Score</b>	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001			3. NoLazyMod: Responded inequality then modernisation; 4.NoLazyInequal: Responded		
<b>Wald</b>	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.000M1	<.0001			inequality twice; 5. Allother: Responded differently		

## Annex

**Table A1 Variables treated as continuous**

<i>Variable label</i> and English translation of question	Mean	Standard Deviation
How well do the following statements describe your personality? I see myself as someone who:		
<b>B5 Extraversion</b> <sup>1</sup>	6.23	1.89
- is reserved (R)		
- is outgoing, sociable		
<b>B5 Agreeableness</b> <sup>1</sup>	7.15	1.60
- is generally trusting		
- tends to find fault with others (R)		
<b>B5 Conscientiousness</b> <sup>1</sup>	7.10	1.73
- tends to be lazy(R)		
- does a thorough job		
<b>B5 Neuroticism</b> <sup>1</sup>	6.18	1.87
- is relaxed, handles stress well (R)		
- gets nervous easily		
<b>B5 Openness</b> <sup>1</sup>	7.44	1.7
- has few artistic interests (R)		
- has an active imagination		
For a child, which of the following personality traits do you find more important?		
- <i>Independence v. respect for elders</i> ? <sup>2</sup>	1.34	0.47
- <i>Curiosity v. good manners</i> <sup>2</sup>	1.44	0.50
<i>Meet poor in daily life</i> <sup>3</sup>	3	0.86
Do you come across people in poverty at work, when studying or daily life		
<i>Poor in Childhood</i> <sup>3</sup>	2.53	1.07
<i>Did you experience poverty as a child?</i>		
Do you agree or disagree with the following statements		
<i>Most people in poverty receive dibao/wubao</i> <sup>4</sup>	2.87	1.13
Most people in poverty receive dibao/wubao		
<i>Poverty to be eradicated by 2020</i> <sup>4</sup>	2.43	1.27
China will eliminate extreme poverty by 2020		
<i>Poverty inevitable in all societies</i> <sup>4</sup>	4.03	1.01
Poverty cannot be avoided in any society		
<i>Why are the rich rich – please rank the following reasons</i>		
Why rich - Rank intelligence <sup>5</sup>	0.68	1.06
Why rich - Work hard <sup>5</sup>	1.24	1.16
Why rich - Luck <sup>5</sup>	0.56	1.02
Why rich - Better opportunities <sup>5</sup>	1.52	1.11
Why rich - Guanxi <sup>5</sup>	0.77	1.15
<b>Range of variables:</b>		
<sup>1</sup> : Max=10, Min=2; <sup>2</sup> :Max=2,Min=1; <sup>3</sup> :Max=4,Min=1; <sup>4</sup> :Max=5,Min=1; <sup>5</sup> :Max=3,Min=0; N= 2449		

**Table A2 Statistics of classified variables**

Variables	Categories	Frequency Count	Percent of Total Frequency
Gender	Male	829	33.85
	Female	1620	66.15
Age	0-35	1637	66.84
	35+	812	33.16
Education	Nongraduates	265	10.82
	Graduates	2184	89.18
Student	No	1612	65.82
	Yes	837	34.18
Some relatives poor	No	696	28.42
	Yes	1753	71.58
Some friends poor	No	1301	53.12
	Yes	1148	46.88
Sample size		2449	



