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What Kind of Welfare State is Emerging in China?

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Note

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China is joining the family of countries that have reasonably comprehensive systems of social protection in place. In 2010, the National People's Congress adopted the first national Social Insurance Law, representing the culmination of a process of radical social reform. Our question here is: what kind of welfare regime is being built in the People's Republic of China?

China has been politically unique. It is one of only five remaining communist states, the others being Cuba, Laos, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Vietnam, and the only one (with some qualification for Vietnam) that has been economically successful. The characteristics of a communist state include centralized power in the hands of a party élite and that this élite is presumably motivated, to varying degrees, by some kind of socialist ideology of statism and social justice.

While maintaining its political uniqueness, China has shed its economic uniqueness. With the reform and opening up that started in 1978, it turned its back on planned economy isolationism and has adopted an open socialist market economy.

In the comparative welfare state literature, there are two main theories to explain welfare state developments. One, originating with Wilensky (1975), sees the welfare state primarily as a reaction to economic forces, notably the level of development. Let us call this “the economic hypothesis”. The second theory, challenging the first and originating with Korpi (1983), sees the welfare state primarily as a product of politically-driven action by power relations. We could refer to this as “the political hypothesis”.

The economic hypothesis would lead us to expect a reactive welfare state in China, similar to that of other market economies at roughly the same level of development—a welfare state of necessity. There is support for this hypothesis in the existing literature. Cook describes Chinese social security reforms as “designed to absorb the shock of entitlement collapse (loss of employment); to deliver relief rather than development; support short-term consumption rather than reduce long-term poverty or vulnerability and to deal with symptoms rather than causes” (Cook et al. 2003:71). The Asian Development Bank has classified the Chinese system as conforming most closely to a conservative welfare regime (ADB 2002).

The political hypothesis would lead us to expect a pro-active welfare state in China that is different from that in economically similar countries—a welfare state of normative purpose. There is also support for this hypothesis in the existing literature. Zheng sees current reforms as a stage in a politically directed development towards a genuine welfare society, an ambition to be realized gradually over the next decades and possibly consolidated by the centenary of the revolution in 2049 (Zheng 2008).

Our question then divides into two: is China producing a welfare state of its own kind, possibly a “socialist” welfare state? Or, if it is reproducing a conventional welfare state, what kind of previous experience elsewhere is it replicating?

Similar to or Different from What?

The literature on welfare state regimes has produced a raft of classifications based on policy design. The effort originates in Titmuss's intuitive division of welfare states into three models by social policy design: the residual model, the industrial achievement-performance model and the institutional redistributive model (Titmuss 1974). This

typology was later given empirical grounding by Esping-Andersen (1990), with the categories renamed liberal (or residual), conservative (or corporatist) and social democratic (or universal), with some revision in subsequent work (Esping-Andersen 1996, 1999).

This is the baseline typology in the literature; however, it is contested and the attractively simple three-model scheme has not survived. There are four main objections: that it is static, theoretically biased, and based on too narrow an observation of social policy arrangements (mainly social security) and too narrow an observation of countries—mainly of countries of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries with little attention paid to the Southern European and Antipodean ones.

The first objection is that welfare capitalism changed substantially from the 1990s and that the regime differences, identified in data from the 1980s have been modified in a trend of convergence (Gilbert 2002). However, although welfare states may in some ways be converging, there is no agreement in the literature that the distinction between models is obsolete.

The second objection, coming mainly from feminist theorists, is that typologies based on decommodification through social security arrangements disregard family structures, gender roles and relationships between work and care.¹ This objection has been absorbed in the typology literature through increasing attention to family policies. Family policy in this context is means arrangements to alleviate the cost to parents of childrearing and to mitigate and equalize the burden of child and family care between genders. For example, in the Nordic model, which has generous parental leave provisions with parental leave allowance on average up to about a year. This can be shared between the mother and the father and some of it is available only to be taken by the father.

The third objection is that other classifications have been suggested based on alternative social policy observations, including health care systems (OECD 1987), social assistance (Gough et al. 1997) and family policies (Guo and Gilbert 2007). These approaches tend to cluster countries differently than in the Titmuss–Esping-Andersen typology. The United Kingdom, for example, is in the least progressive model in their typology yet in more progressive categories in the health care and social assistance classifications.

The final objection has led to various proposals towards more comprehensive or nuanced typologies, including adding Antipodean, Southern European and East Asian models. There are also suggestions to include Eastern European (Deacon 2007) and Latin American models (Huber and Bogliaccini 2010), but these have left less of a mark in the comparative literature.

The Antipodean model was proposed as an alternative to the classification of Australia and New Zealand as liberal welfare states (Castles and Mitchell 1993). The objection was that that classification overlooked the emphasis in these countries on incomes policies that modify inequalities in the primary income distribution as an alternative to after-the fact policies that correct primary income inequalities through redistributive measures. The incomes policies model has not survived in Australia or New Zealand,

¹ Orloff 1993; O'Connor 1993; Sainsbury 1994, 2001; Daly and Lewis 1998; Lewis 1992.

but what was suggested nevertheless represented a unique model that might be described as the “predistribution state”.

The Southern European model has been characterized by a high degree of polarization in income protection systems, which has gone hand in hand with deeply segmented labour markets, fragmented and marginal social assistance, and low priority to family support (Leibfried 1993; Ferrera 1996). Esping-Andersen (1999) conceded the addition of a Southern European model to his original typology, primarily on the argument of marginal family policies.

The East Asian model has been labelled Confucian, productivist and more recently developmental.² East Asian developmental welfare states differ in many respects, but in the ideal model—the closest example is in the Republic of Korea (South Korea)—social policy is part of the repertoire of a developmental state. The characteristics of such a state are:

- a strong state with a state-led economy;
- economic development as the supreme goal of public policy and defined in terms of economic growth;
- that supremacy justified in a promise to alleviate poverty;
- social policy used as an instrument to advance economic development and subordinate to economic policy;
- social security (or the promise of social security) introduced early and proactively in the development process as a mechanism of regime legitimacy and population mobilization into the development project;
- regulation as the main instrument of government policy with provision in the main outsourced to businesses in the form of occupational welfare, to employers and employees in the form of social insurance, and to voluntary agencies in the form of social services;
- a low level of social spending and of state provision; and
- a strong continued reliance on families for welfare and security.

This model represents a distinct approach to welfare, but it has gradually become apparent that developmental welfare is less of a permanent model and more of a transitory state belonging to the early and take-off period of economic development (Ringen et al. 2011). As economic and political development progresses, the welfare state emerges from its developmental confines and becomes established in its own right, rather than as a subordinate instrument of economic policy. In South Korea, for

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