

and reinforcement of social inequalities in China discussed in the book may reflect more the effects of a policy feedback loop than the regime's bias toward elites in providing welfare benefits.

Regarding policy implementation, Huang's subnational comparative study uses provinces as the unit of analysis. This makes sense given data availability issues. Yet because the financing of health care insurance schemes in China is still pooled (*tongchou*) at the subprovincial level, where local leaders' distributive choices might be shaped by factors uniquely different from those of provincial leaders, the empirical analyses in chapters 5 and 6 may not fully capture local officials' motivations and distributive consequences. Corrupted county leaders may take advantage of their access to the pooled social insurance funds to misappropriate them as income to cover their administrative outlays (p. 69). They may also use fiscal straits as an excuse for underspending on social welfare in their jurisdiction. Here the local welfare regime is neither protective nor productivist (where social policy is subordinate to economic growth). Instead, it would reflect a "decentralized predatory state," described in Minxin Pei's (2006) *China's Trapped Transition*, in which local party bosses use the state's authority to feather their own nests rather than improve people's health and well-being. Detailed comparative case studies at the county/city level would help uncover the political dynamics not identified in the book.

Finally, Xi Jinping's 10-year reign since 2012 has raised questions about some of the conclusions of the book, which cover the years of the Hu Jintao administration (2002–11). Compared to Hu, Xi feels even more insecure about the regime's stability and is advancing a significantly different agenda. In pursuing so-called common prosperity, the central government is moving to increase coverage and benefit levels while reducing inequality in the social welfare regime. Today, most of the status-quo type provinces claim more than 95% insurance coverage. The government has also kicked off an urban–rural integration policy for social health insurance. The objective, according to Xi in a recent Politburo speech, is to build a multilevel social protection system that "covers the entire population, promotes urban–rural integration, is fair and unified, and is sustainable." These policy profile changes do not fundamentally challenge the underpinnings of the book's central argument: glaring inequalities across social groups and regions continue to exist, and policy immobility at the grassroots level is exacerbated by the concentration of political power in a superordinate figure. But the rise of a "Xi-in-command" polity also mitigates the implementation bias in China's policy process, generating strong incentives for local leaders to jump onto Xi's bandwagon to show their early and zealous support for his favored policy agenda. Given Xi's preference for universalism and equality, local leaders who directly bear the growing cost of maintaining social welfare stratification will also be in a

more secure position politically to move away from the status quo. Such new political and policy dynamics at the central and local levels may be signs that the stratified expansion is not an equilibrium strategy.

Response to Yanzhong Huang's Review of *Social Protection under Authoritarianism: Health Politics and Policy in China*

doi:10.1017/S1537592722001347

— Xian Huang 

I want to thank Yanzhong Huang for his thoughtful review of my book and Daniel O'Neill for the invitation to participate in this critical dialogue. In the review, Huang makes a good point that the reproduction and reinforcement of social inequalities in China that my book discusses may reflect the public's preferences and choices, such as choosing urban large hospitals over nearby small primary care facilities for health care. As he knows, this involves a "policy feedback loop." The stratified and inequitable expansion of Chinese social health insurance in the early 2000s placed social groups in different positions in terms of access to and capability to pay for health care depending on their sociopolitical status (i.e., *hukou* or household registration, employment sector and status). As a result, scarce health care resources—highly trained doctors, advanced medical devices and technology—become even scarcer for the non-elite groups, such as peasants, rural-to-urban migrants, and informal workers, which motivates them to go to urban large hospitals to obtain better medical services and treatments. Although the regime modified the hospital-centered health system to strengthen primary care facilities and capacities after 2012 when Xi Jinping took power, the public preferences, beliefs, and choices for health care shaped by the existing elite-oriented system still prevail and contribute to the reproduction and reinforcement of social inequalities. In this sense, the demand side needs to be better integrated into the current conceptual framework of social welfare in authoritarian regimes that usually focuses on the supply side (e.g., the regime leaders, bureaucracy).

In addition, the dominant supply-side theory of social welfare in authoritarian regimes is not sufficient yet to fully uncover the political dynamics of welfare policy in the context of China's decentralized multilevel governance. Although my book emphasizes both the career-driven motivations and the local constraints for local leaders in realizing the regime's promise of social welfare expansion, Huang points out a scenario of a "decentralized predatory state" at the county/city or lower levels, in which local social welfare provision is neither protective nor productivist but is diverted to maximize local leaders' personal benefit. This scenario is theoretically different from the "status-quo type" localities my book

identified in which local leaders keep social welfare provision minimalist due to fiscal stringency and low social risks. If a significant predatory state in social welfare was empirically established, it would be interesting for future research to examine whether the political economy explanation developed in my book can account for its existence and trend.

A lingering question about my book, as Huang rightly raises in the review, is whether the “stratified expansion” strategy of social welfare developed by the Hu Jintao administration in the early 2000s will persist or has been

changed by Xi Jinping. On the one hand, there is considerable continuity of social welfare policy in Xi’s era. Many welfare reforms such as the urban–rural integration of social health insurance were initiated and locally piloted by the Hu administration and formalized nationally under Xi Jinping. On the other hand, the “common prosperity” Xi envisioned in his governance ideology seems to be pursued more through political and regulatory means than substantial social welfare and tax reforms. The outcomes and impacts of Xi’s distributive strategy will be unfolding and are worthy of scrutiny.