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China's Social Welfare: The Third Turning Point

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Cambridge: Polity

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As the book's opening sentence highlights, China is a political and economic superpower, a global phenomenon and since 2010 the second largest world economy (p.1). However, China's rapid transformation has given rise to significant social problems and there is ample, but as yet relatively unrealised, scope for research and scholarship in this area. This is therefore a welcome and timely book that charts China's economic and social development and provides an assessment of China at this 'critical juncture' of economic transition and social welfare development (p.181).

The book begins with an overview that conceptualises China's social welfare, including the difficulties of ideal-typing this 'East Asian' welfare regime. Chapter Two charts the development of social policy alongside China's transformation from socialism to 'modernization' through three 'turning points': the first in 1949 involved its transformation into a socialist state and the establishment of 'the iron rice bowl' of a 'basic, egalitarian security network' (p.19); the second in 1978 was its transition towards a market economy through the opening up of China to foreign investment, technology and trade (p.4); the third turning point is generally viewed as occurring from 2006, when Hu Jintao (the then General Party Secretary) announced a new developmental directive focused on constructing a 'harmonious society' (p.5). The latter is particularly significant for social policy as it heralded the introduction of new social welfare programmes and the designation of 2020 as the target year for attaining specific economic and social objectives, including a comprehensive social protection system (p.5). This book specifically focuses on these developments and the ongoing challenges China faces in its transformation from a state socialist country to a hybrid market economy.

Chapter Three sets out the social challenges arising from market reform, in particular demographic shifts (including the one-child policy, skewed sex ratios and an ageing population); migration and 'left-behind' groups; income inequality and poverty. Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven consider, respectively, the policy areas of urban and rural social protection (old age pensions, unemployment insurance, medical and social assistance (*dibao*)); social care for older people; and the emergence of social work organizations and welfare NGOs. The final chapter reflects on China's developmental welfare state, in particular the key challenges for social reforms such as the need to unify its historically fragmented welfare system.

From the book a number of key issues relating to China's social welfare are evident. The historical segmentation and decentralization of the welfare system have resulted in stark regional disparities in provision and in income inequalities, particularly between urban and rural areas. There are also tensions within a system that is shifting from state-based provision to a 'mixed economy', involving the purchase of services (POS) from the private and non-profit sectors, with the latter remaining relatively under-developed. The authors argue that if China is to fully transition to a high-income economy (a *xiaokong* society) it must address its significant social problems through reforms of employment, the wage system, social protection (including an integrated and coordinated urban social protection system) and taxation. Otherwise, it is likely to face a 'tipping point', with the risk of an unsustainable economy and a divided and unstable society characterised by widening income disparities, prefigured by current growing labour and civil disputes (p.182-4).

The book's stated aim is to "provide an objective and wider perspective on China's critical and interrelated social issues, policy responses and prospects" (p.14) and by admission its approach is broad rather than deep. The book fully meets this aim through a comprehensive account of the development of China's social welfare to date, supplemented with figures - with the caveat that the accuracy and reliability of official figures has been challenged (p.8). One omission is possibly a section noting useful sources for statistical data, which would be of benefit to students and lecturers alike. Nevertheless, this text provides a broad and solid foundation for more in-depth critical analysis of specific programme developments and ongoing assessment of the extent to which the Chinese government's pledge to move towards 'inclusive' growth is realised for different groups in society.