

## **Frustration, Shame, and Gratitude: The Meaning of Social Assistance for Women Recipients in China\***

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### **Abstract**

Little is known about women's views on receiving social assistance in China. This paper examines the findings of in-depth interviews with women about their experiences living with social assistance. Women's feelings were complex and included frustration, shame, and gratitude. The paper discusses the issues of social assistance policy relating to these women and proposes a corresponding local explanation through comparison between the findings of the research and the explanation of Western theory on assistance seeking and receiving. It recommends that Chinese policies on social assistance and women's welfare be reformed, including changing traditional ideas of social assistance, reforming the delivery procedure, and providing sufficient support, such as employment aid and emotional assistance for women recipients.

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### **Key words**

Social assistance, *Dibao* (Minimum Living Standard Guarantee System), women recipients, China

## **Introduction**

In its centrally planned economy, China created an employment-based social security system through which the state guarantees its workers life-long employment as well as generous employment protection and occupational welfare for themselves and their families (Huang, 2003). For the few people without a place of employment, known as the "three Nos"

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(residents lacking the working ability, an income, and family support), the state provides limited remedial social assistance. However, with the introduction and acceleration of economic system reform in the 1990s, China has witnessed a rapid increase in social wealth as well as faced a problem of new urban poverty caused by soaring unemployment. In the late 1990s, there were more than 11 million laid-off workers. According to the statistics, the proportion of women who were laid-off was higher than that of men (Guan, 1999). The proportion of women among laid-off workers was 55% in 1996 in Beijing and the female unemployment rate was 1.46% higher than that of males in 1997 in China as a whole (Ma, 2010). Due to the large number of lay-offs, different analysts suggest different figures for the real urban unemployment rate in China in the 1990s, ranging from 7% to 27% (Qian & Wong, 2000). Increasing unemployment rates result in mounting poverty. Li (2001) calculated that the incidence of poverty in families with a laid-off or unemployed worker is approximately 6 times higher than that in families with an employed worker. However, there is no unanimous agreement about the total number of urban poor people in China. Because of the diversity in the definition and measurement of poverty, calculation of the extent of poverty usually varies for different agencies and scholars (Zhang, 2009). For example, according to estimates made by the Urban Investigation Project Group of the State Statistical Bureau, there were 24.28 million (or 8.6% of the total urban population) urban poor in 1995. Although there is divergence in the number of urban poor, it is undeniable that urban poverty has become a serious social problem in China as China transitions from a planned economy to a market economy. Moreover, because the majority of people who are laid-off in urban areas are women, women face a higher risk of falling into poverty.

To address the issue of new urban poverty, from 1999 onwards, China set up a brand-new social assistance program – *Dibao* (Minimum Living Standard Guarantee System) – for urban residents (Leung & Wong, 1999). Compared with the traditional social assistance policy, which is compatible with the planned economy and given mainly to the “three Nos,” urban *Dibao* is an institutional social assistance program whereby any household – as long as its average income is below the threshold set by the local government – is entitled to receive the minimum living allowance from the government (Leung & Wong, 1999). After 16 years of development, *Dibao*, which is the core program in the social assistance system, now covers all of the urban

and rural areas in China. In 2014, *Dibao* was available to more than 70 million poor people, and the cost was about 160 billion Yuan according to statistics from Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs. Special assistance programs that are considered supplements to *Dibao*, such as medical aid, education aid and employment aid, have also been established since the early 2000s.

Regarding the social assistance policy in China, some studies have examined the practice of urban *Dibao* (Leung & Wong, 1999; Huang, 2003), or described the problems of this program (Huang, 2003; Gao, Zhai & Garfinkel, 2010; Gustafsson & Deng, 2011; Wong, Chen & Zeng, 2013; Lei, 2014). Some Chinese scholars have analyzed social assistance, but they tended to examine or assess assistance from the perspective of policy makers with a focus on making policy suggestions (Hong, 2004; Guan, 2011). Recently, there have been several studies from the perspective of assistance recipients (Solinger & Hu, 2012; Chen, Wong & Zeng, 2013; Lei, 2014), but the gender of the recipients has not aroused attention. According to Ministry of Civil Affairs statistics in 2014, female assistance recipients account for approximately 37% of the group receiving *Dibao* allowances in China.<sup>1</sup> They not only face substantial economic pressures in daily life, but they also lack the necessary conditions for participating in social life. Therefore, to increase our understanding of how women recipients experience receiving social assistance, I explored the significance of social assistance for these women, proposed a corresponding local explanation through comparison between the discovery and the explanation of Western theory on assistance seeking and receiving, and evaluated the relationship between their subjective experiences with institutional arrangements, culture and other social contexts, which I hope will inspire the development of social assistance and women's welfare in China.

## Method

The findings reported in this paper attempt to answer the research question: How do Chinese women recipients describe their experiences and

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<sup>1</sup> The ratio can be calculated according to statistics on number of recipients from the website of Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs (<http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/>). In 2014, there were 70.84 million *Dibao* recipients (18.77 urban and 52.07 rural recipients) and 26.1 million female recipients (7.9 urban female and 18.2 rural female recipients). The ratio is approximately 37%.

feelings about social assistance? This study adopted purposive sampling to select research participants. Purposive sampling aims to seek participants who meet some particular criterion. It is a nonrandom technique that does not require underlying theories or a set number of informants (Tangco, 2007). The researcher decides what needs to be known and then finds people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of their knowledge or experiences (Bernard, 2002). I contacted the “local bureaucrats”<sup>2</sup> who are responsible for reviewing social assistance in three communities in Wuhou District, Chengdu City, and they searched the files of assistance recipients to identify participants who met the research criteria. The criteria included: (a) female; (b) 35-50 years old; (c) married with children; and (d) currently receiving *Dibao* and other social assistance. The participants aged 35-50 and married with children were chosen because they were in their middle age and bore the responsibility of childbearing and family management. Thus, in order to meet their families’ demands for daily life, medical treatment, and education, assistance seeking and receiving was these women’s normality of life, and they could provide rich information for the study. Three communities provided a total of 28 participants, and 15 poor women agreed to participate in the research and successfully participated in interviews. The other 13 women could not be contacted or declined to participate.

As the capital city of Sichuan and the largest city in Southwest China, Chengdu established an urban *Dibao* in 1997. In 2014, the number of urban *Dibao* recipients in Chengdu was about 35,000, and among them, 14,500 were women recipients. Chengdu’s policies and the composition of its recipients are similar to other cities with larger populations.<sup>3</sup> Thus, assistance recipients in Chengdu can be considered representative to some degree. Wuhou District is one of the largest and most developed districts in Chengdu. It covers an area of 76.56 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of more than 1 million, giving it the highest population density in Chengdu.<sup>4</sup> An

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<sup>2</sup> “Local bureaucrats” are staff in charge of social assistance affairs in the Residents’ Committee (RCs) and their supervisors in Sub-district Offices (SOs).

<sup>3</sup> This can be determined from relative regulations and statistics on the website of Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs (<http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/>).

<sup>4</sup> The information can be found from the website of Wuhou District People’s Government (<http://www.cdwh.gov.cn/index.php/?cid=345>).

analysis of the living conditions of households in a 2012 district survey showed that some communities within the district are vulnerable because of high unemployment rates and rising cost of living. This district is representative of assistance-receiving areas in Chengdu:<sup>5</sup> the administration is relatively sound and the recipients have had many years of experience with social assistance. The three communities chosen were those determined as vulnerable according to the 2012 district survey, and all had high assistance populations.

The standard of the purposive sampling on determination of sample size is the data it provides instead of the size in the statistical sense. Strauss and Corbin (1990) proposed that, the important standard measure for ending the field interview was whether “theoretical saturation” was reached. “Theoretical saturation” means data satisfaction. It is when the researcher reaches a point where no new information or topic is obtained from further data. In this study, for the themes for analysis, when about 10 women were interviewed, it found that the existing core topics were constantly repeated by the subsequent narrators, which indicates that the participant capacity is almost theoretically saturated. The author performed the interviews with the 15 participants, and each interview lasted for about one hour. Table 1 reveals the characteristics of the respondents. In order to protect the participants’ privacy, all names remain anonymous and have been replaced by figures. All the interviews were conducted in the respondents’ homes, without staff in the RCs. This increased the validity because the social assistance recipients are more willing to share their experiences when officials are absent (Lei, 2014). During the in-depth semi-structured interviews, these women were asked open-ended questions about their experiences with poverty, their health condition and employment status as well as their experiences and feelings about applying for and obtaining social assistance. The questions for all the interviews were similar and included the following: “What prompted you to apply for social assistance?”; “How did you feel when you decided to apply for assistance?”; “Have you ever abandoned the application because you or your family members were worried about losing face?”; “Is it easy to obtain assistance benefits?”; “What do you think of the publicity of your names?”; “How

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<sup>5</sup> The information can be found from the website of Chengdu Civil Affairs Bureau (<http://www.cdmzj.gov.cn/cdmzj/zwgk/qxd>).

did you evaluate *Dibao* and other social assistance policy?” (Prompts: Does current social assistance help you and your family? Is the level of benefits sufficient for your family?).

**Table 1.**  
**Characteristics of Women Participants (n=15)**

Interviewee	Age	Employment status	Children	Family income	State of health	Assistance received
W1	48	unemployed	1 daughter Vocational high school	No income, her husband has odd jobs with income of 400 Yuan/month	Both have chronic disease	<i>Dibao</i> , housing aid
W2	45	Community public welfare post	1 son Vocational high school	Income 520 Yuan/month, her husband has no income	Her health condition is fine, her husband has uremia	<i>Dibao</i> , medical and employment aid
W3	40	unemployed	1 son and 1 daughter both in junior high school	No income, her husband has odd jobs with income of 500 Yuan/month	Both have chronic disease	<i>Dibao</i> , education aid
W4	42	unemployed	1 son Junior high school	No income, her husband has odd jobs with income of 400 Yuan/month	Both have chronic disease	<i>Dibao</i>
W5	38	unemployed	Two daughters in primary school	No income, her husband has odd jobs with income of 400 Yuan/month	She has chronic disease, her husband's health condition is fine	<i>Dibao</i> , education aid
W6	44	unemployed	1 son Junior high school	No income	Both have physical disability	<i>Dibao</i> , housing aid
W7	45	unemployed	1 daughter Senior high school	No income, her husband has odd jobs with income of 600 Yuan/month	She has chronic disease, her husband's health condition is fine	<i>Dibao</i> , education aid
W8	39	unemployed	1 daughter Junior high school	No income	She has chronic disease, her husband has cerebral thrombosis	<i>Dibao</i>
W9	37	Community public welfare post	1 son Primary school	Income 600 Yuan/month, her husband has no income	She has chronic disease, her husband has lung cancer	<i>Dibao</i> , medical, education and employment aid
W10	42	unemployed	1 son Junior high school	No income, her husband has odd jobs with income of 500 Yuan/month	She has chronic disease, her husband's health condition is fine	<i>Dibao</i>
W11	43	unemployed	1 daughter Junior high school	No income, her husband has odd jobs with income of 400 Yuan/month	Both have chronic disease	<i>Dibao</i>
W12	46	unemployed	Two sons both in vocational high school	No income, her husband has odd jobs with income of 400 Yuan/month	Both have fine health condition	<i>Dibao</i>
W13	39	Community public welfare post	1 daughter Primary school	Income 500 Yuan/month, her husband has no income	Her health condition is fine, her husband has chronic disease	<i>Dibao</i> , employment aid
W14	47	unemployed	1 daughter Senior high school	No income, her husband has odd jobs with income of 500 Yuan/month	Both have chronic disease	<i>Dibao</i> , education aid
W15	41	unemployed	1 son Junior high school	No income	She has chronic disease, her husband has physical disability	<i>Dibao</i> , education aid

*Note:* From May to June in 2014 when the author conducted the interviews, the urban *Dibao* threshold in Chengdu was 430 Yuan (per head, per month). Some *Dibao* recipients who have serious diseases are eligible for medical aid; those who have housing difficulties are eligible for housing aid; and those who have school-age children are eligible for education aid. Chronic diseases of the interviewees and their husbands include diabetes, arthritis, tracheitis, and mental sickness.

After the interviews, the data was transcribed, sorted out, and analyzed. Here, the findings are presented using the interviewees' own words and their experience is shown by using their discourse and vocabulary. To avoid the loss of nuance within the original narratives, the data were not translated into English until the stage of writing-up the research (Wang, Zhang, Xu & Zhang, 2011).

## Findings

From the perspective of official evaluation on social assistance, *Dibao* and other social assistances are described as *minxin gongcheng* (People's Heart Project) for the masses. However, the research finds that the feelings of women recipients about social assistance, in addition to gratitude, are mixed with strong frustration and shame. Among the respondents, four women mentioned all of the three kinds of feelings, eight women's statements reflect two kinds of feelings, and three women mainly spoke of one kind.

### *Frustration*

Publicity on a posted notice is a routine method of indicating approval for the *Dibao* allowance application. The recipient names are publicized on neighborhood bulletin boards; thus receiving assistance means the public will know the recipients are incapable and cannot make a living for themselves. The research finds that women recipients do not immediately apply for social assistance when their income is barely sufficient to maintain their existence. Instead, only when their family cannot supply sufficient support and they encounter great difficulty in life, do they then decide to apply for social assistance. This indicates a certain responsibility in that the family actually shoulders its own burdens when possible and also the remedial orientation of social assistance in China. For example, W2 decided to apply for assistance from the state when her husband got a serious disease and her son needed money for school. She mentioned that:

*“Frankly speaking, I did not want to ask for help from the state at that time because that would make me feel bad. If I could earn money, then I would not expect to get that money. But I had nothing else to do. My parents*

*were too old and their health condition was not optimistic as well. It was not a good idea to ask them for money all the time.”*

Thus, it is clear that seeking to live on is the starting point of W2 to apply for social assistance, and also a general motive of the objects of research in seeking for assistance.

Many women felt frustrated by the need to seek and receive assistance. W8 said,

*“How do you feel when you stretch out your hands to the state for money and accept alms? What do you think in your mind? My kid will feel inferior to her friends when they play together. She will feel uncomfortable and imbalanced. Why? Her parents are incapable.”*

W8’s words not only express frustration but also explain the source of frustration, namely, the difference in social background. In the words of Confucius, “Don’t worry about poverty, but rather about the uneven distribution of wealth.” W8 felt indignant and imbalanced when she compared herself with others; this “injustice” is an important source of her frustration. Besides the expectation of family support, the women participants also do not want to apply for social assistance at the start of their hardships because they do not want the public to know that they are incapable. In other words, the need for success is a factor that interferes with applying for assistance. W11 said,

*“In my own opinion, it is better to have a stable job and earn our own living. Nowadays, seeking for social assistance is equal to accepting alms. I am on edge all day.”* W13 said, *“I am progressive, and I do not want to be left behind. I always had outstanding performance in school. But now, I can do nothing. My parents are old and sick, so I have to admit that I am incapable, and I accept alms from the state.”*

The tone in which W11 and W13 were speaking reflected a sense of frustration and their explanation of social assistance as “alms” is a subjective construction and related to their real social life experience. In reality,



social discourse stresses the meaning of alms in social assistance, and when the public opinion and the media publicize social assistance, “caring for the vulnerable group” and “giving warmth” to the poor group are the terms often used. Also the gratitude of the assistance-receiving group is highlighted. This has turned assistance recipients into alms recipients, and the government into the alms giver. Such “alms giving” will undoubtedly make female recipients more frustrated, and they will think they are inferior.

Additionally, frustration has caused spiritual pressures in a few women. W1 said, *“I feel very wronged and uncomfortable. I often want to cry. Why can others live a better life and why is my life so miserable? I am really a loser.”* W7 mentioned, *“I think I am already eliminated by the society. There is no meaning in my life. I feel suppressed. But I still hold on firmly for my child.”*

The statements illustrate that besides frustration they also feel a sense of injustice and exclusion, and indicate that the female recipients need proper channels to channel their negative feelings when experiencing the emotional disturbance brought on by frustration.

### *Shame*

Some recipients found it difficult to apply for social assistance. W3 described the following about her feelings of applying for social assistance, *“It is not easy to apply for Dibao allowances. The procedures are complicated, and various documents and certificates are required.”* W8 had the same opinion. She said, *“Who would be willing to get that? It is so troublesome. You need to fill in forms and get approval for many times. If I am capable, I would rather go to earn money by myself.”* W14 mentioned that she once wanted to apply for medical assistance because she and her husband both had chronic disease and their monthly medicine costs were high, but when she asked “local bureaucrats” for information, their attitude were bad, and she was told that medical assistance was only available for serious diseases, such as cancer. W11 directly expressed her dissatisfaction with the RC staff, *“I think those people are unqualified because they show a bad attitude, are on their high horse, say whatever they want to say, and regard you as inferior citizens.”* Therefore, it is clear that the women think the repeated handlings of procedures and rejection are because the workers are “mean,” “indifferent,” and “in a high rank” instead of because they are unqualified. As a result, they feel ashamed.

Women have different interpretations for publicity on a posted notice. W6 said,

*“I think it is not a big deal because I am qualified. Putting on a notice or not does not matter for me. But if you are not qualified but you are still on the list of the notice, then you would not want to post a notice. However, we do have dignity and do not want others to know it.”*

W6 believes that publicity will harm her dignity, but she also affirms that publicity can have a supervising role. However, many women participants think that publicity on a posted notice will expose their “individual defect” in front of the public, which shames them. For example, W8 mentioned,

*“One day, I saw the name list of the objects with subsistence allowances in my community. There was my name in it. I felt faceless and could not raise my head. I think that, in the hearts of my neighbors, they have mean impressions of us although they haven’t said so. Our family has no communication with them.”*

In addition to the feeling of “no dignity,” what makes the women feel worse is the prejudice from the society. W5 told such a story.

*“I want to tell a story of how gossips are fearful. I feel angry about it. My neighbour told me that the old ladies like to gather together to gossip. They point to someone and say that they are so young but enjoy the Dibao allowances. Such kind of pressure is really huge. Nowadays, if you have Diabo allowances, you actually will be prejudiced. Sometimes I even look down upon myself. But frankly speaking, I have no other methods. I do not want to get that. But at present, I am desperate. So I can only abandon my dignity.”*

Among the women participants, some have not received education assistance. They abandon the application not because their families were unqualified but because they worried that their children would be impacted

by the social stigma. Since education assistance is usually applied to schools, applying for education assistance exposes their poor family background of their children to the schools. W8 said,

*“I do not want to apply for education assistance for my children, and I do not want my children to feel shamed in school. When she goes to the senior high school, I may make some consultations and send my child to Hongzhi Class.<sup>6</sup> And my child also said that she could go to Hongzhi Class, because in that class, all her classmates have the same background with her. Then she dares to raise her head. But if her classmates are all different from her, she would not dare to raise her head. Others will look down upon her.”*

All of the above indicate that the recipients bear a social stigma that will arouse shame. The public has a poor impression of people receiving social assistance and thinks that the assistance recipients reap without sowing and violate the social dictum that “people should stand on their own feet.”

### *Gratitude*

In this study, even though the women complained about the amount and benefit level of social assistance and consider it difficult to satisfy their living needs, they did not use any critical words or sentences to describe the policy of social assistance. Many of them described gratitude for the national policy.

*“The state gives me the greatest help. We have enjoyed the Dibao allowances, and applied for reimbursement for my husband’s serious disease through medical aid. Besides, I have received employment aid to serve as a cleaning worker in the community. I feel we have a good government, and feel assured with the assistance.”* (W2)

*“I think the general direction of government is to serve common people. Even*

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<sup>6</sup> Hongzhi Class is a middle school specially set in large cities to receive children from poor families who will pay no tuition and can enjoy living subsidy.

*though there are malfesants, the government has put great efforts to anti-corruption currently, so the justice prevails. I believe in our state and government. The government is so thoughtful, and the policy of social assistance is so good, from which I benefit a lot. I feel grateful to our government.” (W15)*

*“I consider the government is considerate for us, and I feel grateful. The state, like my mother, understands me and knows that I am indeed in difficulty and then gives a hand.” (W13)*

Then, how can we understand the gratitude of these women for the social assistance? Are their words believable? Do they speak insincerely because of some concerns? As far as I am concerned, the interviewees are sincere, and their affirmation and gratitude for national assistance is also out of sincerity.<sup>7</sup> In addition, different research participants use similar words to describe their feeling towards national assistance at different times and in different places. Thus it proves that the affirmation and gratitude are believable. Apart from the gratitude for the government, some women also describe their sense of indebtedness and feeling of a need to repay society for the national assistance. W6 stated,

*“National policies are so good, and render us much help. I sincerely feel grateful for the government. I feel as if I owe our state. I have no great ability, but I have an idea that, anyhow, I will take an active part in public benefit activities in the future, and support our government. When we’re in trouble, the government helps us; in the future, when our children grow up and show promise, they will strive to make more contributions to the state and the society.”*

According to W6, apart from feeling deeply grateful, she has a strong

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<sup>7</sup> Before the interview, I made known my status as a researcher, and told the interviewees that this research was out of my academic interest, not related to government departments. In addition, during the interview, there were no grass-roots workers on the site. I consider it is not likely that they speak insincerely due to certain concerns.

willingness to “repay” the national assistance. In traditional Chinese culture, it is an ethical norm to repay those who help you, which is manifested as the reward for the people who help you in terms of interpersonal relationships, as well as “faithfully serving the state” in terms of the social aspect (Ma, 2010).

## Discussion

Regarding the women recipients in this study, they sought and received assistance from the government, and expressed complex thoughts about social assistance, which include frustration, shame, and gratitude. Previous research in the West has provided theoretical interpretations of assistance seeking and receiving which mainly include achievement motivation explanation, dignity threatening theory, and equity theory (Ma, 2010). These theoretical interpretations have laid a foundation for understanding the psychological and social reasons for assistance seeking and receiving. Based on the dialogue with the above three theoretical interpretations of assistance seeking and receiving in the West, this section tries to find out how the findings support and diverge from these theories, and then puts forwards a corresponding local explanation that can provide insights for Chinese policies on social assistance.

### *Frustration: Explanation of Achievement Motivation*

According to Western literature, not all assistance seeking and receiving behaviors are from a shortage or needs; sometimes, they may be for the strategy of achievement orientation, enhancing the ability to complete a life event task. The stronger achievement need there is, the weaker the motivation for assistance seeking and receiving (Tessler & Schwartz, 1972; Ames, 1983). That is to say, people with strong achievement needs generally are not willing to seek and receive assistance.

According to the research findings in this paper, the female recipients basically have strong willingness to work, meaning they have a certain achievement motivation and hope to realize self-dependence. However, they have to seek and receive assistance from the state because of the plight of survival, resulting in strong frustration about receiving “alms.” In other words, the unsatisfied basic living needs are the greatest force of as-

sistance seeking and receiving, and they especially show the greatest motivation for the education and medical treatment of their children. For these women, being alive and living for their children is of the greatest significance. Although they long for achievements and hope for work, irrespective of the strength of their achievement motivation, the social environment and their problems can make it difficult to find jobs. Therefore, achievement motivation theory cannot fully cover the research findings because the theory fails to explain the contradiction between these women having achievement motivation and wanting to apply for and receive social assistance. The women are faced with an existential crisis. In order to survive, what they consider first is what to live on, rather than how to satisfy their achievement mentality. As mentioned above, the motivation of women recipients in seeking and receiving assistance is not for themselves; instead, it is usually “for children.” Consistent with Chinese cultural characteristics, one’s life is guided in practice by a sense of responsibility within human relationships, which re-explains the characteristics of the women who seek and receive assistance (Ma, 2010), which cannot be fully explained by the “achievement motivation” theory based on individualism. The explanation that relies on a combination of “achievement motivation” and “motivation of basic needs satisfaction” is more persuasive.

In addition, according to Socialist feminism, women face gendered occupational segregation, over-representation among part-time and low-wage workers (Rubin, 1984; Young, 1997). Social welfare aims to provide benefits for the women’s families, but these benefits do not satisfy the women’s needs (Fraser, 1991). The absence of social welfare programs to redress the needs of women created by the duality of their roles (work and family) will lead to the feminization of poverty (Goldberg & Kremen, 1990). In this study, the women recipients showed strong willingness to work, but they couldn’t find formal jobs due to low education or skill level and social environment reasons such as gender discrimination in employment. Social assistance can provide support for these women and their families; however, the welfare support is insufficient and cannot satisfy the women’s needs because on one hand the benefit level of *Dibao* is rather low (actually at a subsistence level), making it likely that recipients will be trapped in a circle of poverty as a result (Zhang, 2011; Chen *et al.*, 2013), and on the other hand, employment aid measures are very limited and cannot meet the women’s needs for finding jobs. Finally, the insufficient support of social

assistance can be said to have an effect on the recipients' feelings of frustration.

As mentioned above, this frustration has caused spiritual pressures in a few women, which indicates that long-term effect of frustration may do harm to the psychological health of these women and hinder them from participating in the community and the economic market.

### *Shame: Dignity Threatening Theory*

The dignity threatening theory argues that the relationship between assistance recipients and assistance providers implies an "inferior and superior" relation, which makes the dignity of assistance recipients susceptible to threats. Moreover, the behaviors of assistance seeking and receiving conflict with the values of "self-dependence" that an individual accepts in the socialization process. Therefore, such behaviors may inspire negative social impressions in individuals and generate threats for their dignities, interfering with those who need to seek and receive assistance (Fisher, Nadler & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982).

In China, the delivery of current social assistance benefit comprises the local sub-district office (SO) and the residents' committee (RC), both of which are community-based agencies (Huang, 2003). The advantage of this delivery system is that these agencies are able to assess the needs and preferences of the local community. Yet, due to insufficient manpower and lack of professional training, the delivery of benefits is usually operated under discretion and is inefficient because it has to rely on "local bureaucrats" who are not professional social workers (Huang, 2003). Assistance-receiving women report that they have difficulties obtaining social assistance and they feel the harshness and condescending attitude of "local bureaucrats" in their interactions as well as the shame resulting from publicity on posted notices, a shame which can be explained by the dignity threatening theory. Affected by the traditional assistance culture in China, assistance recipients' consciousness of civil rights and concepts of state responsibility have not been deeply rooted, and the relationship between assistance recipients and the state is unequal. Relevant government officials still think of social assistance recipients as people who receive government alms. The "inferior-superior" relationship may threaten the dignity of the assistance recipients. Moreover, the women suffer from pressure, discrimination, and private comments

from others, which can also be explained by the dignity threatening theory. Chinese people have received education since their childhood that “humans should make earnest efforts to stand on their own feet and be independent,” which is a social norm (Ma, 2010, p. 168). When people are not strong enough to support themselves, and they have to make a living by relying on social assistance, they feel ashamed due to this social expectation. Society has a negative impression of and discriminates against assistance recipients and their personalities, which aggravates assistance recipients’ feelings of shame, increases their lack of dignity, and hinders help-seeking behavior.

There is a consensus among social policy scholars that the process of means testing for social assistance is often invasive and stigmatizing (Pinker, 1971; Sen, 1995). As Sen (1995) puts it, “Any system of subsidy that requires people to be identified as poor and that is seen as a special benefaction for those who cannot fend for themselves would tend to have some effects on their self-respect as well on the respect accorded them by others” (p. 20). Women tend to be most vulnerable to poverty, and women recipients need to rely on assistance for a long time. Thus, women recipients are often related to welfare dependency and bear welfare stigma (Wilson, 2012). For example, in the USA, women welfare recipients are considered lazy, cheating, bad mothers for whom public assistance is generational and a way of life (Rogers-Dillon, 1995).

Stigma is generally viewed as a major deterrent factor of welfare take-up. It increases the cost of participating in the assistance program, so that some poor who would participate in the absence of stigma choose not to participate (Moffitt, 1983). China’s social assistance is highly selective and heavily stigmatize the recipients (Solinger, 2008; Ravallion, 2009), thus it could hinder the seeking and receiving of assistance. This study finds that women recipients do not immediately apply for *Dibao* when they first experience income difficulty, which illustrates that welfare stigma may play a deterrent role. But they finally chose to apply for and receive *Diabo* in order to survive. In other words, the stigma of receiving assistance was almost meaningless in the face of pressing needs for food and other necessary goods (Rogers-Dillon, 1995). It illustrates that stigma cannot deter women participants from applying for *Dibao*. And it also confirms that the explanation that relies on the combination of “achievement motivation” and “motivation of basic needs satisfaction” is more persuasive in China



(which is mentioned above). As to education aid, this study finds that some women participants do not apply for education assistance for fear that their children would feel ashamed, which indicates that stigma does play a deterrent role in education aid take-up.

In addition, the feeling of shame can result in negative effects on social relations within this community. As mentioned above in the findings, some women feel faceless and have no communication with neighbours or lose contact with friends, which indicates that they are excluded from the community to some degree. Previous studies have found that *Dibao* recipients experience restrictions in their patterns of social activity and that they have a higher likelihood than others of experiencing social exclusion and loneliness (Huang, 2007; Chen et al., 2013). The findings in this study echo these earlier studies and show the negative effects of the feeling of shame.

#### *Gratitude: Theory of Equity*

The theory of equity assumes that people expect to maintain the equity of interpersonal relationships and that unequal interpersonal relationships may cause indebtedness and individual obsession; with regard to obsession, the individual will make efforts to eliminate it either by repaying or by belittling providers for their assistance (Walster, Berscheid & Walster, 1973; Greenberg, 1980).

After receiving social assistance from the state, the female recipients recover the relationship balance of both parties by appreciating and praising the provider and looking forward to repayment in the future instead of by belittling the provider. In China, the traditional ideas of social assistance mean that poverty is attributed to personal responsibility and social assistance from the government is almsgiving and charity (Guan, 2011). With the development of society, nowadays *Regulations on Dibao for Urban Citizens* and *Interim Measures for Social Assistance* have been established that explain that social members have the right to obtain assistance from the government, but due to the influence of traditional ideas of social assistance, consciousness of that right is not deeply rooted in people's hearts. The study finds the assistance-receiving women feel indebted for the assistance provided by the state, and, with a grateful mind, they consider it a philanthropic act and do not consider it from the perspective of a civil right or state responsibility. The women think that there is "inequity" between them-

selves and the provider, and they attribute the responsibility for the inequity to themselves, regarding themselves as to blame for the indebtedness of receiving assistance that they cannot repay.

However, in contradiction to the theory of equity, the women eliminate the sense of inequity not by belittling or denying the assistance but by affirming and commending it, and they hope to express their gratitude through “delayed” repayment or their children’s repayment in the future. For unequal assistance seeking and receiving, the women feel indebted, which is in agreement with the theory of equity. However, they stress gratitude and affirmation rather than belittling and denial. The female recipients adopt “gratitude and repayment” to eliminate the sense of indebtedness, which verifies the traditional Chinese assistance-receiving culture that “the favor of a drop of water should be rewarded with the gratitude of a fountain of water” (Ma, 2010). Some women recipients compare the relationship between themselves and the state to the relationship between a child and her parents, equating the national assistance to help from parents. The comparison between “state-individual” and “parents-children” is obviously the representation of a collective narration and social mainstream discourse (Ma, 2010). In the minds of Chinese people, the motherland, like the mother of each Chinese person, fosters the Chinese people. When the small family cannot provide sufficient help, the state affords protection for the weak, like the head of a big family. This view interprets national assistance as charity from the perspective of paternalism ethnics, and thus the recipients should naturally show gratitude.

## Conclusion

From the perspective of the female recipients, this article adopts an in-depth interview approach to present the experiences and subjective feelings of women who receive social assistance in China. The women expressed complex feelings about social assistance, including frustration, shame, and gratitude. Frustration reflects the helplessness of the women in their conflict between longing for self-reliance and applying for and receiving social assistance, and also reveals the insufficient support of social assistance, especially the lack of employment aid. Shame refers to the feeling of a lack of dignity that the women have in their interactions with “local bureaucrats” who are not professional social workers in social assistance deliv-

ery and because of publicity resulting from the practice of posted notices of the names of assistance recipients. Frustration and shame have caused great psychological pressure and emotional disturbance, and have excluded the women socially from the community and the economic market. Gratitude indicates the feelings of the female recipients, including affirmation, praise, gratitude, and repayment for policies on national social assistance, implying that the traditional ideas of social assistance still have a strong influence and that the majority of people still regard social assistance as alms, rather than their deserved right.

Since the introduction of the term “feminization of poverty” in the 1970s, more and more countries have realized that female poverty is a serious problem (Pearce, 1978). The discourse on “feminization of poverty” argues that women are increasingly represented among the world’s poor, and reflects that currently the issue of female poverty is no longer concealed in the patriarchal families or ignored. The high visibility of poor women as a result of changing demographics (single parent families; female-headed households) makes it easier for women to be counted. In addition, the concept of “feminization of poverty” reveals the deficiencies of a social welfare system that caters to patriarchal families (Ginsburg, 1992). Faced with this situation, many countries have reformed their social welfare systems, and gender-sensitive welfare policies have become long-term mechanisms in dealing with female poverty. China should pay attention to this trend and reform social welfare policies to eliminate gender blindness. On the whole, a greater understanding of the Chinese social assistance policy and women’s welfare policy can be gained from the research findings, covering the following aspects:

First, legislation for social assistance should be accelerated and an appropriate consciousness for receiving and providing assistance should be gradually built. The collective spirit of the Chinese people to help socially vulnerable groups should also be promoted. The traditional ideas of social assistance should be changed and the social right of poor people to obtain social assistance should be further publicized and strengthened.

Second, the frustration and shame of the women recipients indicate that they require material assistance as well as moral support and emotional release, which should be considered when developing a social assistance policy. Intervention plans for female recipients should be established. Women recipients’ homes, which could provide services for group activities

and psychological consultation, should be established in communities to enhance women's sense of belonging and help them participate in community.

Third, there should be more research on the delivery methods of the current system of *Dibao* and other social assistance policies to prevent social stigma for assistance recipients. The auditing mode of social assistance needs to be improved and the publicity of using a posted notice to announce recipients should be phased out. Professional social workers should be introduced in social assistance delivery.

Fourth, employment aid for women recipients should be developed. From the gender perspective, women recipients suffer from less access to education, healthcare, and jobs training than men recipients (Jane, 2009). It is difficult for women recipients to find jobs and get rid of assistance. Therefore, it is necessary to provide employment aid for women recipients to redress their inequalities. The aid measures could include skill training, occupational guidance, and financial support for receiving education which caters to the demands of the women recipients in order to help them participate in labor market and earn their own living.

The limitation of this study is that the 15 research participants are from urban areas, since the experiences of women recipients in rural areas might be different. In addition, these experiences and feelings of women receiving social assistance have not been compared to those of men, which is important topic that merits future study. What are the distinctive features of women recipients? And how are they different from those of men recipients? Through understanding how the men recipients feel, it can be found out whether the women recipients have different experiences. It is believed that more clarity will be brought to the issue if the feelings of men are compared with those of women in future studies.

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