Politic of Poverty Governance: An Introduction

Zhongyuan Wang · Sujian Guo

Published online: 1 June 2022
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Abstract
Poverty alleviation and politics are interrelated in complex ways. Poverty governance is essentially a multi-faceted process of using political power, exercising political authority, mobilizing political resources, running political institutions, and gaining political legitimacy. However, the approach of economics has long dominated current discussions in the literature on poverty reduction, resulting in a relative lack of political science research on poverty reduction interventions. This special issue has gathered together carefully selected articles to examine the politics of poverty governance in non-electoral settings, with a specific area focus on China. Despite focusing on China, this special issue adopts a comparative analytical lens and extends beyond China studies by striving to position China’s poverty governance in relation to general theories of political science. This introductory article seeks to expound the motives highlighted in the special issue, identify the literature gap that the special issue aims to fill, summarize the key findings and contributions, and finally suggest some promising new areas of future research.

Keywords Poverty governance · Targeted poverty alleviation · Political science research · Politics of poverty reduction

Introduction
The reason why the editors of the Journal of Chinese Political Science have chosen to devote an entire issue to the “politics of poverty governance” is because poverty remains one of the most enduring and unresolved problems that the world faces today. It appears in various forms, posing ongoing harm to many citizens in low-income countries, and even to many in affluent countries. Narrowly defined, poverty typically refers to a state in which the income level of a household or an individual is so low that essential human needs and a minimum standard of living cannot be met. The term “poverty” often brings to mind images in which impoverished
people experience a lack of food, proper housing, clean water and sanitation. Broadly defined, poverty represents “pronounced deprivation in well-being” ([24], p1), which reflects a revised and increasing understanding that poverty is not simply defined as a low level of income. Instead, it describes a “deprivation of capabilities” that limits people’s freedoms to function fully in society and achieve their potential [2, 47]. Regardless of whether one adopts the “thin” perspective of poverty as lacking the essentials for survival, or the “thick” perspective of poverty as the accumulation of multiple disadvantages, modern states are expected to commit and conduct due diligence in the battle against poverty.

Eradicating poverty in its all forms and promoting shared prosperity cannot be achieved without state intervention. Nowadays, many countries around the world attach great importance to solving the problem of acute poverty, adopting a variety of measures to help the poorest and most vulnerable groups within their territories escape the poverty trap. Meanwhile, the international community has also prioritized the eradication of poverty as one of the most urgent global goals, incorporating it into the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development. Thus, poverty reduction has gained much prominence at both the national and international levels. For nearly 25 years, global extreme poverty was steadily declining, with the share of the extreme poor plunging from 36% in 1990 to less than 10% in 2018. Yet one of the greatest challenges facing many countries is the pursuit of continuous progress in poverty eradication [20, 21]. In particular, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its associated economic crisis, which disproportionately impact the world’s poor, are reversing hard-won gains in poverty eradication efforts and exacerbating income inequality [10, 30, 54]. It is the first time in a quarter century that we witness more new poor than the number of people lifted out of poverty, with an estimated 150 million people worldwide being pushed into extreme poverty in recent years. Without a concerted and committed country-level response, growing poverty will potentially precipitate various negative social and political effects. Therefore, there is watershed opportunity present today to reexamine poverty dynamics and investigate the political logic of poverty governance.

The articles in this special issue are generally interested in the political logic of poverty governance in non-electoral settings with an analytic focus on China. Although a majority of the selected works relate to China, this special issue is not a collection of articles purely devoted to China studies. Instead, these articles extend beyond China, with the aim of better positioning China’s poverty governance in relation to general theories of political science, and analyzing it through the comparative lens of cross-case studies. All the contributors were asked to reflect on the politics of poverty governance by respectively uncovering the political motivations, policy processes, and political implications of the Party-led poverty alleviation in China, thus contributing novel insights to institutional and political explanations for poverty.

1 It is based on the estimate by the World Bank, see https://data.worldbank.org/topic/poverty (accessed November 27, 2021).
2 See https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/07/covid-19-to-add-as-many-as-150-million-extreme-poor-by-2021 (accessed November 27, 2021).
alleviation. Ultimately, the overarching goal of the special issue is to bring analytical frameworks of political science into the field of anti-poverty research.

Related literature

Poverty research largely concentrates on four fundamental questions. What is poverty? Why are some people poor? What are the repercussions of poverty? What can be done to reduce poverty? No doubt there is a rich tradition of social science research on poverty which has provided a wide range of answers to these key questions from a myriad of perspectives. However, poverty studies across different academic disciplines have long been very uneven and highly fragmented [9]. The current literature on poverty is mainly dominated by an economics-centric approach because poverty is of inherent interest to economists who are concerned with how to empirically measure poverty and evaluate its severity. This entails examining the nature and causes of poverty, investigating economic performance, which in turn shapes poverty, comparing macroeconomic and microeconomic tools that can be used to combat poverty, and identifying causal influences of various pro-poor economic experiments [5, 28, 42, 44]. Economic explanations have already enhanced the theoretical and empirical knowledge on the meaning, origins, and consequences of poverty. Nevertheless, as defined by a more expanded conception of poverty, poverty not only refers to monetary scarcity, but also more broadly refers to marginalization and exclusion in political domains as an outcome of power relations. Therefore, the prevailing economic approach has proven limited in explaining poverty alleviation efforts from non-monetary angles. In addition, poverty and poverty governance are two related but significantly different research themes. The former focuses attention on the problem of poverty itself, while the latter centers on the broader processes of addressing poverty. Analyses of the meaning, drivers and impacts of poverty need to be distinguished from research on the motivations, processes and results of poverty governance. The economics approach might be more effective and fruitful for answering the questions pertaining to poverty, but it is rather limited to offer deeper insights into the more complex set of motivations, dynamic processes and far-reaching effects of poverty governance. For instance, economic investment, skills training, infrastructure construction, and agricultural development certainly play a pivotal role in tackling poverty, but these things do not emerge organically. State policies and political interventions can often be decisive in shaping the origin, process and outcome of poverty alleviation programs. To cite another example, the central government can devise a comprehensive set of policies, transfers, programs, and assistance aimed at reducing poverty and boosting development, but the bureaucracies located at the lower ends of the political hierarchy often vary in their competence in implementing top-level designed policies. This makes it difficult to reduce poverty effectively and consistently, or results in the elite capture of public interests even under democratic conditions.

In this regard, there is a need to borrow from the perspectives of other social science disciplines, especially that of political science, to study poverty governance [1, 56]. This is because poverty governance is a multi-faceted process of using political
power, exercising political authority, mobilizing political resources, running political institutions, and gaining political legitimacy. Poverty alleviation and politics are interrelated in complex ways. For instance, there are deep-seated political and institutional sources of protracted anti-poverty challenges. Initiatives to end poverty could be politically motivated, and the formulation of poverty reduction programs, as well as the performance of pro-poor policy implementation are greatly influenced by multiple political factors. The evolution of poverty reduction strategies depends largely on the political conditions that structure the policy process. In turn, the results of poverty governance will also generate profound political implications. As an independent variable, politics plays a central role in combating poverty. Good governance requires the state to be capable, responsive and accountable, and in the context of poverty governance, it means making the government work for the poor. As a dependent variable, the effectiveness and flaws of various poverty reduction strategies could also transform politics and affect political behavior, government legitimacy and regime survival. Furthermore, poverty-reduction interventions also encompass various political subjects ranging from state building, institutional adaptation, party politics, state-society relations, and central-local government relations, as well as citizen participation, political attitudes and civil society. As the political scientist Harold Lasswell famously highlighted, politics is all about “who gets what, when, how” [33]. Thus, poverty alleviation which can be considered as a form of distributive politics lies at the heart of politics since it involves the allocation of governmental goods and services. Examining the underlying forces, processes, and political outcomes of poverty alleviation efforts helps to shed light on many critical political science questions. To date, with some notable exceptions ([14, 17], relatively few in-depth studies on poverty governance have been conducted from a political science perspective. “Compared to the other social sciences, political scientists simply do not study poverty as much” ([9], p.2). It is with this gap in mind that this special issue aims to contribute with articles covering different political perspectives of poverty governance.

Traditionally, studies of poverty reduction neglected politics. As political and institutional explanations grow in prominence, the burgeoning literature linking politics, institutions and poverty alleviation can be generally classified into three groups. The first group adopts the approach of new institutionalism to examine the powerful role played by political regimes, bureaucratic systems and sub-national institutions in shaping the processes and outcomes of anti-poverty welfare programs [8]. Related studies delve into institution-specific variables including electoral systems, political parties, courts, administrative agencies, subnational power structures and social movements, that could largely determine the scale and scope of pro-poor policies [3, 11, 27]. This scholarship has therefore built on the traditional institutional arguments and further explored the salient impacts of left-wing parties, labor unions, and democratic institutions on poverty reduction programs.

The second set of studies concerns distributive politics of poverty-reducing interventions under competitive electoral systems. The scholarship identifies that as part of distributive policy, poverty alleviation is often instrumentalized by political parties and politicians as an electoral tool for staying in office and consolidating power. These studies usually focus on political favoritism and clientelist linkage.
in allocating anti-poverty resources, and investigate whether and how incumbents strategically allocate poverty-relief goods disproportionately to targeted groups of constituents (e.g. voters versus nonvoters, core voters versus swing voters, voters in electorally critical districts, culturally, regionally and ethnically identifiable subgroups) as well as choosing the timing of the anti-poverty goods delivery (e.g. during the electoral cycle) [6, 18, 34]. Scholars also seek to examine the success of these allocation activities, evaluating the electoral and political returns to government anti-poverty efforts [13, 32, 39]. These studies find that the allocation of poverty-relief resources under electoral democracies is not to fairly catered to the needs of the poor, but has been largely shaped by political calculations such as electoral interests, partisan favoritism and political survival [31]. This growing body of literature also reveals that such a pattern of anti-poverty resource distribution prevails not only in advanced Western democracies, but also in competitive authoritarian regimes [7, 37, 50]. Autocrats often allocate welfare resources to a targeted population as a means to improve their electoral prospects and prolong their political survival. Overall, these studies again exemplify Lasswell’s definition of politics, that is, politics is concerned with “who gets what, when, how”.

The third set of research highlights the importance of institutional reforms and good governance in improving the outcomes of poverty alleviation. Since the 1990s, international donors and academic researchers have both devoted increasing attention to identifying various political constraints and obstacles for carrying out anti-poverty programs in aid-recipient countries. This area of research discerns how poverty reduction can be most effectively achieved by expanding citizen participation and enhancing government accountability, transparency and responsiveness in under-developed countries [15, 41, 45]. By the same token, the notion of “good governance” has gradually gained widespread currency, underscoring the need to reform political systems and cultivate civil society for the sake of poverty elimination. Consequently, this constitutes a necessary condition for donors to disburse aid to impoverished countries [12, 19, 29]. This scholarship strongly reflects the normative power underlying research that attempts to improve the performance of poverty alleviation in developing countries by transforming their political systems and restructuring governmental institutions through neoliberal pathways, although the actual effects are largely arguable [43].

Poverty is a topic of lively debate in nearly all regime types. However, as demonstrated above, current scholarship on “the politics of poverty alleviation” focuses on discussing the allocation of public resources under electoral systems. This entails examining either the electoral motives and distributive favoritism underpinning poverty alleviation efforts, or the international community’s anti-poverty assistance to under-developed countries and its political stabilization effects. In short, current political studies on poverty governance maintain a typical neoliberal ideological stance, while paying scant attention to poverty governance models and their political logic, especially in non-liberal countries with weak electoral accountability such as China. Little is known about the political motivations, mechanisms, and effects
of poverty governance under authoritarian systems.\textsuperscript{3} In addition, both developing and developed countries today are experiencing poverty in different forms and of varying degrees. Much of the research on poverty in developed countries tends to predominantly focus on urban poverty and relative poverty \[16\], while studies on poverty in developing countries are mostly restricted to rural poverty and absolute poverty \[40\]. These two strands of research hardly intersect and in fact rarely engage with each other.

State actions in the fight against poverty have never been as prominent as today. China is a country that has made major strides in poverty reduction. By prioritizing poverty alleviation in the political agenda of the ruling party, China has become the first developing country in the world to attain the poverty reduction target set by the United Nations ten years ahead of schedule. At the end of 2020, the Chinese government officially declared victory in eradicating extreme poverty, claiming 93.48 million rural people and 832 poverty-stricken counties have been lifted out of poverty. Politics must take center stage if poverty is to be substantially reduced. In this regard, China has made a strong case for using its state capacity and political will, which have had transformative effects on poverty governance. What has driven China’s latest effort in targeted poverty alleviation in a system without electoral accountability? How are poverty identification policies and poverty assistance models crafted by the Chinese government? How can they be implemented locally? Why do local governments vary in their competence to transform their bureaucracy into an effective poverty governance institution? Who are the main bodies involved in China’s anti-poverty scheme, and how do they work together? What brings the unintended political consequences of poverty-reducing interventions? What does poverty alleviation mean for China’s political development and regime consolidation? After addressing extreme poverty, what political risks will growing income inequality generate? The above is a plethora of questions that political scientists are concerned with and need to answer. China is a typical single-party country, where the political logic and process of poverty governance are distinctive from those of electoral democracies. Therefore, we invite papers that consider these topics to contribute to the special issue, which tries to understand the politics of poverty governance in China from a comparative perspective with updated empirical evidence. Of course, the articles included in the special issue cannot fully answer all the above questions, but they represent a fruitful early attempt and effort in this direction, establishing a foundation for a comprehensive political science of poverty governance.

**Contributions of the Special Issue**

Collectively, the articles in this special issue hope to contribute by filling the scholarly gaps identified in the preceding section, and advancing research on the politics of poverty governance in the following three main areas.

\textsuperscript{3} For some notable exceptions, see \[4, 38, 58\].

\textsuperscript{4} Springer
First, the authors introduce various analytical frameworks of political science to advance scholarship on poverty governance. They delve into intricate political elements of poverty alleviation by using the concepts, theories and methods of political research. These efforts not only generate novel institutional and political explanations for the performance and outcomes of poverty eradication, but also unpack the complex linkage between politics and poverty alleviation. The special issue also enriches the existing scholarship on poverty research by expanding its regime focus beyond electoral democracies, and at the same time addresses the uneven development and segregation of poverty research across disciplines. It also enables a better understanding of how statecraft and politics matter to poverty alleviation and inspires further thinking on possible political pathways toward better poverty governance.

Second, the articles investigate China’s poverty alleviation efforts with evidence-based disciplinary analysis and meticulous rigorous cross-case comparisons. The current interpretations of China’s recent anti-poverty achievements lean toward polarization. On the one hand, the Chinese authorities utilize these data as propaganda on government performance and use their achievements to extol the success of the China model. On the other hand, foreign governments and international media tend to ignore, downplay and even question those achievements, assuming that countries without liberal-electoral systems cannot genuinely end poverty. With some notable exceptions [4, 58], there has long been a palpable lack of in-depth social science scholarly analysis of China’s anti-poverty efforts, and especially few contributions by political scientists. This special issue represents a conscious attempt to move away from Chinese official propaganda and Western neoliberalism toward examining the politics of poverty alleviation in a non-electoral context through theory-driven and evidence-based empirical studies. As a result, several new promising areas of research can be uncovered.

Third, the articles in this special issue are thematically and methodologically diverse. They encompass topics ranging from policy design for poverty identification, to central-local government relations in poverty relief, state-business relations in poverty alleviation and formal-informal institutions in poverty governance, to outcome and political effects of poverty alleviation in China and beyond, thus speaking to the broader literature [23, 49, 51]. These studies also vary in research methods from case studies, within-case comparative analysis, and cross-case comparative analysis to quantitative regression analysis based on survey data and cutting-edge causal identification based on propensity score matching. The authors emphasize the complexity of relations between politics and poverty, and provide novel insights into the comprehensive picture of poverty governance through engaging with a variety of political science theories and using multiple methods.

**Organization and Introduction of the Articles**

One salient theme in this issue touches on the critical institutional foundation of poverty alleviation programs, poverty identification. The performance of Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA) heavily relies on the ability of grassroots cadres and the
methods they use to accurately identify beneficiaries on the ground. Given the inherent difficulties of measuring poverty, the key to determining the success of poverty reduction rests on whether the method of poverty identification is scientific, whether the identification process is standardized, and whether the identification result is accurate. As an essential first step (“the first button” in the narratives of the Chinese government) in poverty alleviation programs, poverty targeting will also affect the overall public evaluation and the long-run political effects of the TPA project. In *Who Are Identified as Poor in Rural China’s Targeted Poverty Alleviation Strategy?* Li et al. [36] investigate how poverty identification had been carried out in rural China and show that a multidimensional poverty measure was employed to identify and register poor households in the TPA project. More specifically, the authors argue that instead of focusing only on the monetary dimension (as per previous poverty-reducing programs), those who suffered deprivations in education, health, employment, and living conditions had greater odds of being registered as poor in the new anti-poverty scheme, which resonated more with the capability approach advocated by Amartya Sen. Such an identification strategy compounded with the various forms of targeted assistance helps enhance the effectiveness of the TPA program by targeting and meeting the multidimensional needs of the poor. Based on a recent nationally representative survey dataset, the empirical analysis further reveals that registered households received significantly more government assistance than the non-registered (especially those in well-developed regions). These gaps raise concerns that although the multidimensional approach greatly improved the overall targeting performance, sizable targeting errors (e.g. inclusion errors and exclusion errors) still remain, which necessitates expanded support and more nuanced targeting strategies for both the poor and near-poor households around the country in the post-TPA era [53]. The findings will have policy implications not only for China’s future poverty monitoring and alleviation strategies, but also for related issue areas encountered by other developing countries and even the developed world.

A second theme highlights the essentially dynamic nature of policy implementation of the TPA program in China with a broader comparative perspective. It covers several key topics such as central-local government relations in poverty relief, state-society relations in poverty alleviation, and formal-informal institutions in poverty governance. First, countries with poverty reduction goals always face a dilemma of choosing decentralized versus centralized approaches to combating poverty. Neoliberal norms such as representation, inclusiveness, empowerment, and decentralization have long been espoused by international organizations and western media to promote the interests of the poor, given their theoretically assumed advantages in achieving better poverty relief performance. Can this be supported by empirical evidence in the real world? In *Integrating Devolution with Centralization*, Zuo [57] rejects the prevailing traditional wisdom and argues that some specific forms of political centralization are of crucial and equal importance to the effective delivery of locally managed welfare distribution, because without strong top-down accountability and close monitoring mechanisms, decentralized institutions will often lead to elite capture and the misconduct of local officials. By adopting a “most-different-similar-outcome” research design, Zuo provides a nuanced comparison of three successful poverty alleviation programs carried out in India (West Bengal), Mexico,
and China. The cross-case analysis illustrates that despite large differences in poverty rate, the level of wealth, and the economic and political settings, the three cases share striking common institutional features in their poverty alleviation initiatives. These are the ruling party’s credible commitment to reduce poverty and a set of well-designed institutions that monitor the program implementation and shape the incentives of local politicians. Albeit with varying levels of mixes, organizational arrangements that are both centralized and decentralized contribute to the efficiency of successful welfare programs in all three cases. Therefore, the article makes the argument that to generate pro-poor outcomes, decentralization should be integrated with top-down interventions with specific institutional designs in anti-poverty schemes, signifying a break with traditional ways of explaining anti-poverty success. Given the very fact that many under-developed countries suffer serious institutional deficits in carrying out decentralization, Zuo’s findings throw up more in-depth theoretical reflections on the devolution of decision-making powers and highlight the empirical necessity of developing more pragmatic central-local models in tackling poverty.

Second, governments at various levels are usually posited as the dominant player in implementing poverty alleviation programs, but they never act alone. What roles have non-governmental actors played in state-led poverty relief campaigns? What adaptive strategies were employed by the state and social forces respectively to reconcile their conflicting interests? In addition to central-local relations, we need also to look at the evolving government-business relations (state-society relations) in China’s recent war against poverty. In To Get Rich is Glorious, Huang and Xin [26] discuss entrepreneurs’ philanthropic participation in the TPA program. Focusing on the Guangcai Program in Shandong, the article first classifies local entrepreneurs into four types depending on the differences in their aim of participation and level of activeness: altruist, speculator, involuntarist and temporizer. These different types of China’s new rich reveal varying patterns in the strategies utilized to interact with the government in the TPA program, which are largely determined by the entrepreneurs’ business size, family backgrounds, and political linkages, and of course generate diverse returns. Accordingly, the Chinese state is also found to be very proactive in adapting its tactics which comprise a combination of carrots and sticks. This allows it to deftly engage with entrepreneurs of different kinds and mobilize their resources to attain the radical goal of poverty eradication. Huang and Xin’s work uses a fresh angle to explain China’s success in eradicating poverty by considering the strategic mutual infiltration of state-society relations, uncovering dynamic patterns of non-governmental participation in state-initiated poverty-reducing projects in China’s context. More generally, targeted poverty alleviation provides an apt case to observe the evolving relationship between government and business under the new leadership, a topic that extends broadly in Chinese political research.

Third, an array of formal institutions has been established by international organizations and national bureaucracies to facilitate poverty reduction endeavors in various parts of the world. The existing literature on China’s TPA program has also focused on state-designed formal institutions and their operations at sub-national levels. These include but are not confined to managed campaigns, sent-down work teams, first party secretaries, and paired support networks. However,
the swift success of China’s poverty alleviation cannot be adequately explained by rational institutional design and formal institutional arrangements, given the equally important role that informal institutions in multiple forms also play. In *Formation of Relational Poverty Governance and Its Impacts*, Xu, Xu & Chen [55] examine how the Chinese government has employed personalized approaches and soft measures, which is identified by the authors as “relational poverty governance”, to implement anti-poverty policies. Unlike networks built on traditional clientelistic ties (which usually lead to distortions of policy implementation), relational governance establishes a new web of “quasi-relative relations” in China’s anti-poverty projects. It is characterized by artificial informal modes like “building parent-like relations by superior cadres”, “signing kinship contracts” with local cadres, and “using pan-kinship relations by village cadres”. As highlighted by the authors, apart from campaign-style bureaucratic mobilization, the Chinese authorities often use combined strategies of emotion, ethics and moral obligations as the “soft weapon of the strong” to incentivize cadres at various levels to realize the goal of poverty reduction. As a result, by embedding personalized linkages into anti-poverty assistance and creating relational interactions, the state can exercise its power more precisely throughout the TPA process and therefore strengthens its authority to penetrate into rural regions. Articulating such a conceptual framework of “relational poverty governance” broadens our understanding of China’s anti-poverty battle in particular, and poverty governance through informal institutions in general.

A third theme pertains to the outcome and political effects of poverty alleviation in China and beyond. Pertinent issues such as the underlying conditions that contribute to the performance of poverty governance, whether and how poverty relief leads to unintended consequences such as corruption, and what will happen if poverty and inequality prevail in modern society, are examined. First, China’s recent campaign against poverty was mainly designed and promoted by the ruling party and the central leadership in Beijing. Top-level design (*dingceng sheji*) has been considered as one of the defining features of the party regime under Xi Jinping [46, 48]. Under the unitary system, the Chinese government at various levels and in different localities are held accountable with the common task disseminated from top down. However, it does not mean that all the local governments performed equally well and met the targets at the same pace. How can the variance in the performance of local bureaucracies in accomplishing state anti-poverty tasks be explained? In *Power and Poverty in China*, Li and Wu [35] try to explain why some Chinese counties perform better in poverty alleviation (measured by the earlier year of counties being delisted from the poverty list). As such, this work sheds light on the micro-political setting of subnational power structures, which departs from the existing literature that mainly considers the historical, economic or macro-political accounts, by taking the county party secretaries holding a concurrent higher-ranking post as a core explanatory variable. A discrete-time event history analysis drawing on a unique county-level dataset of 832 nationally designated poor counties in China provides empirical evidence for the correlation of leadership concurrency and prominent performance in accomplishing the central task. Related plausible causal mechanisms, as argued by the authors, include the increased bargaining power and privileged political connections engendered by the concurrent upper-level posts, which allow the counties to
obtain more assistance and support that are critical to better poverty governance performance. “Power is essential to alleviate poverty”, the authors stress. The findings not only affirm the underlying political logic of regional variance in anti-poverty performance in China, but also chime with the comparative politics literature on how powerful actors create and maintain favoritism in state welfare distribution [7, 25], a phenomenon prevailing in different regime types.

Second, poverty relief has often been a political instrument strategically wielded by incumbent administrations to enhance regime legitimacy and consolidate ruling power [58]. In practice, however, it also results in unintended consequences that could undermine the desirable political effects and even change the course of regime development. One of the undesirable consequences that accompany poverty aid is the increased propensity for corruption [17], especially under circumstances where transparency and accountability are limited. How, then, can the magnitude and extent of corruption in poverty governance programs be estimated? What are the causal mechanisms that link poverty and corruption? In Does Poverty Relief Breed Corruption, Wang [52] evaluates the impact of earlier waves of China’s poverty reduction programs on corruption at the subnational level. Leveraging on a unique dataset on 881 low-income counties, Wang’s research uses propensity score weighted regression to address the confounding bias and identifies statistically significant findings on more corruption cases and more convicted officials in counties registered in the national poverty list. In other words, China’s pre-TPA anti-poverty programs (which mainly target counties), while greatly benefitting the poverty-stricken population and local economy, have actually caused more corruption in poor counties. This causal relation remains robust when using different model specifications. It seems that, as documented in many developing countries, China was stuck in the hard-to-escape poverty-corruption trap under the old anti-poverty schemes. Moreover, corrupt misconduct became a major impediment to further poverty reduction efforts in these places. The new targeted poverty alleviation program, which was initiated and enforced after 2014 and primarily focuses on precise poverty identification [36] and close monitoring [57], emerged against the backdrop of such a poverty-corruption dilemma in the early 2010s. Wang’s work highlights the risk of unintended political consequences and the importance of anti-corruption institutional design in welfare redistribution process. The lessons of how China, with weak electoral accountability but strong top-down accountability, escaped the poverty-corruption trap can benefit scholarship.

Third, poverty is one of the most acute problems in nearly all countries around the world. Although the aim of this special issue is to examine governance relating to extreme poverty in China and beyond, we take a step further by looking into the political impact of entrenched relative poverty in a global context. Although dramatic progress has been made in global poverty reduction since 2000, the disparity in the distribution of wealth continues to increase. As the Chinese saying goes, “scarcity poses no worry, but uneven distribution does” (bu huangua er huanbujun). Higher levels of economic inequality could result in various political challenges that assail contemporary society. In Income Inequality and Global Political Polarization, Gu and Wang [22] investigate whether and how the proliferation of income inequality and rising political polarization in many parts of the world are related to each
other. A plausible posited positive linkage between the two variables does not seem counter-intuitive, but there is a relative lack of strong empirical evidence on this interrelation across the globe. Using repeated cross-national data from six waves of the World Values Survey from 1990 up to 2020, this study identifies the potential polarizing effect of income inequality. As the authors illustrated, such a positive and statistically significant association remains very robust to different model specifications. Although not necessarily causal, the results can be viewed as suggestive evidence to the adverse political repercussions of income inequality, which can be further supported by multiple causal mechanisms identified in related qualitative literature. This inquiry attests to the complexity and long-term nature of poverty governance, which should not solely focus on lifting people out of absolute poverty (as China’s targeted poverty alleviation does), but should instead address the more salient problems of relative poverty and distribution inequity. Delays in finding an effective solution to economic inequality are likely to fuel social conflicts and trigger political instability. The political repercussions of income inequality pose a common challenge to regimes of various types all over the world. This also helps us to understand why China has been committed to promoting the goal of “common prosperity” through a grander development plan after its official declaration that extreme poverty had been eradicated by the end of 2020.

Looking Forward

Poverty is essentially a political phenomenon. To enhance poverty governance requires active government interventions and the effective pre-settlement of various political problems. With the prevalence of income inequality, political polarization, armed conflicts, and fragile states, particularly at a time when millions of vulnerable people are considered newly impoverished as a result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the prominence of politics, institutions and governance in shaping the performance of poverty alleviation cannot be overstated. It is with this goal in mind that the special issue attempts to reformulate the research agenda of poverty governance, bringing the analytical concepts, perspectives and methods of political science into poverty alleviation research, and drawing a clearer connection between politics and poverty governance. The articles in this special issue deepen our understanding of poverty alleviation as a multi-faceted process of using political power, exercising political authority, mobilizing political resources, running political institutions, and gaining political legitimacy. They also collectively highlight the importance and urgency for durable political reforms to be promulgated, both nationally and locally. As political scientists, it is our duty to meaningfully engage in conversation, analysis and reflection on poverty governance. With this special issue, we feel privileged to contribute to this endeavor.

The authors push the intellectual boundaries of the poverty literature forward in at least three ways. First, the disciplinary lens of political science is introduced to enrich the poverty governance literature, placing the focal point on politics and institutions to better understand poverty governance. Second, moving beyond China’s propagandistic discourse and Western neoliberal discourse, the special issue
promotes evidence-based empirical research on poverty alleviation in China, and advances political science research of poverty governance in non-electoral regimes with evidence from the Chinese experience. Third, it thematically and methodologically expands the political study of poverty alleviation. We hope that this special issue points readers toward where this scholarship is headed and inspire growing scholarly interest in related topics. Nevertheless, despite the contributions to the literature, this special issue admittedly also grapples with several dilemmas and challenges. Some challenges are theoretical and methodological, while others are related to the research scope, which also pave the way for many more exciting and promising new areas of research in the future.

There are many themes worthy of scholarly attention for future research, including but not limited to: cross-national quantitative research on the politics of poverty governance, comparative research on poverty governance and welfare policies in authoritarian regimes, comparison of international promotion of distinctive anti-poverty models, political attitudes and political agency of the poor, the impact of shock events on poverty governance (e.g. a pandemic, international conflicts), the political influence of poverty governance on specific subgroups (e.g. women, ethnic minorities, the working class), and political strategies to provide universal welfare in the post-poverty era. Methodologically, in addition to descriptive explanations and regression analysis, more causal approaches can be carried out to test theoretical hypotheses by utilizing innovative research designs and cutting-edge estimation strategies. To conclude, this special issue aspires to open up a dialogue with the myriad of issues presented here to stimulate future research on the political science of poverty governance.

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