



## Kerry E. Ratigan, *Local Politics and Social Policy in China: Let Some Get Healthy First*

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When I was doing fieldwork in China during 2011–2013 for my dissertation, the most common comment I got from government official interviewees about social health insurance reform was that “there are huge differences at local levels.” (*ge di dou bu yi yang*) I remember when I chatted with a city official in southwest China about their slow and hesitant merging of the urban and rural resident health insurance programs, a move that had been quickly and enthusiastically completed in some coastal regions, the official repeatedly mentioned “we (their province) are always the last to adopt (any) reform policy, while they (coastal provinces) are always ahead of us.” He seems quite accustomed to these different “work styles” of local governments in coastal and inland provinces, but I was struck by the stark contrast between the two. Although I tried to summarize and explain the regional variation in Chinese social health insurance policies from the socioeconomic and sociopolitical perspectives, I always feel that those policy differences are just a tip of the iceberg and should be situated in a larger picture of diverse welfare regimes or political economy in subnational China. I wish I could systematically link the welfare differences Chinese people experience in different provinces to my greatest impression from dissertation fieldwork, that is, the different ways or styles that provincial governments govern. Fortunately, Dr. Kerry E. Ratigan’s book, *Local Politics and Social Policy in China: Let Some Get Healthy First*, has excellently accomplished this job. She clearly shows how Chinese provinces govern differently and how this impacts the priority and implementation of local social policies including healthcare, education, old-age pensions, poverty alleviation, and housing.

In *Local Politics and Social Policy in China*, Dr. Ratigan delineates three governing styles or approaches among Chinese provinces. The one commonly seen in rich coastal provinces is a *pragmatic* approach that delegates to local governments, the private sector, and nonstate actors to implement social policies that support economic

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development, such as healthcare and education. By contrast, the one popularly held by poor inland provinces is a *paternalist* approach in which provinces micromanage policy implementation and prioritize targeted social policy, such as poverty alleviation and housing. The approach found in the rest provinces is a mix of *pragmatic* and *paternalist* ones, exhibiting elements of each of these two approaches. Based on these observations, Dr. Ratigan theorizes the policy style of Chinese local governments in three dimensions: local state resources (e.g., provincial budget, human capital of local state, and relationship to the central government), institutional approaches (e.g., decentralization vs. standardization), and patterns of policymaking (e.g., top-down vs bottom-up in policy process). In these ways, she develops a policy-style framework to show how pragmatic and paternalist approaches to governing have influenced and shaped social policy implementation in China. The book contributes to the welfare state literature by uncovering how local politics lead to a collection of welfare states in China rather than one cohesive welfare regime.

Through the policy-style framework, *Local Politics and Social Policy* also unpacks how national policies are shaped, and sometimes distorted, by local governments in China. For example, pragmatist provinces are more likely to leave space for their localities to shape central policy, sometimes by innovating and sometimes by subverting central directives. By contrast, paternalist provinces are more likely to implement social policy in alignment with central guidelines, although these provinces may suffer from corruption and other deleterious effects on policy implementation. The book thus enhances our understanding of the central-local relations in an authoritarian party-state by going beyond an examination of formal institutions to discover the norms that shape central and local actors' decisions throughout the policy process.

To empirically examine the differences in regional approaches to governance, Dr. Ratigan constructs a set of policy styles indicators, including the economic development strategy index and political openness index. The creation of these indexes not only helps us capture the differences in provincial politics for further quality study, but also facilitates quantitative analysis of the impacts of policy styles on social policy implementation as well as empirical tests of various explanations for the variation in local policy styles. This book is therefore a significant addition to the studies of Chinese local governments and politics.

The comparative yet local perspective and the rich insights about Chinese politics and social policy offered by *Local Politics and Social Policy* are extremely valuable for scholars and students of China studies, who increasingly find it hard to conduct in-depth fieldwork and study in mainland China due to various considerations including China's deteriorating relationships with some foreign countries and its long-lasting travel restrictions during the COVID 19 pandemic.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author of this article certifies that she has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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