

Introduction

On the night of November 24, 1922, Guo Hetang was sleeping in a Beijing alleyway when a policeman from the Fourth District Precinct discovered him. As Constable Chang Quan learned from questioning him, Guo was thirteen *sui*, a native of Handan County (about three hundred miles southwest of the capital city). His mother died when he was quite young, and after his father passed away in 1921, he lived with his uncle for a while. When the uncle left town to look for work, Guo moved in with Li Kui, a neighbor who was a former soldier. In June of 1922, Li brought him to Beijing, but when they arrived he abandoned the boy at the Qianmen train station. At first Guo wandered around the city begging. A few days later he found a job carrying water for a man named Liu, who gave him a set of clothes and two meals of steamed buns each day. “But recently Liu complained that I was eating too much and kicked me out,” Guo told the authorities. “The policeman found me sleeping on the street.” At the conclusion of the interview, Guo signed a statement summarizing his responses with an X mark. Departing from the usually taciturn police report, Constable Chang wrote that “this young child wore thin clothing and was freezing. He shivered and his voice shook as he spoke. If nothing is done he will surely freeze to death.” Five days later, the police chief inspector’s office arranged for Guo to be sent to the Capital Vagrant Workhouse (Jingshi Youmin Xiyisuo), with a note explaining his history. The cover memo added that “this boy is orphaned and helpless, and deserves compassion,” and also expressed the hope that he would learn a “suitable craft” at the workhouse and no longer “wander about destitute.”¹

What happened to Guo Hetang at the workhouse, and afterward? The records do not tell us. His story, described in a one-page testimony preserved in the police files at the Beijing Municipal Archive, is one ordinary example among many. However truncated and sparse, the details of this case suggest new elements in twentieth-century Chinese urban life that deserve our attention. A policeman patrolling the city streets, an orphan abandoned at the railway station, a former soldier from a provincial town passing through the capital, a young life of misery narrated to interrogators and recorded for the police file, the workhouse as a place of charitable detention—these threads underline some of the main themes of this book.

Guilty of Indigence seeks to understand what we can know of a life like Guo Hetang's in the context of urban poverty in Republican-era China. It traverses the terrain of philanthropy, punishment, social science, municipal governance, war, and revolution. But ultimately, the book focuses on the experiences of the homeless destitute, in a time of political upheaval and displacement. In considering questions such as how the notion of poverty as a social problem changed or how relief methods varied, this study places "the poor," rather than their benefactors and custodians, at the center of inquiry.

In addition to asking how the turbulence of the first half of the twentieth century affected the lives of the urban destitute, the book also traces changes in attitudes about "poverty" and the policies enacted for its alleviation. As elite opinion increasingly sounded the alarm that "poverty" was a major obstacle to the nation's aspirations for progress, officials and reformers sought solutions from different sources, including Japanese penology, Anglo-American sociology, and the foreign administration of China's treaty ports. The flow of knowledge into China from multiple contexts, intersecting with existing practices, produced new institutions that endeavored to rehabilitate the nonworking poor: by punishing their criminality, reforming their indolence, and eradicating the "parasitic" dependence of those who subsisted on charity. I argue that the emergence of these ideas and practices, embodied in the advent of the workhouse, represented a fundamental reordering of the relationship between the state, private charity, and the neediest members of society. As the concept of the "social parasite" became deeply ingrained in both the conventional wisdom and social policy, it became the rationale for the exclusion and punitive treatment of people identified as such. At the workhouse, a new regimen of detention and labor cast government officials and philanthropists in the role of wardens and caretakers of those singled out as needing punishment or deserving aid. These institutions became laboratories for the production of social citizenship, demarcating the boundaries of social belonging on the basis of labor and discipline. At the same time, the workhouse created new forms of criminality, stigmatizing those who refused to work as "vagrants" and as liabilities to the productivity of the nation.

These changes took place in the early decades of the twentieth century in China, a critical historical juncture when new possibilities emerged for imagining the relationship between government authority and the people. With the demise of the imperial regime in 1911, the floodgates opened to contestation in competing venues for political participation and civic action, the seeds of which had been planted in the late nineteenth century. Recent studies of citizenship in Republican China have analyzed its diverse forms in both ideology and practice. Historians have made clear the importance of civic rituals, sports, consumption, and education in shaping the content of political and cultural citizenship. Robert Culp, for instance, shows how secondary school students translated textbook ideals into action, as they experimented with participation

in Boy Scouts and military training to constitute themselves as citizens (*guomin*, *gongmin*) of the Republic.² As various other groups, old and new, found different ways to perform citizenship, they created opportunities for political action and crafted new forms of social and cultural authority.³

Yet as Merle Goldman and Elizabeth Perry remind us, “citizenship implies exclusion as well as inclusion.”⁴ Thanks to the work of social scientists, we have a good picture of how the politics of exclusion worked in the post-1949 era. Dorothy Solinger’s masterful study, for instance, explains the marginalization of rural migrants as “second-class citizens” in the urban welfare system.⁵ As the socialist state established the parameters of its welfare regime, social citizenship, in T. H. Marshall’s classic definition, constituted recognized claims for economic welfare and security.⁶ Such parameters were not so obviously delineated in the early decades of the twentieth century. One of the goals of this study is to explore the politics of exclusion in a time when the contours of social rights and obligations were far from settled, when the practices which marked the boundaries of belonging in “society” were in the infancy of formation.⁷ My research charts how starting at the turn of the century, intellectuals and officials began to define the ability and willingness of the “common people” to labor in the service of the nation-state as one of defining attributes of social membership. Even while the legacy of Confucian paternalism persisted, assumptions about productivity, discipline, and self-sufficiency became embedded in the political economy of social welfare. At a time when China confronted relentless assaults from the forces of imperialism and global capitalism, government officials and private philanthropists considered it their responsibility to confine and discipline the “recalcitrant” and the “indolent,” and to harness their labor for the benefit of the nation.

Evolving over more than fifty years, this imperative to work was enacted at the workhouse and the relief home, intensifying under the ideology of Nationalist productivism and during wartime mobilization, reaching a crescendo in the post-1949 socialist state. As productive labor became a condition of social citizenship, how did those on the margins understand their exclusion, and how did they organize to defend their interests? My emphasis on the disciplinary power of the state is balanced by an equal commitment to understanding the experiences of those labeled as outcasts. I focus on Beijing and Shanghai, two cities where concerted efforts to clear the streets of vagrants, orphans, and drifters subjected the homeless to harassment, deportation, or detention. As inmates in workhouses and relief homes, those guilty of indigence became experimental subjects for bureaucrats testing a newfound belief in the transformative power of labor. My analysis illuminates how people detained under these circumstances responded to the disciplinary project of making them into “citizens,” and how they coped with destitution in a period of deep social dislocation. Inmates in government custody, for instance, protested their incarceration by sending letters and petitions for release. Refugees in winter shelters

resisted separation from their families as the price of receiving government assistance. Written individually or collectively, sometimes anonymously, these letters reveal both the desperation of the times and the resilience it took to survive. At the same time, sources show that punitive agencies could also function as places of refuge for those with nowhere else to turn. Petitions from desperate parents seeking asylum for their children suggest that custodial institutions served critical charitable purposes. In Shanghai, the protracted struggles of the “straw hut people” (named for the construction material of their dwellings), spanning nearly three decades, illustrate their resourcefulness in defending their homes. In a time when homelessness could be a crime, they fought tenaciously to save their huts from destruction.

These new insights into the lives of the urban destitute are documented in a wealth of materials that have survived in the archives of government agencies and private charities, but have largely been overlooked by researchers. The records of the earliest workhouses, unevenly preserved and scattered among several archives, tell primarily the story of elite motivations and offer only fleeting glimpses into the experiences of their inmates. Sources increase in scope and depth for the period after 1928, when the Nationalist (GMD) government’s municipal administrations established the Social Affairs Bureau to take charge of poor relief (among many other duties). In particular, the well-preserved records of the Beijing agency provide detailed documentation of its relief institutions and include hundreds of letters that people wrote in a variety of contexts: asking for help, seeking the release of family members arrested for begging, describing starvation conditions at the government relief home.

In Shanghai, the archives of the Municipal Council, the governing authority of the British-dominated International Settlement, chronicle the efforts of shantytown residents to save their homes from demolition. In addition to police reports and administrative records, numerous letters from hut dwellers plead for the postponement or cancellation of eviction orders. Some of these petitioners wrote the letters themselves, including well-educated people who sprinkled their entreaties with allusions to the classics and semiliterate authors who wrote in the vernacular with an unsteady script. In other cases, one literate member or a professional scribe wrote on behalf of a group, and the signatories appended their name chops or cross and X marks. These first-hand accounts convey in vivid, sometimes heartbreaking detail the circumstances that reduced people to destitution, and the strategies they crafted to survive. We see how groups of shantytown residents appealed to the rhetoric of patriotism and citizenship and invoked the discourse of legal rights to claim a legitimate place in the city.

Many of these letters follow a conventional style of supplication, using the pro forma language of entreaty and stock phrases describing misery. Rendered as melodramatic narratives, sometimes with exaggerated or fabricated grievances, and mediated by the hands of scribes or literate acquaintances, these

documents approximate the “voices of the poor.” They do not capture their own words in a straightforward fashion—but in many cases, they come close to doing so.⁸ Where possible, I have corroborated their claims against a wide range of other sources: the administrative files of workhouses and other institutions, journalistic accounts, sociological studies, and police interrogation reports, such as that of Guo Hetang described above. Taken together, these records reveal facets of people’s lives that historians of China have not thought possible to study. Just as important, they provide penetrating perspectives into how the language of poverty shaped broader debates about social order and the configuration of rights and obligations. They also cast into sharp relief the central tensions between punishment and charity, illuminating the problems impoverished people confronted, as well as their hopes and their frustrations.

In tracing the interactions between concepts of poverty, social policy, and the lives of the urban poor in China, many of the issues raised in this book will resonate with historians and contemporary observers of other regions of the world. Indeed, questions that preoccupied Chinese society in the early twentieth century can be found in multiple historical contexts, from England’s Poor Laws to the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro to the American “war on dependence.”⁹ What constitutes a “decent provision for the poor”? “What are the limits of social obligation?”¹⁰ While it is beyond the scope of this study to address the voluminous literature on poverty and citizenship around the world, I am attentive to specific moments of cross-cultural fertilization—the workhouse imported from the West via Japan, the role of the Salvation Army, the idea of the “social parasite” drawn from American sociology. But in the end, my goal is to show how Chinese attempts to find solutions to problems that have vexed many other societies unfolded at a particular historical juncture of imperial demise, war, and revolution. During a prolonged period of state dissolution and state formation, contestations over the meanings of poverty and the parameters of social citizenship impinged on the lives of indigents in Chinese cities in unprecedented ways. How an orphan such as Guo Hetang became part of “the urban poor,” whether confinement and the imperative to work improved or harmed his life chances, how others scratched out a living on the streets, what it meant to be homeless in Beijing and Shanghai—these issues form the central concerns of this book.

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Prior to the twentieth century, poverty was not yet a crime in China. Confucian elites did not view it as a “social problem” (indeed, the notion did not exist), or regard it as a barometer of moral defects and social danger. Familiar concepts from American and European history such as “the lazy poor,” “the dependent poor,” and “the dangerous poor” did not have Chinese equivalents. In the early imperial period, “poverty” was a morally neutral concept, reflecting fate rather

than individual failure. The ideal of the “impoverished scholar” (*pínsi*) in fact lauded men who rejected worldly status and material success. By the late Ming, growing commercialization and concomitant anxieties about the distribution of wealth had eroded this ideal. Charitable institutions increasingly favored the virtuous poor, especially chaste widows and filial sons.¹¹ But as Philip Kuhn has concluded, even in the late imperial period, wealth and poverty remained relatively weak markers of social differentiation in Chinese society.¹²

Throughout the imperial era, “the poor” (*pínmin*) did not constitute a distinct social group. To be sure, there were people identified as such, most often in times of dearth and in the context of famine relief. Like “starving people” (*jimin*) and “refugees” (*nanmin*), “the poor” were those experiencing a temporary state of hardship.¹³ A more fixed category referred to “widowers, widows, the elderly without children, and orphans” (*guangua dugu*).¹⁴ Imperial decrees stipulated that only these solitary people, without families to rely upon, were eligible for permanent government aid, either as residents in poorhouses (*yangjiyuan* or *pujitang*, supported wholly or in part by the emperor’s generosity) or as nonresident pensioners.¹⁵ Beyond help for the most vulnerable, the emperor’s obligation to provide for the economic well-being of all of his subjects constituted the bedrock of the dynasty’s legitimacy. Clichés of Confucian paternalism declared that as “the father and mother of the people,” the sovereign (and his officials) would ensure “the people’s livelihood” (*minsheng*), while failure to “nourish the people” (*yangmin*) would fatally erode the moral-political foundation of the state.

At the same time, while being “poor” did not represent moral failure, and begging and vagrancy were not crimes, the historical record amply documents persistent distrust of transients. Such suspicions regarded drifters—particularly young male ones—as people who had lost their mooring in the community and family structure, cast adrift into a sea of crime and possibly rebellion.¹⁶ In the Qing dynasty, the *baojia* system of household registration in theory prevented such strangers and “vagrants” from infiltrating local communities. There was often a “beggar chief” who kept watch over a roster of local mendicants.¹⁷ As Pierre-Etienne Will has shown, preventing people from roaming the countryside or invading the cities was a chief preoccupation of Qing officials during subsistence crises. Their priority was to keep peasants at home, so that they did not “lose their place” (*shisuo*).¹⁸

Will’s landmark study also highlights the central role the Qing government played in the distribution of famine relief during the eighteenth century. The family kinship system remained the most important safety net, and private philanthropists also played significant roles. As Will convincingly demonstrates, however, the imperial bureaucracy successfully mobilized vast resources to help famine victims through a variety of mechanisms: allotting food or selling subsidized grain from public granaries, doling out cash payments, and organizing public works projects under the rubric of “substituting work for relief”

(*yigong daizhen*). Work relief in the Qing dynasty meant voluntary participation, on a noncustodial basis, in infrastructure projects such as dredging rivers and canals, repairing city walls, building irrigation reservoirs—undertakings that could employ large numbers of laborers without major capital outlays. But although officials considered *yigong daizhen* a useful method, it was a supplement to, rather than the primary focus of, traditional famine administration.¹⁹

The strong administrative capacity of the High Qing provides a striking contrast to the post-Taiping era, when a weakened central government largely ceded authority to local elites, a shift that has been the subject of numerous studies. Much of this research has centered on the balance of power between local elites and the state, and the implications for civil society. William Rowe's pioneering studies of Hankou and Mary Rankin's analysis of Zhejiang, for instance, demonstrate that local leaders used philanthropy as a strategy for increasing their autonomy and influence vis-à-vis the Qing state.²⁰ The devolution of power and the fragmentation of imperial authority were crucial factors in the eventual fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911.

The demise of the imperial system and the new Republic's rapid descent into chaos under a revolving door of warlord regimes further fueled the forces of local autonomy. As many historians have shown, local elites embarked on ambitious projects to create modern cities through reforms intent on "civilizing" the urban population. New civic groups (chambers of commerce, professional associations) and transnational voluntary organizations (the YMCA, the Red Cross) blossomed; traditional charities and associations based on native place ties reinvented themselves.²¹ All of these studies have enriched our understanding of the state–society dynamic in the late Qing and the Republican period, but for the most part, the focus on urban reform and philanthropy has largely disregarded the experiences and the perspectives of the *recipients* of charity. In these works, "poor people" make only cameo appearances, as the objects of suspicion, loathing, or compassion.

Guilty of Indigence argues that "the poor" were front and center in the drama of China's tumultuous history in the early twentieth century. Although they had been there all along, in plain sight, "the poor" of the cities became visible and troubling in new ways. Beginning as an amorphous category constructed from elite anxieties about the future of the nation, over time "the urban poor" became "real," a process that Ian Hacking has called "making up people." As a concept, "poverty" was indeed a "moving target" in early-twentieth-century China.²² This was true in Hacking's sense of dynamic interactions between the classification and the people so-classified, but also in the sense of a conceptual elasticity that stretched the term to encompass diverse forms of destitution, ranging from temporary unemployment to old-age poverty. But in contrast to the expansiveness of the idea, the interventions by and large targeted a specific manifestation of "urban poverty": the condition of homelessness. This study focuses on the changing relationship between the discursively protean category

of “poverty,” concerted attempts to intervene in the lives of the homeless, and “urban poverty” as lived experience.

By exploring the process by which “poor people” became a constituent feature of urban life, and the material reality of their experiences, my research takes the study of Chinese cities in a new direction. Over the past two decades, the trajectory of English-language scholarship has shifted away from the vigorous debate over civil society and its possibility or failure in China, to histories exploring different facets of urban cultural life. In the main, these studies have concentrated on the elite and middle classes.²³ Meanwhile, in Chinese-language scholarship, a subgenre loosely branded “cultural studies of the underclass” has proliferated. These histories of beggars and vagrants typically span the millennia of Chinese history, ranging freely from tales of the founding emperor of the Ming dynasty (a former beggar) to the contemporary “floating population” of migrants.²⁴ Hanchao Lu’s recent book, *Street Criers: A Cultural History of Chinese Beggars*, is an important addition and the only English-language work on the topic. Relying on rich collections of folklore, legends, and oral traditions, Lu describes the beggar kings and the organization of their guilds. By painting a vividly panoramic view of cultural practices from the early nineteenth century to the present, moving fluidly from Inner Mongolia to Shanghai to Canton to Suzhou, *Street Criers* emphasizes an unchanging culture of mendicancy largely impervious to political upheaval and social change.²⁵

In contrast, *Guilty of Indigence* draws from a different and variegated source base to locate the experiences of the “urban poor” in explicitly local and historical contexts. By paying attention to finely tuned social conditions and shifting political circumstances, this book deepens our understanding of Chinese urban poverty as both lived experience and “social problem.” I have chosen to write in detail about two different cities, with the goal of highlighting the specific conditions that shaped experiences of destitution. It is illuminating, for instance, to contrast life in Beijing under a lengthy period of Japanese occupation during World War II to the divided jurisdiction of treaty port Shanghai. Furthermore, following institutions and ideas as they changed over fifty years makes it possible to underscore historical continuities and disjunctures in both discourse and practice. Whereas the workhouse has typically been relegated to a footnote in histories of the modern prison or in short-lived urban reform efforts, the longer view considers how these institutions both changed and persisted as appealing solutions to Qing reformers, Chinese sociologists, foreign missionaries, treaty port residents, Nationalist officials, and Communist (CCP) leaders. Finally, bringing the history of punishment and charity into dialogue suggests that the impulses to punish “the poor” and to help them were often born of the same motives.

In presenting a narrative of both significant historical change and surprising continuities, I also depart from the scholarship of the previous two decades that has reassessed more positively the Nationalist Party’s years in power. Rejecting

an earlier preoccupation with explaining the GMD's disintegration, leading to the Communist victory in 1949, recent studies have detected signs of strength and even vitality in the GMD's state-building efforts.²⁶ This is particularly true of the numerous works focusing on the Sino-Japanese War years (1937–45). Rather than sowing the “seeds of destruction,” as the title of Lloyd Eastman's 1984 book memorably put it, historians now emphasize how the GMD's wartime policies laid the foundation for the successor Communist regime.²⁷ While I trace continuity across the 1949 divide, my approach generally eschews the state failure–success question as an organizing framework. Instead I ask how local agents of government power (the constable on the beat, the municipal official, the workhouse warden) attempted to police, punish, or help the “urban poor,” and especially what effects these interventions had on the target populations. We see that even as institutions of labor discipline became microcosms of government collapse, they still commanded enormous powers of detention vis-à-vis the homeless, exercised in the name of charity and punishment. From the perspective of the people on the streets, this dynamic had the effect of both underscoring the power of the state and exposing its impotence.

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The chapters of this book interweave social, intellectual, and institutional histories, moving between elite perspectives, government policies, and lived experience, and navigating both national concerns and local realities. Chapter 1, “Between Charity and Punishment,” examines how “poverty” (*pin*) emerged as a resonant concept for reforming elites in the early twentieth century. Deeply anxious about China's precarious future, officials and intellectuals began to view “poverty” as an issue imbued with national significance. Drawing from Japanese penology and a burgeoning industrial training movement, reformers experimented with various types of workhouses, endeavoring to revive the nation on the foundation of labor. These first workhouses initially incarcerated misdemeanor convicts, and then extended detention to the nonworking poor, especially targeting “vagrants” and “beggars”—the male, mobile, and most unproductive members of society. The creation of these institutions marked a striking departure from traditional practices, anointing the combination of detention and labor as the most promising method of creating productive citizens.

In the first decade of the Republic, the advent of sociology as a new field of knowledge in China attempted to study “poverty” on a scientific basis. Chapter 2, “Parasites upon Society,” explores how the metaphor equating the nonworking poor with “parasites” became ingrained in sociological thinking. As left-wing intellectuals valorized labor and foreign missionaries promoted “scientific charity” based on work relief, these ideas converged with workhouses and poorhouses that provided custodial detention in the guise of both punishment and

charity. In addition, this chapter begins the story of Shanghai's straw hut shantytowns, and the protracted battles between their residents and the International Settlement's Municipal Council.

During the Nanjing decade, the subject of chapter 3, ideas that had evolved since the turn of the century played instrumental roles in the formation of the Nationalist government's social policy. In *Useless to the State*, Zwia Lipkin suggested that the GMD's social engineering ambitions focused on creating a model capital in Nanjing by expunging "social deviants." But whereas Lipkin attributes the origins of the Nationalist reform effort generally to "Western ideas and policies,"²⁸ I argue that the GMD's extractive notion of social citizenship and assumptions about poor relief continued the trajectory of Qing reformers and drew from the discourse of productivism that emerged in the previous decade.

The outbreak of World War II in China in July 1937 launched a refugee crisis that profoundly changed perceptions of "poverty" and its realities. Chapter 4, "Beggars or Refugees?" follows the fortunes of occupied Beijing and the "solitary island" of Shanghai, against the backdrop of a broader national crisis. In Beijing, I show that while the collaborationist government largely preserved the existing structure of poor relief, aggressive policing tactics resulted in the large-scale incarceration of people who aroused suspicion simply because they were homeless. In a wartime climate, the provision of relief, frequently entangled with concerns about social order, now focused sharply on security. In contrast, treaty port Shanghai, which remained free of Japanese occupation until the Pearl Harbor attack, became a temporary haven for more than 1.5 million refugees. The initial outpouring of sympathy for war victims, many of them destitute and homeless, transformed the face of urban poverty. But when the crisis did not abate, the refugee issue hardened into "the beggar problem," reconfiguring old debates about both poverty and responsibility for poor relief.

As the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists intensified between 1945 and 1949, chapter 5 shows how the GMD regime proved incapable of coping with increasing urban disorder in both Shanghai and Beijing. With refugees from battleground areas in the countryside continuously fleeing to the cities, the municipal governments tried to use relief agencies to serve both charitable and punitive purposes. In Beijing, desperate refugees starved in winter shelters and workhouses. In Shanghai, conditions in government institutions were equally deplorable, and many of the destitute preferred the squalor of their own straw huts to relief based on the deprivation of freedom. Thousands of refugees also forced their way into the coffin repositories of native place associations, choosing to "keep company with ghosts" rather than submit to government custody. By 1949, these grim examples of suffering fatally exposed the Nationalist government's inability to fulfill its own commitments.

It was on the ruins of such lives that the Communists could ride to victory. Yet as soon as the new regime conquered the cities, the CCP found itself con-

fronting problems with homeless transients and refugees, just as its predecessors had throughout the Republican era. The Epilogue tells the story of the encounter between agrarian revolutionaries and the urban poor and shows how the methods the CCP adopted drew on institutions and ideas that had developed and changed over a half century. Although the perspective of government authority dominates the source base after 1949, some recently declassified archival materials make it possible to look behind the curtain of propaganda. We see how, fused to socialist ideology, the marriage of detention and compulsory labor became a potent combination aimed at harnessing the productivity of “social parasites” for the benefit of New China. And as old Nationalist winter shelters became new Communist detention centers, the urban poor found that in the People’s Republic, as before, there would be no place for those who were guilty of indigence.