(This is a preliminary draft; full version upon request)

Beyond the Promise: Distributional Discordance in China's Pandemic Control

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1 Motivation

Scholars have noted that authoritarian governance are often performative - that they appear to be responsive to public needs but generate minimal impact on the problems that they attempt to solve. Existing studies, however, study non-selective, uniform performative governance to the society as a whole. Meanwhile, the rich literature in distributive politics focus exclusively on the distribution of genuine benefits, despite the fact that performative benefits have also proved to be a cost-effective way of improving popular support (Ding 2022). These gaps then lead to our questions: When authoritarian governments selectively distribute performative benefits or relief among social groups, towards whom would the government choose to be performative and towards whom would they choose to be genuine? Do groups that receive performative benefits always solely receive such benefits, or do other circumstances influence how they are treated by the government? These questions become particularly fascinating when we examine the distribution to civilian groups, who are uniformly denied political power, in authoritarian regimes.

In this paper, we develop a new distribution theory that navigates the distribution of performative benefits as an authoritarian strategy. We propose that when an authoritarian regime is highly secure, it distributes performative benefits to the groups that are preferred by the regime propaganda and genuine benefits to the group that is important for their policy goals. However, when the regime is moderately secure, the regime distributes genuine benefits to both of these groups. We empirically tackle these questions by capturing an immediate shift in the security level of China, which is arguably the most secure authoritarian regime, and utilizing micro-level data that captures the change in both genuine and performative relief distribution among social groups. Specifically, we study this problem through an analysis of the preferential allocation of COVID-19 testing resources across different economic classes in H city, a large

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metropolis and economic powerhouse in southeast China, before and after the sudden outbreak of popular protests against the zero-COVID policy in October 2022.

Beyond contemporary China, our theory helps explain patterns of performative distribution observed in a wide range of authoritarian regimes including the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek, Fascist Italy under Mussolini, and Egypt under Nassar.

2 Empirical Context

Since the pandemic's inception, the Chinese central government adopted what was likely the world's strictest and longest zero-COVID policy through measures including lockdowns, quarantines, and regular mass testing. Starting in April 2022[1], a mandatory PCR testing policy was enforced, requiring each citizen to get tested at designated government-operated testing booths every 48 to 72 hours to maintain their rights of entering the public space. Having access to closer testing sites with shorter queues, therefore, play crucial roles in shaping residents' life satisfaction, and therefore, attitudes towards the government. Hence, preferential COVID testing resource distribution can be understood as a "public relief" that makes life easier for certain groups under high state surveillance.

Meanwhile, the quality of resource received by each neighborhood is measured by two dimensions: *testing site density*, which refers to number of testing sites per capita in each housing community, and *responsiveness*, which describes the efficiency with which the government addresses overcrowding at a neighborhood's nearby testing sites by increasing staff levels (Fu 2023). Only when both are offered to the housing community can a resident's time consumed on testing be substantially decreased. Nevertheless, while each community's testing site density is clearly visible to all on the app, government responsiveness is highly invisible to the public. Thus, we categorize the offering of merely testing site density without government responsiveness as a performative benefit, while the provision of both testing site density and government responsiveness constitutes a genuine benefit.

To test for the distribution of performative and genuine benefits, we construct a dataset that records real-time queueing time at over 7000 testing sites in H city from September to December 2022 by scraping data from the COVID testing app published by H government. Utilizing the geographical locations of these testing sites, we map them to H city's 4698 housing communities, categorized into the rich, the middle class, and the poor neighborhoods according to housing prices. We then compare testing resource accessibility across testing sites in the rich,

[1]The zero-COVID policy officially ended in January, 2023.

the middle class, and the poor neighborhoods, as well as the government responsiveness to site crowdedness before and after the shock of protests. In doing so, we aim to understand how the authoritarian government selectively distributes performative and genuine benefits to civilian groups, and how their strategies change when regime security is moderately threatened.

The reason for selecting economic classes as the subjects of comparison is their salience in H city, whose economic growth is primarily driven by major technology companies and Foreign Direct Investments. The rich (entrepreneurs, investors), therefore, are highly crucial and irreplaceble for economic growth. Meanwhile, the middle class (employees in tech, finance, manufacturing, professionals), although also important for economic growth, are highly replaceable, as H city is a highly popular job destination for college graduates. Just as the middle class the poor (migrant workers) are economic important and replaceable. Nevertheless, unlike the middle class, the poor is the preferred group under the Chinese Communist propaganda. These features make economic classes an ideal categorization to test our theories.

3 Data and Empirical Strategy

Our data is collected from a mobile system[2] from September 8 to December 8, 2022. Every 10 minutes from 8am to 10pm daily, we sent individual queries via API to access queueing status of every testing site located throughout the city. Each observation includes the following details: date and time of the record, site ID, site location, current queueing status, current staff level, operational hours, and population access specifics. Our dataset also combines rich data including H city's residential real estate and property data, daily COVID reports, and urban village data, etc., to create a unique and novel dataset.

Our data is an ideal dataset to test authoritarian government's resource allocation strategy towards different economic groups. From official statistics, H city is China's one of the most populous and economically developed cities and one of the largest immigrant cities with world's highest housing prices and high wealth inequality – while an average two-bedroom unit sells for over $900,000, more than 40 percent of the population live in crowded urban villages, low-income residence, and public rental houses. The young and expanding nature of H city means that housing communities of different income levels often neighbour each other, thereby lending us the advantage of conducting a a spatial border analysis on adjunct housing communities that are less than 200 meters from each other but are categorized into different economic classes according

[2]The app was launched by the local government of H city, which allows users to access the app via WeChat and conveniently check the latest updates regarding queueing status at nearby testing sites before making a walk-in visit.

to housing prices. For each of these community pairs, we compare the distribution of visible and invisible benefits exclusively accessible by their residents. Such a measure naturally addresses for the issue of spatial heterogeneity and isolates the impact of economic classes on government distribution strategy. Under the border analysis framework, we employ a simple Ordinary Least Square (OLS) model to test for the distribution of visible benefits (testing site density). To test for the distribution of invisible benefits (government responsiveness to crowdedness, we employ a Heckman selection model to correct bias from non-randomly generated samples. In the first stage of the model, we use a range of predictors to select in the sites that are likely to be busy, and then estimate whether the government would address the crowdedness at these sites. We conduct these tests before and after the protest break.

4 Main Results

Table 1: Testing Site Allocation

	(1)	(2)
DV: DiffSiteNumber	Pre-protest	Post-protest
RichMiddle	0.192***	0.206***
	[0.0450]	[0.0401]
	(1.95e-05)	(3.03e-07)
MiddlePoor	-1.059***	-1.136***
	[0.139]	[0.135]
	(0)	(0)
RichPoor	0.600	0.106
	[0.725]	[0.764]
	(0.408)	(0.890)
PopulationHigh	7.09e-05***	6.31e-05***
	[7.97e-06]	[6.10e-06]
	(0)	(0)
PopulationLow	-3.56e-05***	-3.40e-05***
	[3.97e-06]	[4.37e-06]
	(0)	(0)
Constant	-0.0645***	-0.0568***
	[0.0167]	[0.0141]
	(0.000112)	(5.73e-05)
Observations	25,577	25,577
Adjusted R-squared	0.0389	0.0462

Table 2: Government Responsiveness to site crowdness

	(1)	(2)
DV: DiffResponsiveness	Pre-protest	Post-protest
RichMiddle	-0.0203	-0.0328
	[0.0184]	[0.0262]
	(0.271)	(0.210)
MiddlePoor	0.234***	-0.422***
	[0.0646]	[0.0923]
	(0.000298)	(4.80e-06)
RichPoor	0.272**	-0.122***
	[0.112]	[0.0388]
	(0.0154)	(0.00165)
PopulationHigh	1.90e-05***	1.32e-05*
	[4.84e-06]	[8.03e-06]
	(8.39e-05)	(0.0997)
PopulationLow	-2.07e-05***	4.62e-06
	[3.93e-06]	[5.42e-06]
	(1.39e-07)	(0.393)
Constant	-0.00938	0.0690***
	[0.0124]	[0.0195]
	(0.450)	(0.000394)
Observations	3,222	3,222
Log-likelihood	-1702	-2955

While we are still waiting for several street-level and community-level datasets to further polish the statistical analysis, below are our preliminary results so far. For the visible benefit (testing site density), we find a *U-shape* relationship in the distribution of resource accessibility across neighborhoods: both the rich and the poor neighborhoods gain substantially greater access to testing facilities compared to the middle class, a pattern that is consistent before and after the protest. Nevertheless, the government's pattern to distribute the invisible benefits

(responsiveness) reveals a stark contrast before and after the protests. We found that before the protest, the government was the least responsive to the poor communities. However, after the protest, they became the most responsive to the poor and the least responsive to the middle class.

We interpret these results as follows: when regime security level is high, the government distributes performative benefits to the poor, genuine benefits to the rich, and no benefits to the middle class. After the protest, the government distributes genuine benefits to both the rich and the poor, while stilling overlooking the middle class.

Apart from working on the statistical analysis, we are also hoping to supplment the results with a text analysis of all local government documents related to COVID-19. Our preliminary screening of the documents leaves us the impression that the government was highly inclined to publicize their resource preferences to the poor both before and after the protest outburst, lending support to our hypothesis of the performative distribution to the poor.

5 Theory

To whom, and when, does an authoritarian government choose to be performative? We highlight "propaganda premium" (i.e. whether a social group is the preferred group under regime propaganda or whether the regime gained power through promising benefits to this group) as a determinant towards whether the government would distribute performative to a group. Our theory proposes that an authoritarian government would prefer to distribute performative benefits to the groups that has the "propaganda premium". However, this group does not always only receive performative benefits - this depends on the security level enjoyed by the regime. When the regime's survival is fairly secure, propaganda premium raises the distribution priority ranking of a group in narrative but does not raise priority rank in reality. However, when regime survival is under a moderate level of threat, propaganda premium raises the distribution priority ranking of a group in narrative but also in reality, as citing propaganda serves as a quick "band-aid" to regime legitimacy. Hence, when the regime is highly secure, it offers performative benefit to the group with propaganda premium and genuine benefit to the group important for current policy goals; when the regime is less secure, it offers genuine benefit to the group with propaganda premium and genuine benefit to the group important for current policy goals.

6 Contribution

In addition to offering a distribution theory that proposes the distribution of performative benefits as a strategy, we also contribute to the understanding on selective public goods distribution by proposing an explanation how strong, highly secure authoritarian governments that do not struggle with survive distribute resources. Existing explanations of authoritarian distribution-can be summarized into two camps: while some propose that the regimes offer benefits to supporters of the regime to survive (the winning coalition theory (Buenos de Mesquita et al 2003; Morrow et al. 2008) and the punishment regime theory (Magaloni 2006)), others propose that they offer the limited resources to those who might be the potential threats of the regime to survive (the co-optation theory (e.g. Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, Svolik 2012) and the squeaky wheel theory (Wallace 2014)) . We argue that these theories are not sufficient to explain the strategies of strong authoritarian governments that have already established large and stable support base or capability to crush resistance. In addition, we argue that the literature also pays insufficient attention to the upkeep of the provision, which is extremely important for the quality of the provision but is largely invisible to the societal groups other than the recipients. This means that investing in upkeep yields less propaganda values than investing in expanding initial allocation. Thus, understanding the patterns of provision upkeep would help reveal the intentions of the authoritarian regimes in public goods provision

Therefore, by capturing the immediate change in distribution strategy following China's largest popular protest since 1989 and the differential distribution in the "initial provision" and "upkeep" of the public goods, we propose a theory that explains the changes in authoritarian regimes' distribution strategy when its level of security fluctuates. We propose that when regime survival is secure, an aspiring authoritarian regime may desire to realize its policy ambitions. Thus, when the authoritarian regime feels more secure, its main criteria in distribution would be a group's usefulness and irreplaceability in helping to realize the regime's policy goals. It will then try to meet its less-important "survival needs" with the minimum costs by choosing the recipient group that generates the greatest propaganda benefits with performative benefits. However, when it feels less secure, it will distribute genuine benefits to this group to ensure their compliance and support. In our case, although the middle class and the poor are both important for regime survival, the government chooses to offer performative benefits to the poor because they deserves the most care under the Communist narrative when the regime is secure to polish its image with the minimum costs. However, when the protest inflicted a degree of regime insecurity, the government will offer genuine benefits to the the poor. In that

respect, our theory and case also highlights the previously overlooked role of ideology in shaping authoritarian governments' distribution decisions.

Beyond the contribution in theory, we empirically contribute to the literature on authoritarian distribution by observing a rare case where the government distribute unevenly to different social groups under a universal provision agenda. Universal provision agendas, like free healthcare, are usually highly uniform across different groups, whereas selective distribution often involve the distribution of different public goods to different groups, a feature that generates incomparability and therefore difficulties in causal identification. Another empirical merit of our case lies in our ability to cleanly identify the change in the attribution of crisis responsibility using the sudden outbreak of the protest under a regime where heavy self-censorship and automatic censorship apparatus makes it difficult the central leader to learn popular opinion before the protest. In addition, our case speaks to the literature on repression-co-optation trade-off (Wintrobe 2000). While co-optation and repression are typically presented as a trade-off, we demonstrate that dictators may use public goods distribution as a means to make the implementation of repressive policies more palatable.

This nuanced shift in co-optation strategy highlights the adaptive nature of authoritarian regimes in the face of self-imposed crises and underscores the complex interplay between political survival, legitimacy, and the strategic distribution of resources.