

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Governing Rural Poverty on Urban Streets: Guangzhou's Management of Beggars in the Reform Era

Ryanne Flock*

*Contemporary Chinese Studies, Julius-Maximilians-University, Würzburg, Germany

Corresponding author: ryanne.flock@uni-wuerzburg.de

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Abstract

This study investigates how discourses on panhandling intertwine with the governance of beggars on China's urban streets. It focuses on local policy implementation in Guangzhou city, led by the bureau of civil affairs along with its centres for "custody and repatriation" and "assistance stations." The study aims to understand how the state regulates panhandling and engages with beggars in public spaces. Exploring the internal logic of the state's approach and how it has changed during the 40 years of reform, it also considers the junctures at which contradictions and conflicts arise. Based on fieldwork data (2011 to 2014) and the analysis of government documents, yearbooks, academic and mass media discourses, I argue that the state's treatment of panhandlers poses a conundrum as welfare measures conflict with control. While several layers of state regulation and actors contradict each other and create grey areas of state-induced informality, people who beg for alms are continuously criminalized and excluded from public space.

摘要

本研究调查了有关乞讨的话语如何与中国城市的公共空间管理互动，研究重点在于广州市的地方政策以及其执行部门：如民政局、「收容遣送」所和「救助站」。论文提问这些机构是如何规范乞讨行为，并与公共空间里的乞丐打交道？管理方法的内部逻辑是什么？这些方法在40年的改革开放中是如何变化的？矛盾和冲突出现在哪里？基于实地调查数据（2011年至2014年）和对政府文件、年鉴、学术和大众媒体话语的分析，本研究调查显示：国家对乞讨者的处理正面对福利与控制相对立的难题，国家法规和行动者在不同层面上出现相互矛盾，国家政策引致的非正规性更创造出灰色地带，以致乞讨者不断被视作犯罪并被排除在公共空间之外。

Keywords: urban China; urban governance; public space; beggars; panhandling; urban poverty; social welfare

关键词: 中国城市; 城市治理; 公共空间; 乞丐; 讨饭; 城市贫困; 社会福利

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit Chinese cities, the Ministry of Civil Affairs launched "a special plan to improve the assistance and management services for vagrants and beggars living without shelter."¹ The aim was to remove panhandlers, the homeless and other mobile poor from the streets to curtail the spread of the virus and to ensure that they were isolated if infected or that they left the city. The plan combined various associations deeply ingrained in Chinese culture that are linked to "beggars" and which make their governance so conflicted. Panhandlers are considered to be poor and pitiable and so their treatment is a litmus test of benevolence and state legitimacy.² According to legal experts writing in the *Legal Daily* (*Fazhi ribao* 法制日报), "offering help to vulnerable groups such as vagrants and beggars ... is also a manifestation of the continuous progress of

1 Ministry of Civil Affairs et al. 2020.

2 Lu, Hanchao 2005; Lipkin 2005; Schak 1988.

a country's social civilization."³ In contrast, beggars are also often portrayed as beyond control and dangerous. Officials and scholars alike emphasize that they are harbingers of social instability and generate crime and disease.⁴ Moreover, beggars' visibility in public spaces can be understood as a symbol. Because they trigger negative associations with poverty, transience and informality, these scenes stand for the state's lack of control and appear as a moral and aesthetic nuisance questioning China's modernity. Respective policies therefore not only try to "rescue and assist" (*jiuzhu* 救助) but also "to maintain social security, clean the social atmosphere and improve the appearance of the city."⁵

This study aims to take a deeper look into how these discourses intertwine with the state's management of panhandlers on urban streets and to contribute to our understanding of poverty governance in contemporary Chinese cities. Using the southern metropolis of Guangzhou as a case study, I examine how local government actors regulate panhandling in the city and how they engage with beggars in public space. I explore the internal logic of their approach and how it has changed over 40 years of reform and opening. At which junctures do contradictions and conflicts arise? I focus on local state actors such as the bureau of comprehensive city management (known as the *chengguan* 城管), the police bureau and the bureau of civil affairs along with its centres for "custody and repatriation" (*shourong qiansong* 收容遣送) (CR hereafter) (until 2003) and its "assistance stations" (*jiuzhu zhan* 救助站) (after 2003).

There is scant literature on beggars and their governance in the People's Republic of China.⁶ Existing studies cover the early migration movements⁷ and, lately, focus on beggars' agency versus the growing state attention.⁸ Chinese works emanate primarily from the fields of urban planning and management, welfare administration and public security.⁹ The more dominant academic discussions about "new urban poverty,"¹⁰ however, mostly centre on the unemployed with an urban household registration (*hukou* 户口), the dispossessed and rural migrants.¹¹ Beggars – the most vulnerable among rural migrants – are often excluded from these studies, as scholars focus on "migrant workers" (*nongmingong* 农民工). Social welfare research tends to revolve around the "minimum livelihood guarantee" (*zuidi shenghuo baozhang* 最低生活保障, *dibao* hereafter),¹² leaving open questions on the assistance stations and their emergence out of the CR system – once a most potent tool of migration control. Nevertheless, these and other studies highlight 1) a growing conflict between the state's (communist) provision of social care and the (capitalist) emphasis on individual responsibility¹³; and 2) a differentiated governance of vulnerable groups. In the name of benevolence, social stability and urban modernity, local state actors shape cities and manage the population through welfare programmes, *hukou* policies and redevelopment projects.¹⁴ Panhandlers are embedded in both contexts.

This study uses additional data from primary sources in Guangzhou, as explained below. I concentrate on the CR system during the first two decades of the reform period, explaining its rhetoric and shifting position between welfare and control. This system officially targeted panhandlers in

3 Quoted in Du, Xiao 2020.

4 Tang and Wen 2018; Ministry of Civil Affairs et al. 2020; Guangzhou Bureau of Civil Affairs 2021.

5 Du, Xiao 2020.

6 For studies on panhandling in imperial and republican times on the mainland and in Taiwan, see Lipkin 2005; Schak 1988; Lu, Hanchao 2005; Qu 2007.

7 Fernández-Stembridge and Madsen 2002; Solinger 1999.

8 Henry 2009; Flock 2014; Duo et al. 2019; Hao, Zhu and Thompson 2021.

9 Xu, Fang, and Wang 2006; Tang and Wen 2018; Chen 2007; Zhang, Heather, and McWhinney 2012; Liang, Hongxia 2014; Peng and Wang 2017; Liu, Jin, and Wang 2016; Wang, Li and Wang 2020.

10 Wu et al. 2010, 1.

11 Wu et al. 2010; Hussain 2003; Solinger and Hu 2012; Solinger 2013; Du, Huimin, Song and Li 2021.

12 Solinger and Hu 2012; Solinger 2013; Golan, Sicular and Umaphathi 2014; Gao 2017.

13 Yang and Walker 2020; Solinger and Hu 2012.

14 Tomba 2014; Chan 2019; Pils 2020.

need and increasingly focused on their exclusion from the city. Later, it covered rural migrants in general, supported by the pejorative associations linked to beggars and extended to migrants. In contrast to extant research, the study finds that CR was not abolished after 2003 but transformed. The succeeding system of assistance stations offers welfare to “drifting and begging persons” as a narrowly defined group of deserving poor. However, the assistance stations’ help is short-term, and the main goal is still repatriation – that is, sending them back to their home villages. The article elucidates the local personnel involved and their approaches to managing public space. It embeds newer developments during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 in the overall process. While several layers of state regulations and actors contradict each other and create grey areas of state-induced informality, beggars are continuously criminalized and excluded from public space.

Data and Methods

The paper draws on data gathered during fieldwork in Guangzhou (2011–2014), including non-participant observation of panhandlers and their interactions with state authorities in commercial, touristic and religious public areas.¹⁵ I define panhandlers as people who ask for money or help as charity while emphasizing their state of misery through their appearance or overall performance. This allows me to differentiate panhandlers from street artists. For interviews, I included people who categorized themselves as “beggars” (*qigai* 乞丐) or as “begging” (*qitao* 乞讨). I interviewed 50 people who were either panhandling at the time or had panhandled in the past in Guangzhou, focusing on their motivation, socioeconomic background and experiences of governance and welfare. The state’s perspective was additionally analysed through laws and regulations on panhandling from the district to the national level, concentrating on information pertaining particularly to Guangzhou. The study considers Guangzhou’s yearbooks and chronicles, examines official announcements and reports, especially those from the Ministry and bureaus of civil affairs in Guangdong, Guangzhou, and the local assistance stations. Chinese academic papers by authors who either cooperate with or work at the assistance stations and/or related social work companies offer a further look into the relevant procedures. The analysis kept in mind the varying political and practical understandings of the Chinese term for “beggar” and the administrative label *liulang qitao ren yuan* 流浪乞讨人员. According to the legal text, the latter phrase refers to “drifting and begging persons” until 2013, and to “vagrants and beggars” in the following years. While translations can affect connotations to some extent, *liulang* is interpreted as “vagrant” or “drifting” – i.e. from one job or place to another with no purpose.

Governing Visible Poverty Through “Custody and Repatriation”

After 1949, Guangzhou’s city leaders accepted Beijing’s request to set up “custody centres” (*shou-rongsuo* 收容所) to deal with refugees, vagrants and the “parasitic population” (*jisheng renkou* 寄生人口).¹⁶ The parasitic population referred to panhandlers, prostitutes and pickpockets, etc. Such people were viewed as victims of the “old society” (*jiu shehui* 旧社会) – that is, of capitalism, militarism and colonialism – but they were also regarded as a source of instability owing to their habits and “illegitimate professions.”¹⁷ According to local chronicles, Guangzhou’s custody centres held about 60,000 people from 1951 to 1957.¹⁸ The aim was to send them back to their home villages or to “reform” (*gaizao* 改造) them using practical and ideological education to make them choose a different livelihood.¹⁹ When, in 1957, China declared that it had officially eradicated panhandling throughout China (together with prostitution and other “vices”), it was an important milestone for

15 Flock 2021.

16 Quoted in Smith, Aminda 2013, 123.

17 Ibid., 8.

18 Editorial Committee of Guangzhou Chronicles 2010, 689.

19 Ibid., 693.

the self-understanding of the young socialist republic. The custody centres were reduced in number and size and were redefined as “custody *and* repatriation” centres – institutions which became a vital cog in the country’s *hukou* system to control the growth of the urban population and rural-to-urban migration.²⁰

In 1980, however, the Ministry of Civil Affairs admitted that the “problem of begging is a social problem that has existed for a very long time. In particular in the past decade of chaos [meaning the Cultural Revolution], after the collapse of the national economy and the weakening of custody and repatriation, begging became a serious phenomenon in some cities.”²¹ Two years later, the State Council announced its “Measures of custody and repatriation of urban drifting and begging persons,” followed by the “Execution details” of the Ministries of Civil Affairs and Public Security.²² These regulations targeted those who roamed *and* panhandled in public spaces or who lived on the streets.²³ Such people had to be admitted, educated and “immediately sent back to their homes.”²⁴

According to the legal text, these measures were to be understood as a form of “relief” (*jiuji* 救济).²⁵ However, in everyday enforcement, they barely served as a support system. According to Wen Changluo 温长洛 from Guangzhou’s social relief department (*shejiu chu* 社救处): “Custody and repatriation mean the administrative management of the society where coercion is primary and support only secondary.”²⁶ “Administrative management” in this case referred to a penalty system which punished activities that supposedly disturbed a city’s social peace (but which were still outside the scope of criminal law). The police enforced these measures with warnings, fees or detention.²⁷ In the case of CR, the police made arrests and then sent detainees off to CR centres, which remained under the responsibility of the bureau of civil affairs.²⁸ When issuing further local measures in 1983 and 1985, the governments in Guangdong and Guangzhou broadened their definition of “drifting and begging persons” to include those trying to flee to Hong Kong, prostitutes, “suspicious criminals on the run,” those “who disturb public order” and “other aimlessly wandering persons (*mangliu ren* 盲流人员).”²⁹ “*Mangliu*” was (and still is) a pejorative term for all rural migrants and shows the general interpretation of the law. Guangzhou government specifically targeted rural migrants not connected to an urban *danwei* 单位 (work unit), without family in the city, or without a stable income.³⁰ Anticipating national policy, it referred to this population as *sanwu ren* 三无人员 – people without the three [securities]. In 1991, the State Council followed suit and made official what had long been the custom at the local level with the promulgation of its “Comments on the reform of custody and repatriation,” which extended the remit of CR centres. What was initially designed for beggars was extended to include rural migrants without ID, a permanent residence or form of income in the city.³¹ The CR regulations still defined the target group as “drifting and begging persons” but used the term as a pejorative social category to control rural-to-urban migration.

Monetary incentives accompanied a shift in the operation of CR centres. Owing to local budget constraints, the bureau of civil affairs offered minimal financial support, in some cases only paying staff salaries but not running costs. The new policies allowed the centres to issue fees while the

20 Ibid., 689; Pi 2009.

21 Ministry of Civil Affairs 1980, n.p.

22 State Council 1982; Ministry of Civil Affairs and Ministry of Public Security 1982.

23 State Council 1982, Sec. 2.

24 Ibid., Sec. 7.

25 State Council 1982, Sec. 1; Ministry of Civil Affairs and Ministry of Public Security 1982, Para. 1.

26 Wen 1994, 26.

27 Biddulph 1993.

28 Guangzhou Municipal Government 1991; 2001.

29 Guangdong Provincial Government 1983, Sec. 4; Guangdong Provincial People’s Congress 1987, Sec. 5; Guangzhou Municipal Government 1986[1985].

30 Guangzhou Municipal Government 1986[1985].

31 Solinger 1999, 63.

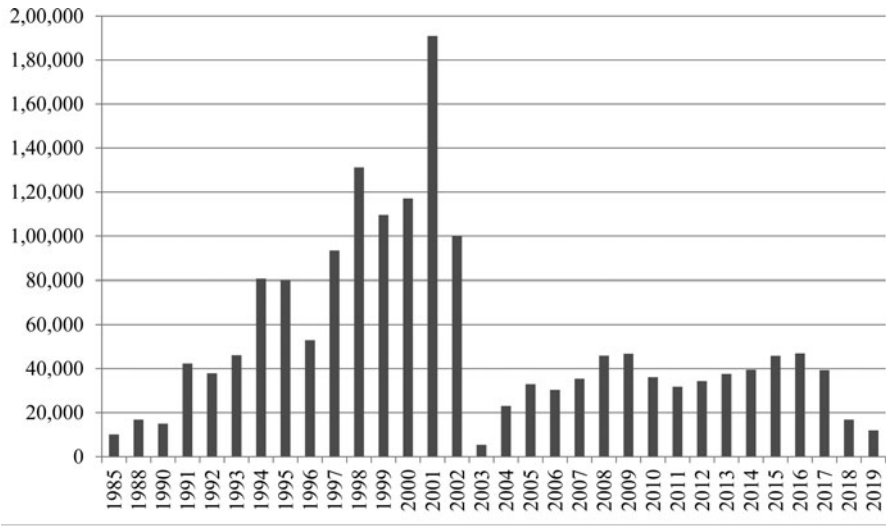


Figure 1: Cases Taken to CR Centres (until 2002) and Offered Assistance by the Assistance Stations in Guangzhou (2003 and later)

Source: *Guangzhou Yearbook*, various years. Some editions (1985, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1993, 2000, 2002) refer to “persons” (*ren* 人) but the most commonly used category is “cases” (*ren* 人次).

overall expenses increased more than sixfold during the 1990s.³² Detainees had to pay for their detention, board and lodging, as well as a return ticket to their home villages.³³ Those unable to pay had to work in CR-controlled institutions. Moreover, there are reports of arbitrary extortion for deposits, fees and bribery.³⁴ Poverty-stricken panhandlers, mostly old and disabled, were hardly targeted in this system as their share of those detained in the centres fell from 20.2 per cent in 1991 to 3.8 per cent in 2000.³⁵

As Figure 1 shows, the CR system expanded following the “Comments” of 1991. As rural migrants were considered to be a security threat and a symbol of backwardness in public space, the CR system developed in tune with general city-wide events and campaigns. The two peaks of 131,143 and 190,900 internees in 1998 and 2001 corresponded with the launch of an ambitious “civilized city” campaign and the hosting of the Ninth National Games. While pertinent local institutions celebrated these higher numbers as a sign of success, they continued to push the boundaries of the national regulations. Some political scientists argue that a certain degree of deviance from central policies is inherent in the Chinese state, leading to productive flexibility but also a dangerous loss of control.³⁶ The CR system became a general tool for controlling any unwanted segments of the population and was eventually applied to all those found without the required papers, including tourists, travellers in transit and those who had just arrived and who had no opportunity – and no obligation – to be already registered at the police.³⁷ Guangdong government criticized Guangzhou’s approach several times as “normal migrant workers” constituted the majority of internees.³⁸

32 Editorial Committee of *Guangzhou Chronicles* 2010, 829.

33 Guangdong Provincial People’s Congress 1987; Guangzhou Municipal Government 1986; Zhang, Heather, and McWhinney 2012, 377.

34 Zhang, Heather, and McWhinney 2012, 376; Human Rights in China 1999; Ling and Han 2002.

35 Editorial Committee of *Guangzhou Chronicles* 2010, 830.

36 Zhou, Xueguang 2010.

37 Ling and Han 2002.

38 Guangdong Provincial Government quoted in Su 2004, 6. See also Guangdong Provincial People’s Congress 2002.

Guangzhou's broad interpretation of "drifting and begging persons" as well as the arbitrariness and even brutality of its system can be seen in the case of Sun Zhigang 孙志刚. He was a design graduate from Wuhan University of Technology who had just started a job in the city. Following a random check, he was found to be without ID or residence card and so was taken to the police station and then to a CR centre. His friends and employer brought the missing documents, additional recommendations, fees and bribes to the centre – but to no avail. He died from serious injuries received during his detention.³⁹ Although not the first to die under such circumstances, Sun's death received the most attention.⁴⁰ Pressure from (social) media highlighted the case while lawyers petitioned the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress for reform – and succeeded. In June 2003, the 1982 Measures, which had been the basis of migration control since the early reforms, were nullified.⁴¹

System Changes in 2003: From Exclusion to Welfare?

The new "Measures for managing and assisting drifting and begging persons living without means in cities" took effect in August 2003.⁴² Figure 1 illustrates that Guangzhou government only published statistics for the following months. Moreover, the Figure clearly shows a break and change in the scope of the system. "Drifting and begging persons" were now narrowly defined as homeless people who wander around and panhandle for a living, who are unable to work, who lack support from friends and family and who do not qualify for existing welfare programmes.⁴³ The Ministry of Civil Affairs highlighted that those "who wander and beg, but do not meet the above requirements, do not belong to the target group of this welfare programme."⁴⁴ The CR centres were renamed "assistance stations" and continue to remain under the jurisdiction of the local bureau of civil affairs, while the police lost the authority to round up beggars. Officially, the stations are not allowed to take people into custody against their will, and those seeking protection are free to leave the premises anytime. The 2003 "Measures" explicitly prohibit forced labour or the charging of fees.⁴⁵

This policy shift corresponded with the Hu–Wen administration's emphasis on humanization (*yi ren wei ben* 以人为本) and the introduction of new programmes on poverty reduction and the improved treatment of rural migrants in the cities.⁴⁶ From 2005 onwards, separate protection centres for street children were set up in line with the new system and, in 2006, forcing others to beg, especially children and minors (under 14 years), became a criminal offence.⁴⁷ The assistance stations became part of the expanding social welfare offered to the different poverty groups as defined by the state.⁴⁸ The city of Guangzhou has two main stations, in Tianhe 天河 and Luogang 萝岗 districts, as well as branches in Panyu 番禺, Zengcheng 增城, Huadu 花都 and Conghua 从化 districts.⁴⁹ Regulations of 2014 broadened their scope to include vagrants and beggars, meaning migrants "without means of subsistence" (*zishen wuli jie jue shisu* 自身无力解决食宿) who are currently or will in the future end up drifting or panhandling in the city.⁵⁰ Comparing the 15 years before and after 2003, the number of people covered by the new classification dropped

39 Hand 2006, 119–122.

40 See Ling and Han 2002; Human Rights in China 1999, 18.

41 Hand 2006, 124; Biddulph et al. 2017, 12.

42 State Council 2003.

43 Ministry of Civil Affairs 2003, Sec. 2.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., Sec. 15.

46 Howell 2019, 65.

47 Shi 2007.

48 State Council 2014.

49 Wang, Li and Wang 2020, 86.

50 Ministry of Civil Affairs 2014.

by more than a half (see [Figure 1](#)). For the government and many Chinese researchers, there is a clear shift “from forced CR to loving care.”⁵¹

The success of the new system as a welfare institution is, however, limited. A person eligible for assistance can receive medical care, accommodation and food for a maximum of ten days, twice a year. The focus is on short-term emergency care and supporting panhandlers to leave the city. Assistance staff can help eligible people to contact home authorities and relatives and can organize and pay for return tickets.⁵² Ignoring the various reasons for panhandling in the first place, reuniting with the family remains the default solution. If a family cannot be located, those in need might be referred to “settlement centres” (*anzhi zhongxin* 安置中心). But again, settlement in these centres is meant to be temporary and repatriation measures take place at regular intervals according to the motto “low admittance rate, low occupancy rates, high turnover rate” (*di zhiliu lü, di anzhi lü, gao zhuanxian lü* 低滞留率、低安置率、高周转率).⁵³ Thus, the goal of repatriation remains at the core of the assistance stations’ mission.

The offer of assistance from the state is not always wanted by panhandlers. There are reports for Guangzhou and other cities that a significant number refuse even to go to an assistance station.⁵⁴ The interviewees in this study emphasized the importance of self-determination and rejected the patriarchal discipline of the stations. The staff in the stations determine the day’s timetable – when to get up, when to go to bed and when to eat. Personal belongings are stored when entering the station and alcohol and cigarettes are forbidden.⁵⁵ Moreover, the experiences of arbitrary detention before and after 2003 were still raw for my interviewees. Flora Sapio highlights that while “mental illness” is unspecified within the regulations, the diagnosis is used to justify coerced detention.⁵⁶ This does not mean that no panhandlers are relying on or even taking advantage of the stations’ services. Some register multiple times to get more food, medical care and transport tickets.⁵⁷

For many people engaging in panhandling, however, returning home is not the solution. They have left because their problems cannot be remedied there. Statistically, poverty in China correlates with rural residency, old age, the absence of children and illness.⁵⁸ These are the characteristics that describe beggars as well. Of the 50 panhandlers involved with this study, most were between 40 and 70 years old, and 27 were physically disabled or were begging for their disabled parent or child. While physical limitations need not necessarily lead to poverty and panhandling, physical strength and health are important assets in the countryside and for a migrant worker in the city. Take the example of Mr Huang. In his early 30s, Mr Huang had suffered a severe injury to his leg, which meant he was unable to carry heavy goods or stand for hours on end. Lacking the education needed for jobs other than the typical ones open to migrants, such as working in a restaurant, construction site or factory, he had lived on Guangzhou’s streets for three years, singing and begging for money and collecting recyclables.⁵⁹ Illness not only means the loss of work and income but also the additional cost of treatment. Medical expenses are still the “number one poverty generator”⁶⁰ for more than 40 per cent of households below the poverty line.⁶¹

Research indicates that most of those who engage in panhandling are rural migrants and thus are not eligible for urban welfare or related benefits owing to the *hukou* system.⁶² Moreover, these

51 Tian 2013, Para. 3.

52 State Council 2003, Sec. 7; Ministry of Civil Affairs 2003.

53 Guangdong Provincial Department of Civil Affairs 2013; 2019; Guangdong Provincial Department of Civil Affairs 2018.

54 Hao, Zhu and Thompson 2021; Liang, Hongxia 2014.

55 Similarly in Shanghai, see Hao, Zhu, and Thompson 2021.

56 Sapio 2010.

57 Liu, Jin, and Wang 2016, 78.

58 Wagstaff and Lindelow 2008, 267.

59 Interview, 10 September 2014.

60 Liu, Yuanli, Rao and Hsiao 2003.

61 Zhou, Yang, Guo and Liu 2020, 2.

62 Chen 2007; Duo et al. 2019.

people bear witness to China's unequal regional development. Since the Hu–Wen administration, the expansion of *dibao*, health insurance programmes and the provision of public goods in the countryside have been massively promoted; however, such public goods are often limited by the budgets of each region.⁶³ Thus, poorer provinces or counties pay less state support and provide fewer hospitals or retirement homes. To offer another example, 70-year-old Mr Bang was unable to secure a place at his local retirement home as it was poorly funded and overcrowded. He received *dibao* payments of 60 yuan a month – about half of the national average – which was insufficient to cover the costs of accommodation, food and medicine in his village. Therefore, he went to a prosperous city such as Guangzhou to panhandle. Mr Bang's wife had died several years before and he had no children.⁶⁴ In a survey conducted by Lu Guoxian and colleagues, it was found that 77 per cent of the 130 beggars interviewed in Guangzhou and four other cities were unmarried and 46 per cent were childless.⁶⁵ These figures are unusually high for China. For the majority of my interviewees, the family was not a pillar of support: parents were deceased or too old, siblings and other relatives had turned their back or could not support the disabled family member on their own low income. Some had lost contact with their families during migration; others had no money to keep in touch or return home. Some did not dare to return home without a successful migration story. They were ashamed, did not want to ask for help or to burden anyone. Mr Gang was a 23-year-old man of restricted growth with five siblings. For him, however, panhandling by singing was a reasonable way to “fight for myself” (*ziji fendou* 自己奋斗), for his own livelihood and his independence.⁶⁶

From Assistance to Control: Criminalizing Panhandlers in Public Space

Since panhandlers do not necessarily go to the assistance stations (and the police no longer have the authority to enforce attendance), the stations' “mobile assistance teams” (*liudong jiuzhu dui* 流动救助队) are supposed to patrol the city's public spaces. These teams are only allowed to give out information about the stations' services, distribute brochures or “counsel and persuade” (*quandao* 劝导) those defined as panhandlers to accept their help.⁶⁷ Local newspapers carry stories about the teams distributing moon cakes in autumn or blankets in winter. However, the teams only play a minor role in the everyday life of beggars, as their numbers are restricted and only increased for specific events. In four years, I only saw them once – during the “hygienic city” campaign. Since 2015, Guangzhou's assistance stations have been buying in the additional services of social enterprises, setting up non-profit organizations and mobilizing “volunteers” (*zhiyuanzhe* 志愿者) as part of the drive to expand the “civic welfare infrastructure.”⁶⁸ In 2019, staff from the 17 social enterprises engaged in assistance stations' work mainly participated in patrols “to establish a good relationship with vagrants and beggars, and then to persuade them to leave or return to their hometowns.”⁶⁹ Moreover, they supported the stations' efforts to build up a comprehensive file system supplemented by fingerprints and DNA testing, face recognition software and family tracing apps.⁷⁰ Both the mobile assistance teams and these social workers approached those who did not qualify, or who did not wish to be “assisted,” which goes against the terms of the 2003 Measures.⁷¹

63 Golan, Sicular and Umapathi 2014; Solinger and Hu 2012.

64 Interview 11, February 2013.

65 Lu, Guoxian, Wang and Li 2012, 39.

66 Interview 11, February 2013.

67 State Council 2003, 11.

68 Howell 2019, 59; see also Peng and Wang 2017.

69 Yuexiu District Bureau of Civil Affairs 2019, Sec. 3.2; see also Peng and Wang 2017; Guangzhou District Assistance Station 2018.

70 Peng and Wang 2017; Editorial Committee of Guangzhou Yearbook 2015; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020.

71 Wang, Li and Wang 2020, 87.

Why do these patrols extend their authority in this way? And if repatriation is ineffective, why does it form the core of the assistance stations' approach? Guangzhou's local committee of the political consultative conference offers a familiar explanation: "The welfare and management work for drifting and begging persons is not only about social welfare but also about social control."⁷² Similar to the continuing *hukou* system, "assisting" panhandlers is a means to shape the growth and "quality" (*suzhi* 素质) of the urban population and to keep out rural poverty and migrants. The stations have not shaken off the legacy of the CR system and still see themselves as a management agency to support the city's economy, security and cleanliness.⁷³ Chinese scholars and government actors alike emphasize that beggars reflect badly on a city as they contradict the image of a prosperous metropolis: "Their clothes are worn out, their appearance is dirty, and the contrast with a beautiful urban environment could not be greater."⁷⁴ This is especially true for Guangzhou with its international perspective and its dreams of becoming a global city. A city's image affects on its monetary and political interests, and panhandling might endanger investments as well as political careers. According to Eric Henry, the visibility of panhandlers challenges the very self-understanding of an emerging China, as beggars represent "the cracks within the taken-for-granted doxa of modernity itself."⁷⁵ Additionally, the discussion on welfare eligibility has fuelled the idea of the "professional beggar" (*zhiye qigai* 职业乞丐). Widely used in academia and the media, political discourses and social work arenas, the term connotes dishonesty and betrayal. It implies the person in need might exaggerate or fake an emergency, harass passersby, be rich or might be organized in a "beggar gang" or otherwise engage in criminal behaviour.⁷⁶ To portray beggars as "professional" serves as justification to withhold benevolence and tolerance.

Since the system's changes, Guangzhou city officials have been looking for new ways to approach panhandlers. Xu Zhigang and colleagues explain in a research report for the local government that "whether beggars accept assistance is their freedom of choice, but let us assume their actions influence the city image, then they must accept control by *chengguan* officers."⁷⁷ Following this logic, panhandling is criminalized by defining related behaviour as an administrative offence: "If you sleep on the street, you affect the daily life of the residents. If you stop cars on the street [to beg], you affect the traffic. If you beg by force, hold passersby, spit on the street, leave rubbish, make a mess of the environment, violate hygiene rules, etc., we will punish you according to the law."⁷⁸ These words, by the-then mayor Zhang Guangning 张广宁, were translated into regulations on public cleanliness and traffic control in 2004 and in subsequent years. These regulations also use catch-all phrases and are aimed at beggars who display "uncivilized behaviour," "disturb order in public places,"⁷⁹ "disturb others," "affect the cityscape and environment,"⁸⁰ or else might affect it.⁸¹ The national government supports this approach. In 2009, the Ministry of Civil Affairs defined typical forms of panhandling in China, such as singing or writing on the pavement with chalk, as noise nuisance and environmental pollution.⁸² By determining that the visibility of beggars is a problem for the "*shirong*" 市容 (city landscape), responsibility for their control shifts to the *chengguan*.⁸³ Following

72 CPPCC 2011, Para. 3.2.1.

73 Also Solinger and Hu 2012, 746.

74 Xu, Fang, and Wang 2006, 61; Duo et al. 2019, 454.

75 Henry 2009, 30.

76 Wang, Li and Wang 2020, 88; Tang and Wen 2018, 91; Liu, Jin, and Wang 2016, 79; Du, Xiao 2020; Liang, Hongxia 2014, 144.

77 Xu, Zhigang, et al. 2005, Ch. 2.1.

78 Zhang, Guangning 2004, 35.

79 Guangzhou Bureau of Civil Affairs et al. 2005, Sec. 7.1.

80 Guangzhou Bureau of Civil Affairs, Guangzhou Bureau of Public Health and Guangzhou Team of Comprehensive City Management 2004, Sec. 5.1.

81 Ministry of Civil Affairs et al. 2009.

82 Ibid., Sec. 2.3.

83 State Council 2015.

the general governance logic on public space, beggars are therefore expelled according to zones and rhythms of prestige and popularity.⁸⁴

Guangzhou's local regulations forbid panhandling in areas of tourism, commerce, political representation, transport, and at parks, theatres, schools and hospitals.⁸⁵ Those who do not comply with the request to leave are liable to prosecution.⁸⁶ Both the *chengguan* and the police participate in mobile assistance team patrols and increase their cooperation with the assistance stations whenever Guangzhou is under the spotlight. Figure 1 shows the state actors' efforts approaching beggars in the name of "assistance." During the preparations for the Asian Games, cases were double the number compared to four years previously and rose to more than 45,000 in 2009; in 2010, 54 per cent of all cases were approached within the one month the Asian Games took place.⁸⁷ Moreover, cases of repatriation increased as well, to 18,823 in 2009. One interviewee, Mr Qi, stated that during the Asian Games, patrols had picked him up against his will, given him a train ticket and accompanied him to the platform to ensure his departure.⁸⁸ The upward trends of "assistance" in the following years correspond with the "civilized city" campaign (2011) and several stages of the "hygienic city" campaign (2013–2016).

The pandemic occurred at a time when the Guangdong Bureau of Civil Affairs had already been struggling with hygiene standards and treatment within the assistance stations and the settlement centres.⁸⁹ Subsequently, those living on the streets were of particular concern in terms of health: "Vagrants and beggars are at high risk of pneumonia from the novel coronavirus infection owing to their homelessness, mobility and low awareness of protection."⁹⁰ The aim was to prevent the spread of the virus within the stations and on the streets of Guangzhou. Several new regulations and guidelines stipulated hygiene measures and staff training, as well as regular testing.⁹¹ Those who showed signs of Covid-19 were forced to quarantine in either an assistance station or in guarded hotels. Reports at the district level show how the patrols measured fever, distributed masks, dismantled and disinfected outdoor sleeping arrangements.⁹² While patrols in general increased in number and frequency,⁹³ *chengguan* and police patrols were also given the authority to take panhandlers directly to an assistance station.⁹⁴ The pressure on beggars increased as they were reportedly "escorted" (*husong* 护送) by patrols, a phrase which, according to Sapio, is a euphemism for forced removal.⁹⁵

In alignment with the Ministry's "special plan," mentioned above, Guangzhou's assistance stations have continued with their efforts at repatriation and technical surveillance since migration was allowed to resume in mid-2020.⁹⁶ Security cameras additionally monitor public space for signs of beggars and homeless people, while panhandling-related behaviour has been criminalized.⁹⁷ Collecting trash – an important income source for people living on the streets – was made illegal

84 Flock and Breitung 2016; Flock 2021.

85 Guangzhou Bureau of Civil Affairs et al. 2005, 7.1.

86 Guangzhou Bureau of Civil Affairs, Guangzhou Bureau of Public Health and Guangzhou Team of Comprehensive City Management 2004, Sec. 4; Guangzhou Bureau of Civil Affairs et al. 2005, 7.

87 Guangzhou Bureau of Civil Affairs 2010.

88 Interview, 24 August 2014.

89 In 2017, 20 people died over a two-month period in a centre close to Shaoguan city, Guangdong province. The unhygienic conditions and rapid spread of disease among penned-up people were attributed to a lack of supervision and corruption (Li 2017).

90 Guangzhou Bureau of Civil Affairs 2021, n.p.

91 See, e.g., Ministry of Civil Affairs et al. 2020; Guangdong New Coronary Pneumonia Prevention and Control Command Office 2020; Guangdong Provincial Government 2020.

92 Panyu District Government 2020; Liwan District Zhanqian Street Office 2020.

93 Guangzhou Bureau of Civil Affairs 2020a; 2020b; Du, Xiao 2020.

94 Guangdong Provincial Government 2020, 3.3, 3.6.

95 Ibid., 3.3; Panyu District Government 2020; Conghua Bureau of Civil Affairs 2020; Sapio 2010, 170.

96 Ministry of Civil Affairs et al. 2020; Guangdong Provincial Government 2020.

97 Guangzhou Bureau of Civil Affairs 2020a.

in February 2020 in the name of cleanliness and hygiene.⁹⁸ In effect, the pandemic has served as an additional reason to continue past governance trends of control to make beggars leave the city and its public space.

Conclusion

The governance of beggars presents the Chinese state with a paradox, particularly in terms of images, symbols and stereotypes. Panhandlers appear both pitiable and dangerous at the same time and so the respective institutions under the Ministry of Civil Affairs oscillate between welfare and control. Their solution is to expel beggars from public spaces and the city. Even though the CR system was abolished in 2003, the institution and part of its self-understanding live on today. The contradictory nature of the succeeding assistance stations is best elucidated by the ideas surrounding “professional beggars”: they do not come under assistance stations’ area of responsibility and yet many of the stations’ activities reference them. “Real beggars” are to be supported but the system is not geared towards their needs. Panhandling is not a crime, yet it is prohibited and punishable under the banner of urban aesthetics. These administrative frictions go beyond the understanding of implementation gaps from the central to the local state. They expose inter-institutional conflicting goals which lead to areas of state-infused informality.

Moreover, the governance of panhandlers represents an example of the state favouring and welcoming certain segments of the urban population – the young, wealthy and well-educated – over others (such as rural migrants), a policy which affects various groups on the social margins. Beggars are now being pushed out of the city and its public spaces.⁹⁹ This development is embedded in a larger context of imagined modernity, the meaning of reform and opening up, of wealth and of poverty. On the one hand, the social system has been expanded since the Hu–Wen administration; on the other, the system carries neoliberal notions of self-reliance and self-responsibility. During the era of Mao Zedong 毛泽东, beggars on urban streets were a sign that the government and the political-economic system were in the wrong. Today, Chinese researchers argue that panhandling is a “worldwide phenomenon which has occurred throughout the ages” and is an expected side effect of urbanization.¹⁰⁰ Thus, the state is not to blame. Lichao Yang and Robert Walker point to a shift in the Chinese view of poverty that occurred during the reform process, away from blaming bad governance towards finding individual fault.¹⁰¹ The effect has been observed in other places of the world as well: “the more that citizens attribute poverty to personal failings, rather than to social injustices or the economic structure, the less tolerant they will be of beggars.”¹⁰²

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Conflicts of interest. None

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98 Liang, Yitao 2020.

99 Flock and Breitung 2016; Solinger 2013; Du, Huimin, Song and Li 2021.

100 Wang, Li and Wang 2020, 85.

101 Yang and Walker 2020.

102 Smith, Patricia 2005.

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Ryanne FLOCK is a research associate at the Contemporary Chinese Studies at Julius-Maximilians-University Würzburg, Germany. She is currently undertaking postdoc research as a member of the project "Social worlds: China's cities as spaces of worldmaking," funded by the German Ministry of Research and Education (BMBF). She focuses on processes of modernization and urbanization, and the reciprocity of space and society in China. Flock received her PhD in Chinese studies from the Free University Berlin in 2021.

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