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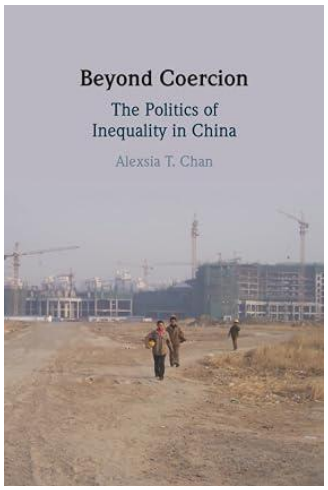
معرفی و نقد کتابِ
ورای الزام: سیاست تبعیض در چین

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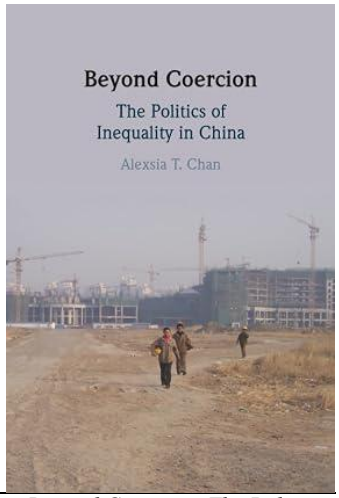
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Book Review:
Beyond Coercion: The Politics of Inequality in China

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Abstract

Why do citizens who are visibly and persistently disadvantaged by state policy so rarely organize against the state that disadvantages them? This puzzle has long troubled scholars of authoritarian durability, and it is the starting point of Alexsia T. Chan's *Beyond Coercion: The Politics of Inequality in China*. Chan's answer centres on internal rural migrants in urban China, a population estimated in the hundreds of millions, who remain excluded from many of the public services attached to urban residence despite two decades of central government directives ostensibly aimed at their incorporation. Rather than treating this persistent exclusion as evidence of simple neglect or administrative failure, Chan argues that it is the product of a deliberate governing strategy she terms "political atomization", a process through which local governments distribute public goods and welfare benefits in ways that fragment migrants' shared grievances into individual, case-by-case negotiations, thereby forestalling the kind of collective claims-making that could otherwise pose a political threat.

The book's central theoretical intervention is to reframe authoritarian social control as a function not primarily of repression or its familiar counterpart, co-optation, but of the administrative architecture of service delivery itself. Local bureaucrats, Chan shows, routinely defer, complicate, or individualize migrants' access to housing, healthcare, education, and social insurance, converting what could be a shared structural grievance, exclusion from urban citizenship rights under China's household registration (hukou) system, into a series of private bargains between individual migrants and street-level officials. The effect, she argues, is a form of control that operates "beyond coercion": migrants are not silenced by force. Still, they are administratively prevented from recognizing and acting on their common interests.

Empirically, the book is organized in two parts that correspond to the two halves of this argument. The first examines the mechanics of atomization from the state's side, showing how policies nominally designed to expand migrant welfare, under sustained pressure from labor shortages, unrest, and central mandates to integrate migrants into host cities, are implemented in ways that deflect and demobilize rather than satisfy migrant demands. The second inverts the lens to examine migrant agency, documenting how workers respond to exclusion not primarily through protest or formal appeals but through informal improvisation: relying on unlicensed clinics, "people-run" schools, and selective opt-outs from social insurance schemes they judge not to serve their interests. This second half is one of the book's more distinctive contributions, since it resists a purely top-down account of control by taking seriously the tactical resourcefulness migrants exercise within, and against, the constraints atomization imposes.

Methodologically, the study draws on qualitative fieldwork

among migrant communities and local officials, complemented by analysis of policy documents and implementation records. This granular, ethnographically inflected approach allows Chan to move beyond the aggregate statistics on hukou-linked exclusion that dominate much of the existing literature and to reconstruct the everyday bureaucratic encounters through which atomization actually occurs, encounters in which street-level officials, migrants, and the ambiguities of policy language interact to produce outcomes that look, from a distance, like simple non-compliance but which Chan shows to be a patterned and reproducible mode of governance.

Chan's argument speaks to three literatures at once: the study of authoritarian resilience, comparative work on immigration and internal migration governance, and welfare-state scholarship on the politics of public-goods provision. Her core insight, that incremental expansions of social policy can, under certain institutional conditions, entrench rather than erode inequality, has purchase well beyond the Chinese case, offering researchers of illiberal and hybrid regimes a vocabulary for describing forms of control that are neither overtly coercive nor genuinely inclusive. The concept of political atomization is presented as portable: applicable, in principle, to any setting where a state faces political pressure to expand rights or benefits to a marginalized population while retaining strong incentives to prevent that population from mobilizing collectively.

The review that follows situates Chan's contribution within the broader literature on Chinese authoritarian governance, assesses the empirical and theoretical strengths of the book's two-part structure, and considers questions the framework leaves open, particularly regarding the scope conditions under which political atomization, as opposed to coercion or co-optation, is the state's strategy of choice, and the extent to which the concept travels to non-Chinese and non-authoritarian contexts. On balance, *Beyond Coercion* is a genuinely original contribution to the study of authoritarian governance and inequality, one likely to become a reference point for scholars working on migration, welfare, and social control in China and comparable settings.

Introduction

China's household registration system, the hukou, has for decades divided the population into rural and urban categories that determine access to subsidized housing, public schooling, basic healthcare, and social insurance. Chan opens the book with the scale of what is at stake: by 2030, roughly 70% of China's population, nearly a billion people, will live in cities, and 292.5 million of the country's current residents are internal migrants, meaning close to one in five people in China lives away from the place where their hukou is registered (World Bank and Development Research Center of the State Council, 2014; National Bureau of Statistics, 2022: 1). Central authorities have periodically

announced reforms meant to ease this exclusion, most notably a 2014 National New-Type Urbanization Plan that pledged to convert 100 million rural hukou registrations to urban ones by 2020, citing labor shortages, social unrest, and the political costs of an increasingly visible urban underclass. Yet, as Chan documents in *Beyond Coercion: The Politics of Inequality in China*, the promised incorporation of migrant workers into urban citizenship has been persistently incomplete even as reform rhetoric has intensified (pp. 4–5).

This gap between policy announcement and policy outcome forms the empirical puzzle at the heart of Chan's book. It is also a puzzle for the study of authoritarian governance more broadly: how does an increasingly disadvantaged population, tens of millions strong, remain politically quiescent in the face of what would seem to be a clear collective grievance? Chan's answer is neither that migrants are unaware of their exclusion nor that the state relies on brute repression to keep them in line. Instead, she argues, local governments have developed a subtler and more durable mode of control, one that operates through the very policies ostensibly designed to help migrants rather than against them.

This review situates that argument within the wider literature on authoritarian governance, traces the book's evidentiary structure across its two parts, and evaluates the theoretical and empirical contribution before turning to questions the framework leaves open for future research.

The argument: Political atomization

Much of the literature on authoritarian durability describes a "toolbox" of two principal instruments: coercion, the use or threat of force to suppress dissent, and co-optation, the incorporation of potential challengers into the regime's coalition through material or institutional incentives. Chan's central theoretical contribution is to identify a third instrument, one that operates at a lower and more diffuse level than either: political atomization. She defines this as a process in which the state, often through the mundane machinery of local bureaucracy, allocates public goods and services in ways that individualize claims and obscure their collective character, thereby preventing an aggrieved population from recognizing and acting on a shared political interest.

Where coercion suppresses collective action after it forms and co-optation prevents it by buying off potential leaders, atomization works earlier still: it forestalls the very perception of commonality that collective action requires. A migrant worker denied access to subsidized housing through a bureaucratic technicality, or granted partial access to healthcare through an ad hoc arrangement with a sympathetic official, experiences her situation as a personal negotiation rather than a shared structural exclusion. Multiplied across millions of similar encounters, Chan argues, this individualization of grievance

functions as a remarkably effective and largely invisible instrument of social control, requiring neither violence nor overt concession.

Chan takes care to place the concept relative to adjacent literatures rather than let it float free. She situates political atomization between two poles associated with James Scott: the high-modernist ambition to render society legible from above, and the low-level "everyday forms of resistance" through which ordinary people evade such projects, and she draws a parallel to Lisa Wedeen's work on the rhetoric and symbolism of authoritarian rule in Syria to justify looking past material interest alone. She also distinguishes the concept from the extensive literature on patronage and clientelism: where classic clientelist exchange offers targeted, actual entitlements in return for loyalty, she argues that the Chinese state instead sustains compliance through the allure of diffuse, promised benefits that need never be fully redeemed, a distinction that lets her draw on clientelism scholarship from Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America (citing, among others, Pepinsky, 2007; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Hawkins & Hansen, 2006) while still claiming something analytically distinct.

Structure and Evidence

The book's seven chapters, as Chan lays out in an explicit roadmap, are organized into two complementary movements bracketed by theory and conclusion. Chapter 1, "Inequality and the Autocrat's Toolbox", frames the puzzle and situates it against existing accounts of authoritarian resilience, immigration governance, and welfare-state politics. Chapter 2 develops the theory of political atomization itself, drawing on the street-level bureaucracy tradition associated with Michael Lipsky to extend insights on frontline discretion from democratic to authoritarian contexts.

Part I ("Public Services as Social Control", Chapters 3 and 4) examines atomization from the state's side. Chapter 3 shows how municipalities deflect migrant demands through what Chan calls "phantom services": nearly impossible eligibility requirements, paperwork burdens, and the quiet enforcement of dormant rules that let officials appear responsive while directing migrants elsewhere. Chapter 4 turns to demobilization through partial and incomplete inclusion in migrant education, and identifies three distinct regulatory postures cities take toward informal "people-run" migrant schools: suppression and exclusion, selective absorption and segregated inclusion, and certification and full inclusion, which Chan illustrates with Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu, respectively (pp. 17–18).

Part II ("Migrant Workers Blunting Control", Chapters 5 and 6) inverts the analytical lens to examine migrant agency. Chapter 5, "Playing with Institutional Leeway", draws on Michael Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy framework to show how migrants gain ground by working with, rather than around, the same frontline doctors, teachers,

and administrators who ration services: shared regional origin, a provider's own history as a migrant, or simple recognition- what Chan terms "co-migrant empathy", can translate into a longer hospital consultation or a more forgiving school enrolment. Chapter 6, "Making Do and Muddling Through", moves further from the formal system, documenting migrants who bypass frontline discretion through illegal private clinics, informally pooled insurance and emergency funds among co-workers, and calculated decisions about which available insurance schemes are worth the premium. Chan is candid about the limits of both forms of agency: co-migrant empathy is unevenly distributed and can just as easily produce discriminatory treatment as generous treatment, and the workarounds in Chapter 6 are stopgaps rather than solutions, unable to cover chronic conditions or the recurring costs of schooling, leaving the state's underlying use of public-service provision as a tool of social control essentially unchanged even where migrants succeed in blunting its effects.

Chan, an Associate Professor of Government at Hamilton College whose research focuses on authoritarian politics and development in China, grounds the theory in a substantial evidentiary base: fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2019 across six cities in four regions, Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, and Dongguan, and 150 semi-structured interviews with migrant workers, officials, doctors, and teachers, supplemented by government documents and archival material. That empirical range is what lets her rule out simpler explanations for why cities treat migrants differently, rather than merely asserting that they do.

Before advancing the theory, Chan tests it against blunter alternatives. Wealth does not explain the pattern: Beijing remains exclusionary, Shanghai's efforts have had limited success, and Chengdu has done comparatively well on migrant education access, despite Beijing and Shanghai being the wealthier cities. Labor shortages fare no better as an explanation, and population-control policy points the other way: Beijing's 2016–2035 master plan capped the city at 23 million residents by 2020, and Shanghai capped itself at 25 million by 2035, with neither city's stance toward migrants tracking straightforwardly with its labor needs.

The concluding chapter opens not with a summary but with a scene: a public security official in Chengdu, pulling the author aside after a long day of interviews, predicts that managing migrants will soon become one of the most important issues in Chinese public security. From there Chan widens the lens in a section titled "Political Atomization in the World", arguing that the mechanism she identifies in China is not sui generis. She points to Brazil's Bolsa Família program, whose conditional cash transfers have simultaneously deepened democratic accountability and imposed paperwork burdens that exclude some poor people, and to a long tradition of client diversion

in U.S. state-level welfare administration dating to the 1990s. These comparisons are suggestive rather than systematic: Chan raises them explicitly as an agenda for future research rather than as cases she tests, closing the chapter with open questions about the "desired zone of control" within which states calibrate inequality without triggering the dissent it might otherwise provoke.

Ethnographic texture

What keeps this theoretical apparatus from feeling abstract is Chan's fieldwork, and a handful of vignettes are representative. In Chapter 5, Chan watches the same Beijing doctor examine two patients with matching ankle injuries within a single afternoon: one, dressed in name-brand athletic wear and flanked by friends, receives a careful exam, easy rapport, and a referral for an X-ray; the other, in torn work clothes and trailed by a labor subcontractor clutching cash for a deposit, receives a few curt questions and a dismissive diagnosis. Afterward, the doctor sums up his own reasoning in five words: "You can tell who's a migrant." From the concluding chapter, a vegetable vendor from Henan Province, having heard that property ownership might satisfy her adopted city's residency requirement, works out for the author exactly why the arithmetic does not: Beijing housing costs measured against the takings from a vegetable stall selling by the mao (p. 149). A construction worker from Guizhou Province, interviewed beyond Beijing's Sixth Ring Road, answers a question about his hopes with a stark statement Chan leaves unadorned: *"I do not have any dreams"* (p. 153). Moments like these do argumentative work rather than merely illustrating the theory: they render political atomization not as an abstraction but as a lived, cumulative exhaustion, and they are a large part of why the book reads as compellingly as it argues.

Critical assessment

The book's principal achievement is conceptual: it identifies, names, and empirically substantiates a mechanism of control that scholars of Chinese politics and migration have often observed in passing but rarely theorized as a coherent strategy in its own right. By showing that incremental, superficially progressive social policy can entrench rather than erode structural inequality, Chan complicates a common assumption in the literature: that expanding state services to marginalized populations necessarily strengthens their political standing. It is a substantial corrective, with implications well beyond China.

The book's attentiveness to migrant agency in Part II is similarly valuable, and Chan does not merely gesture at the tension between individual coping and collective mobilization: Chapter 6 poses the question directly, asking whether migrants' self-organized workarounds undermine or reinforce political atomization. Her answer,

echoed in the book's closing pages, is that they mostly reinforce it. Informal insurance pools, insurance-card sharing, and cooperative labor groups relieve material pressure but generate no new claims on the state; pooled cash, Chan shows, typically flows into the formal system anyway once a participant reaches a hospital emergency room, and each family that finds a workaround is one less constituency pressing officials for systemic reform (p. 161). This is a carefully argued position, but the evidence she marshals in Chapter 6– construction workers pooling wages within a shared dorm, hometown networks vouching for one another's insurance cards, migrants weighing which of several types of insurance are worth the premium– describes exactly the kind of horizontal trust and coordination that, in other authoritarian and hybrid settings, has eventually scaffolded collective claims-making. Chan is alert to the difficulty: she notes elsewhere in the book that migrant organizing has grown harder in the Xi Jinping era even as popular action increases where the migrant population has grown fastest. The book is on firmer ground showing that this solidarity has not yet translated into mobilization than in showing that it structurally cannot.

A second question concerns scope conditions, and here the book is more forthcoming than a first reading of its China-focused chapters might suggest. In the conclusion, Chan does gesture toward non-Chinese analogues, Brazilian conditional cash transfers, American welfare diversion, and toward the possibility that political atomization operates across regime types and levels of development (p. 157). What she does not do, by her own framing, is test the concept outside China: the comparative discussion reads as an invitation to future researchers rather than a demonstration. The book would have made an even stronger case for the theory's portability had it developed even one of these parallels far enough to show political atomization doing distinctive explanatory work, work that could not equally well be described as ordinary bureaucratic discretion or path-dependent welfare retrenchment.

Chan likewise acknowledges that the book was designed to establish political atomization as a general phenomenon rather than to explain its variation. She directs future researchers toward the empirical material in Chapters 3 through 6, and the schooling material in Chapter 4 in particular, as a starting point for explaining why some cities and provinces atomize migrant demands more thoroughly than others. The book identifies this gap with precision, which reflects intellectual honesty. Still, readers seeking a comparative, subnational account of Chinese governance will need to look to the research agenda the book sets rather than to the book itself.

The book's explicit effort to distinguish political atomization from patronage and clientelism is one of its clearest theoretical moves. Still, the boundary is not always as sharp in the empirical chapters as the framing promises. Deflection through onerous eligibility rules and

demobilization through partial school access will sound familiar to readers of the clientelism literature Chan herself cites, where discretionary, particularistic distribution likewise manages rather than satisfies demand (e.g., Pepinsky, 2007; Slater, 2010). Chan's rejoinder, that Chinese migrants are offered diffuse, unredeemed promises rather than targeted entitlements, is conceptually clean. Still, a reader may reasonably ask how much empirical daylight separates a diffuse promise from a particularly stingy targeted one.

Contribution and Significance

These are, in the end, questions that arise from the strength of the book's central argument rather than objections to it. *Beyond Coercion* makes a meaningful contribution to at least three fields of scholarship: comparative work on authoritarian governance, where it expands the analytical toolkit beyond coercion and co-optation; migration studies, where it offers a rigorous account of how formal inclusion policies can coexist with substantive exclusion; and welfare-state scholarship, where it extends questions about the politics of public-goods provision to a non-democratic setting. For a journal concerned with the comparative study of countries and their governance, the book models scholarship that is at once deeply grounded in a single national case and explicitly attentive to the theoretical stakes that case raises for the study of politics more broadly.

Conclusion

Beyond Coercion is a tightly argued, empirically rich, and conceptually original contribution to the study of Chinese politics and, more broadly, of authoritarian governance and inequality. Alexsia T. Chan's concept of political atomization offers scholars a precise vocabulary for a form of social control that operates through, rather than despite, the ordinary business of public administration, a control strategy likely to be recognizable well beyond the case of Chinese migrant workers once named. The book will be of considerable interest to comparative politics scholars, China specialists, and researchers of migration and welfare-state politics in non-democratic and hybrid regimes, and it deserves a wide readership among all three audiences.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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