Social Foundation of the Hereditary Privileges in China: Wechat Survey Evidence

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Previous literature of authoritarianism contends that dictators coopt the elites to keep them investing in the authoritarian rule via various means including the hereditary privileges. Through greater opportunities for education, job, medical care, welfare etc, the hereditary privileges are attractive to elites to secure their social-economic status across generations. Nevertheless, they arguably instigate the grievances of the non-beneficiaries by breaking the rules and consequently exacerbating income inequality. Accordingly, the hereditary privileges are a double-edged sword to the authoritarian rule. In this paper, we investigate the social foundation for the hereditary privileges in authoritarian regimes and posit that self-interests and the prospect of upward mobility influence how the public perceives of the legitimacy in the hereditary privileges in authoritarian regimes. Specifically, people in the higher social-economic ladder assign greater legitimacy to the hereditary privileges because they are current or future beneficiaries. For those who are in lower social-economic ladder now, they recognize the legitimacy of hereditary privileges when they are optimistic about moving up in the future. They are tempted to make their children future beneficiaries of them. To empirically test the hypotheses, we conduct an original online survey with Wechat QR code to 4,390 college students from 306 universities in China from October to December 2016. With a focus on the hereditary privilege for the children of government officials, the empirical evidence corroborates with our argument that self-interest and the prospect of upward mobility account for the perceived legitimacy of the hereditary privileges in China. The findings shed light on how social recognition ameliorates the effect of income inequality on democratization.