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China's Dormant and Active Social Volcanoes

Martin King Whyte

ABSTRACT

China's leaders often claim that the rising tide of mass protests in recent years is primarily driven by popular anger over the widening gap between rich and poor. However, in a series of national surveys that I helped direct, it becomes clear the average Chinese citizen is less angry about current income gaps than citizens in many other societies. There also is no clear increase in such anger over time (despite a sustained rise in income inequality). The primary drivers of popular anger lie elsewhere—primarily in power inequalities, manifested in abuses of power, official corruption, bureaucrats who fail to protect the public from harm, mistreatment by those in authority, and inability to obtain redress when mistreated. China's leaders have done an impressive job in recent years of addressing poverty and material inequality, thus keeping the distributive injustice social volcano dormant. However, they have so far been unwilling or unable to make fundamental reforms to address procedural injustices. Unless they can provide Chinese citizens with more effective protections from the arbitrariness and abuses of entrenched power, a shared sense of injustice will persist, and this active volcano will continue to smolder, with the potential to erupt and threaten Party rule.

By most indicators, including sustained and rapid economic growth, raised living standards, and reductions in mass poverty, China's transition from a centrally planned socialist economy to a primarily market-driven system after 1978 has been extraordinarily successful. However, that success has not translated into the "harmonious society" that Hu Jintao, the previous leader of the Chinese Communist Party, made a primary goal. Instead, Chinese society in recent times has seen increasing eruptions of popular discontent and mass protests. Some observers have characterized the current situation as "rocky stability."¹ Others, including analysts within China and even Party leaders themselves, fear that a rising tide of popular discontent and of activist protests against the status quo may eventually threaten the entire political order and Party rule.² The sud-

1. Steven Jackson, "Introduction: A Typology of Stability and Instability in China," in *Is China Unstable?*, ed. David Shambaugh (Armonk: Sharpe, 2000).

2. Although there is considerable debate about the accuracy and comparability of the figures cited on mass protests in China over the years, there is little doubt that they have become increasingly common and occa-

den and unexpected collapse of Communist Party rule in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989–91 and the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 that initially paralyzed the Party still haunt China's leaders today, producing nightmares of a "social volcano" of popular protests erupting and sweeping the Party into the dustbin of history.

The Party is determined to prevent such an eruption, and to avoid that possibility China's leaders have adopted a wide range of measures designed both to reduce popular discontent and to control outbreaks of mass protest when they do occur. However, in identifying the discontent that threatens their rule, China's leaders place primary emphasis on the rise in income inequality, which this article will show is a dormant social volcano that poses little threat to the regime. At the same time, the Party fails to grapple systematically and seriously with a much more dangerous set of problems (what I refer to as China's active social volcano). National surveys in which I participated indicate that unless China's leaders direct their attention to this active volcano of discontent and can find ways to reduce it, they are unlikely to be able to maintain even "rocky stability" indefinitely. In the pages that follow, I present evidence that the dominant analysis of popular discontent is misguided,³ indicate where I think the more serious threats to Party rule lie, and discuss why the leaders have so far been unwilling or unable to focus more effectively on those threats.

ON DORMANT AND ACTIVE SOCIAL VOLCANOES IN CHINA

In any society, popular anger over injustices is a necessary, although not sufficient, precondition for destabilizing the prevailing political order.⁴ There are dif-

sionally involve large numbers of protestors and episodes of violence. Available sources cite a total of 8,700 such mass protests nationally in 1993, 87,000 in 2005, and 180,000–200,000 annually in recent years. For an analysis of major sources of mass protest activities, see Jae Ho Chung, Hongyi Lai, and Ming Xia, "Mounting Challenges to Governance in China: Surveying Collective Protestors, Religious Sects, and Criminal Organizations," *The China Journal*, no. 56 (July 2006): 1–31.

3. My use of the term "misguided" does not mean that I think official efforts to reduce income inequalities are undesirable but rather that such inequalities are not the primary source of popular discontent. Therefore, reducing the gaps, however desirable for other reasons, will not help make China a more harmonious society or a more stable political order.

4. There is no simple formula by which popular discontent that rises above level *X* produces regime change. The literature on social movements makes clear that a large number of other conditions affect whether or not disruption of the political status quo and regime change will occur, including the solidarity, resources, and leadership of challengers; skill at framing the popular discourse; and the strength, solidarity, and determination of the existing leadership. Moreover, as Mao Zedong recognized in this realm long ago, "a single spark can start a prairie fire" (an image that haunted China's leaders after the events in Tunisia that touched off the Arab Spring movement). My contention here is simply that the more widespread and intense the popular anger over social injustice, the more difficult it will be for the leadership to maintain their rule. Given this assumption, it is important to assess what issues Chinese citizens are most and least angry about and whether the policies and practices of the Party seem well suited to deal with and reduce the primary sources of popular anger.

ferent types of injustices that may anger ordinary citizens. Since the launch of the “develop the West” campaign in 2000 by Party Secretary Jiang Zemin, China’s leaders have primarily focused on the potential threat to their rule posed by popular anger over the rising income gaps that have accompanied post-1978 market reforms. Subsequent Party leaders up to and including Xi Jinping have adopted a wide variety of measures designed to shift away from the emphasis on growth at all costs during the 1980s and 1990s toward more equitable growth. In other words, China’s leaders (and most commentators) have seen distributive injustice as the primary source of rising popular anger. They have launched multiple initiatives (to be discussed later) to try to avoid the eruption of a potential social volcano due to the widening gaps between rich and poor. However, my surveys in China, to be reviewed here, clearly indicate that the distributive injustice social volcano has long been and remains dormant.

However, indignation over distributive injustice is not the only or the most important threat the Party confronts. As in other societies, another primary type of unfairness that ignites popular anger is injustice stemming from power rather than income inequality—where citizens receive unjust treatment from those in authority, become aware that officials abuse their positions for private gain, suffer because those in power fail to fulfill their obligation to protect the public, or feel unable to obtain redress when treated unjustly (or even get into worse trouble if they try). In this analytical distinction, distributive injustices involve differences in wealth and income that are perceived as unfair, while procedural injustices involve unfair advantages held by the powerful and vulnerability and mistreatment of the powerless.⁵ I contend that China faces an active social volcano involving popular anger over such procedural or political injustices, which poses a much greater threat to stability and Party rule than the distributive injustice social volcano.

TRENDS IN INCOME INEQUALITY IN THE REFORM ERA

The fact that income gaps in China have grown steadily is not in dispute. China went from having quite moderate income inequality, with a Gini index under 0.30 in the early 1980s, to a much more unequal distribution of 0.49 in 2007

5. Obviously this distinction between distributive and procedural injustice gets fuzzy at higher ranges of the stratification order, since many Chinese in positions of power and members of their families have used their status to become very wealthy. On the other side of the ledger, to some extent those who become very rich through business ventures with no family connections may use their wealth to gain influence among the political elite, although this is a less prevalent phenomenon than in most other societies. (A recent Pew Research Center comparative survey found that 38 percent of Chinese citizens surveyed felt that rich people have too much influence in their political system, in contrast to a median of 64 percent who expressed this view in the 34 emerging and developing countries included in the study; see <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/02/12/discontent-with-politics-common-in-many-emerging-and-developing-nations/>.) Despite these crossover effects, ordinary citizens generally can distinguish whether a particular instance of perceived injustice reflects power exercised unfairly versus unfairly obtained wealth.

(see fig. 1).⁶ By this measure, China had sharper income inequality in 2007 than such societies as the United States and Russia. (It was not as sharp, though, as in some other countries not included in fig. 1, such as Brazil and South Africa, where estimates of the Gini index approach 0.60.) Since some analysts claim that when Gini surpasses 0.40 a country enters a “danger zone” for social unrest and political turbulence,⁷ the trend line for China has fueled dire predictions.

There is ongoing debate about what the trend in income distribution has been since 2007. According to Ma Jiantang of China’s National Bureau of Statistics, the national Gini peaked in 2008–9 at 0.49 but then started to decline slightly, reaching 0.47 in 2012.⁸ However, other China surveys since 2010 point to a continued rise in income inequality. Yu Xie and Xiang Zhou estimate the Gini is in the 0.53–0.55 range,⁹ and another survey directed by Gan Li and associates led to an even higher 2010 estimate of 0.61, which if accurate would equal or surpass the levels of the most unequal countries in the world.¹⁰ Regardless of how this debate is resolved, it does not affect the primary trend: Chinese citizens have had to adapt to a sharp change—from living in a society with relatively modest income inequality to one with very large gaps.

Moreover, the income gap between rural residents and migrants versus urban citizens, while already large during the Mao era, has grown substantially and is probably wider than in any other country (with China’s urban/rural household income ratio at least 3:1 and, depending on assumptions used in the calculation, perhaps more than 4:1 in 2007).¹¹ The rising incomes of the nouveaux riches have resulted in very conspicuous consumption, with lavish mansions, fancy foreign automobiles, expensive night clubs, exclusive golf and polo clubs, private jets, and foreign travel and education. Meanwhile, a portion of China’s population, particularly in rural areas, remains mired in abject poverty; millions have lost jobs and have had to cope with unemployment; and rising costs for higher

6. In fig. 1 the estimates for China in 1988 and later come from the China Household Income Project Surveys (see Li Shi, Hiroshi Sato, and Terry Sicular, eds., *Rising Inequality in China: Challenges to a Harmonious Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). The remaining figures come from the UNU-WIDER World Income Inequality Database, Version 2.0c (May 2008), available at http://www.wider.unu.edu/research/Database/en_GB/database/.

7. See, e.g., Josephine Ma, “Wealth Gap Fueling Instability, Studies Warn,” *South China Morning Post*, December 22, 2005.

8. Yang Lina, “Gini Coefficient Release Highlights China’s Resolve to Bridge the Wealth Gap,” *Xinhuanet*, January 21, 2013, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-01/21/c_132116852.htm.

9. Yu Xie and Xiang Zhou, “Income Inequality in Today’s China,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, April 28, 2014, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1403158111>.

10. Cited in Ernest Kao, “China’s Wealth Gap Continues to Widen,” *South China Morning Post*, December 10, 2012. See discussion of these competing estimates in Martin K. Whyte, “Soaring Income Gaps: China in Comparative Perspective,” *Daedalus* 143, no. 2 (2014): 39–52.

11. Li, Sato, and Sicular, *Rising Inequality in China*. On how official policies actually aggravate rural-urban income inequality, see Martin K. Whyte, ed., *One Country, Two Societies: Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Whyte, “Soaring Income Gaps.”

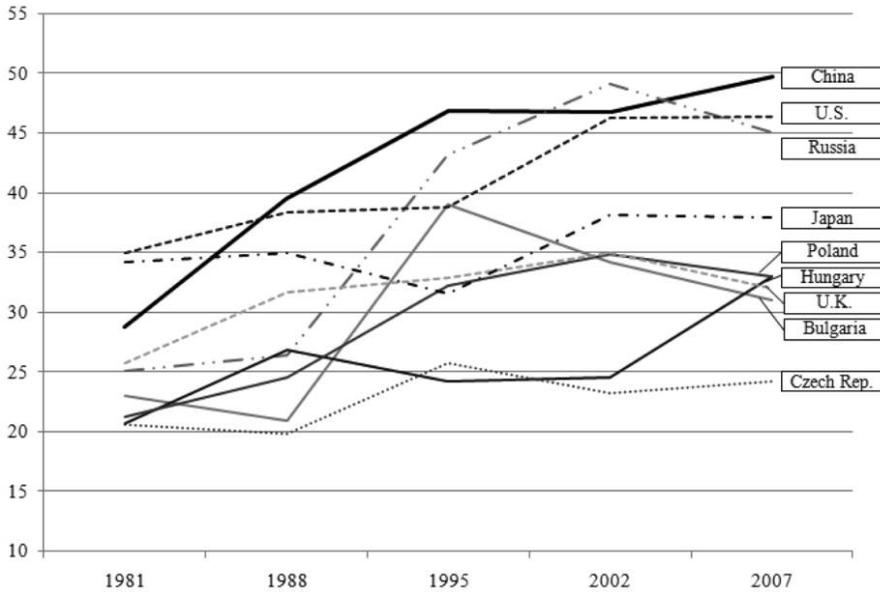


Figure 1. Comparative Gini Coefficient Trends (Gini X 100)

Sources: Estimates for China in 1988 and later come from the China Household Income Project Surveys (Li, Sato, and Sicular, *Rising Inequality in China*); remaining data come from the UNU-WIDER World Income Inequality Database (see n. 6).

education, health care, and many basics have left many ordinary Chinese feeling priced out and denied opportunities.¹² In other words, much more is involved in China's income inequality trends than simply a statistical shift. The gaps between the rich and the poor are not only much larger today but strikingly more visible, with a growing potential to incite envy and anger among those Chinese who are not doing so well.

CHINA'S DISTRIBUTIVE INJUSTICE SOCIAL VOLCANO SCENARIO

In a *New York Times* article in 2006, Joseph Kahn stated, "Because many people believe that wealth flows from access to power more than it does from talent or

12. However, it is not the case that China's income gaps have been produced by the rich getting richer while the poor get poorer. Rather, China has made impressive progress in reducing the proportion of the population living below internationally recognized levels of poverty, from perhaps 60 percent at the end of the Mao era to under 10 percent in recent years (see Li, Sato, and Sicular, *Rising Inequality in China*). Instead, the trend can be described as one in which most poor Chinese have experienced income gains during the reform era but more slowly than their richer fellow citizens. The rising tide of economic development has lifted almost all boats but at very different speeds. Even in urban China, pockets of extreme poverty persist; see, e.g., Mun Young Cho, *The Specter of "the People": Urban Poverty in Northeast China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

risk-taking, the wealth gap has incited outrage and is viewed as at least partly responsible for tens of thousands of mass protests around the country in recent years.”¹³ Two years later, a Reuters dispatch quoted a Chinese researcher making a similar claim: “Writing in the *Chinese Economic Times* on Thursday, Professor Zhou [Tianyong, a researcher at the Central Party School] warned that the resulting strains between rich and poor could erupt into searing unrest that would test the ruling Communist Party’s grip.”¹⁴ More recently a BBC reporter commented on the transition to the leadership of Xi Jinping in 2012: “So the job of making China a fairer place will now fall to the Communist Party’s next generation of leaders, who will rule the country for the next 10 years. The fear is that China’s growing inequities could undermine the legitimacy of their one-party rule, and the more unequal China becomes, the more unstable it may be.”¹⁵

What are the specific claims that together form the social volcano scenario? In reviewing a large number of such statements, I include the following claims:

1. Most ordinary Chinese citizens view current income gaps as excessive and unfair.
2. As the gaps between rich and poor have widened, ordinary Chinese have become more and more angry.
3. There is a growing popular belief that the benefits produced by China’s market reforms are being monopolized by the undeserving wealthy and powerful.
4. There is widespread nostalgia for the perceived greater equality of the late Mao era.
5. Peasants, migrants, people living in interior provinces, and other disadvantaged groups are even more angry than others about the growing gaps between rich and poor.
6. Popular anger over income inequality is a major contributor to the growing wave of mass protests that could eventually threaten Party rule.

My own research for the past decade and more has been devoted to examining whether these social volcano prognoses are accurate or not. Based mainly on the results of a 2004 China national survey on these issues, I concluded that such assertions cannot withstand empirical scrutiny. My refutation formed the core of my 2010 book *Myth of the Social Volcano*.¹⁶ In general my colleagues and I found that there was surprisingly little sign of anger then about current patterns of income inequality in China and that in many respects Chinese survey respondents were more accepting of those patterns and more optimistic about their personal chances of getting ahead than their counterparts in other countries. Furthermore, the disadvantaged (and rural residents in particular) unexpectedly had more pos-

13. Joseph Kahn, “China Makes Commitment to Social Harmony,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2006.

14. Reuters, “China Scholar Warns of Social Turmoil as Growth Slows,” December 4, 2008, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/12/05/us-china-economy-unrest-idUSTRE4B40H820081205>.

15. Damian Grammaticas, “China’s Ever-Widening Wealth Gap,” *BBC News*, November 1, 2012.

16. Martin K. Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

itive attitudes toward current inequalities than their more advantaged fellow citizens (particularly relative to educated urbanites). While I labeled the Chinese volcano a myth in the book, my subsequent research and the subsequent rounds of our surveys have led me to a reformulated question, namely, whether the social volcano of anger about income inequality, even if dormant in 2004, might perhaps no longer be so.

The 2004 survey on which the book was based could not speak to the question of whether popular anger about income inequality was on the increase or not (claims 2 and 3 above). To address the question of change over time, this article presents selected results from three national surveys I helped direct (in 2004, 2009, and 2014).¹⁷ In order to place these China surveys into a comparative context, so we can assess how relatively angry or complacent Chinese citizens are about current inequalities (social volcano claims 1 and 4 above), the Chinese results will be compared with the findings of surveys in other societies (both postsocialist societies and advanced capitalist ones) that asked the same questions. Since the central issue we are considering here is whether Chinese have become angry about the inequalities spawned by the post-Mao market reforms and their increasingly capitalistic society, and whether they feel that the socialist system they once lived under was more fair, the most appropriate comparison is with other postsocialist countries (in Eastern Europe) as well as with advanced capitalist countries.

SURVEYS ON CHINA'S INCOME INEQUALITY AND DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

All three China surveys involved collaboration with, and survey field administration by, the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University, directed by Shen Mingming.¹⁸ These surveys incorporated replications of a large

17. The first China national survey in 2004 was preceded by a pilot survey conducted in Beijing in 2000. The findings of the Beijing pilot survey, while broadly similar to the later national surveys, will not be discussed here. My analysis here examines only overall patterns of inequality attitudes for the full sample in each China survey but not how those attitudes vary by social class, income, rural versus urban residence, or other background factors. So social volcano claim 5 above will not be considered here, although I have examined it elsewhere. For the 2004 survey, internal variations in views on current inequalities are examined in detail in Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano*; for how those variations changed between 2004 and 2009, see Martin K. Whyte and Dong-Kyun Im, "Is the Social Volcano Still Dormant? Trends in Chinese Attitudes toward Inequality," *Social Science Research* 48 (November 2014): 62–76.

18. A large but shifting team of colleagues assisted the author in the first two China national survey projects, including Jieming Chen, Juan Chen, Maocan Guo, Chunping Han, Pierre Landry, Xiaobo Lu, Albert Park, and Wang Feng. Both the 2004 and 2009 surveys received primary support from the Smith Richardson Foundation and various sources at Harvard University (the Harvard China Fund, the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, the Asia Center, and the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies), with some additional funding coming from the University of California at Irvine and from Peking University. The lead investigators for the 2014 survey were Kristin Dalen and Hedda Flatø, researchers at the Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies in Norway, with principal funding coming from Norwegian sources.

number of questions about views on current inequalities that had previously been employed in surveys in other countries, enabling us to compare the attitudes of Chinese citizens with their counterparts elsewhere. Particularly important in this regard were replications of questions used in the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), which carried out several rounds of surveys in Eastern European countries, the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and West Germany beginning in 1991.¹⁹

For the 2004 China national survey, we employed spatial probability sampling, a technique developed by project colleagues Pierre Landry and Shen Mingming.²⁰ Using this procedure, in 2004 a nationally representative sample of 3,267 Chinese adults ages 18–70 were interviewed, with a response rate of about 75 percent. The 2009 survey was a follow-up to the 2004 survey, conducted to assess changes in popular attitudes over time and in reaction to the post-2008 global financial crisis. The same sampling frame was used as in 2004, and we interviewed 2,967 respondents nationally, a response rate of about 70 percent. The passage of time required us to draw a new set of sampling points for the 2014 survey, although following the same basic sample design. The new survey repeated virtually all of the same attitude questions regarding inequality and distributive justice issues, making possible comparisons of Chinese attitudes at three separate points of time at five-year intervals. In the 2014 survey 2,507 respondents were interviewed, with a response rate of about 66 percent.

CHINESE ATTITUDES TOWARD INEQUALITY IN TEMPORAL AND CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

I present here tables that place the Chinese attitudes in comparative context.²¹ The responses from each Chinese survey are displayed in the first three columns

19. See, in particular, James Kluegel, David Mason, and Bernd Wegener, eds., *Social Justice and Political Change* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995); David Mason and James Kluegel, eds., *Marketing Democracy: Changing Opinion about Inequality and Politics in East Central Europe* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). The ISJP focus on Eastern Europe includes Russia and several other parts of the former Soviet Union. Not all the countries included in the ISJP project are used in the comparative tables presented later in this article. In all ISJP rounds, separate surveys were administered in the former West and East German portions of Germany. Data reported here from the most recent rounds of the ISJP project (in 2005 and 2006) were kindly shared through the assistance of Bernd Wegener.

20. For details on how this sampling method is carried out, see Pierre Landry and Shen Mingming, "Reaching Migrants in Survey Research: The Use of the Global Positioning System to Reduce Coverage Bias in China," *Political Analysis* 13, no. 1 (2005): 1–22. (Most China surveys continue to use household registration records as the basis for drawing samples, but those records are increasingly inaccurate due to the ability of Chinese citizens to move away from where they are registered. Spatial probability sampling selects respondents based on their de facto residential locations, no matter where they are legally registered.)

21. Note that there are two social volcano claims addressed in this analysis—whether anger about the unfairness of current income inequalities is rising in China, and whether such anger is already at levels as high as or higher than in other societies. The tables that follow allow us to address both claims—first by comparing the three China surveys and then by comparing all of the China results with the other countries included in these tables.

of each table.²² By comparing the first three percentages in each row of the tables, one can get a sense of how Chinese attitudes toward the statements in question changed over time. Since more than 70 attitude questions were included in our surveys, only a selection of results is presented here.

The remaining cells in each row in these tables display comparable percentages from the surveys conducted in multiple ISJP countries. That project conducted several rounds of surveys—in a broad range of advanced capitalist and East European postsocialist countries in 1991, in a smaller number of mostly East European countries in 1996, and then in a still smaller number of ISJP countries in 2005 or 2006. The columns in the middle of each table summarize responses in East European postsocialist countries, while the columns on the right summarize responses in advanced capitalist countries. These summaries for other countries are included to help assess whether Chinese anger about current inequalities in any survey year is high or low when compared with other societies. For all of the ISJP locales, only the results of the most recent survey are displayed.²³

There are multiple dimensions involved in thinking about the fairness or unfairness of current inequalities, and no single question or summary scale can represent this complexity.²⁴ Based on previous work analyzing distributive justice attitudes, I distinguish three distinct conceptual domains here. The first involves perceptions of current inequalities—the extent to which respondents think current income inequalities in their society are fair or unfair. A second domain concerns the optimism versus pessimism that respondents feel about opportunities for upward social mobility and obtaining social justice. The third and final domain concerns approval of income differentials versus preferences for greater

22. Since the 2004 and 2009 surveys sampled urban and rural locales separately, sampling weights were used to adjust the raw percentages to accurately reflect the views of all Chinese adults. Since the 2009 survey involved slightly different weights, the percentages for 2004 displayed in these tables, based on those revised weights, differ very slightly from those reported in earlier publications based on that survey alone. The 2014 China survey did not oversample urban localities, but sampling weights were nonetheless applied in order to make the results of that survey fully comparable to the 2004 and 2009 surveys. All results reported here are weighted percentages.

23. Germany gets two columns in each table, since, as noted earlier, ISJP has continued conducting separate surveys in former West Germany and East Germany. The ISJP also conducted surveys in some additional countries, such as Holland and Estonia, which are not included in these tables. By displaying only the most recent figures from the ISJP surveys, we assume that average figures for a particular country generally reflect persistent, dominant attitudes in each nation rather than highlight what was happening to the economy or other events and trends there in that particular survey year. Obviously this is something of simplification necessary to avoid drowning the reader in details, but we think it is a defensible assumption.

24. As noted earlier, each China survey included more than 70 questions regarding attitudes toward inequality. Even after combining related questions into scales, we ended up with 12 distinct inequality attitude measures in analyzing the 2004 survey data, with statistical associations across these measures quite weak. See the discussion in Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano*, chaps. 5–9.

equality and for a stronger government role in promoting equality. Responses to questions in each of these domains are displayed in sequence below, in tables 1, 2, and 3.

Perceptions of Current Inequalities

The first row in table 1 displays the results when survey respondents in each locale were asked, “Do you think the current income gaps among people in this country are too large, somewhat large, appropriate, somewhat small, or too small?” Here the percentages in each cell are a total of those who responded “too large” and “somewhat large.” Comparing the China results first, it is notable that the percentage of respondents who feel that national income gaps are too large increased from 71.9 percent in 2004 to 75 percent in 2009 and then to 81.5 percent in 2014. However, it is also evident that substantial majorities in all of the countries surveyed feel that their current national income gaps are too large. These Chinese responses look fairly moderate in comparative perspective—higher than in the US survey, similar to or a bit higher than the levels in the British, West German, and Japanese surveys, but below the levels in all of the East European ISJP countries (except Poland in 1991). In sum, Chinese respondents join their counterparts in many other societies in feeling that national income gaps are wider than they should be. Though Chinese are even more likely to feel this way in the most recent surveys, they are not unusually critical of those gaps.

In judging how fair or unfair current income gaps are, much more is involved than simply assessing the size of the gap between rich and poor. Arguably more important are views about who the rich are and how they obtained their wealth and who remains poor and why they are stuck in poverty. In the ISJP and China surveys, a battery of questions was asked to assess what psychologists call such attributions of poverty versus wealth. Each respondent was presented with a series of possible explanations for why some people and not others are poor and also with a series of possible explanations for why some people are rich. In each case they were asked to render judgments about whether a particular factor had a very large influence (on being poor, or on being rich), a large influence, some influence, a small influence, or no influence at all. Among the factors they were asked to rate, some were designed to stress individual merit (e.g., lack of effort explaining poverty, talent explaining wealth) and some to reflect societal unfairness (e.g., unequal opportunity explaining poverty, unfairness of the economic system explaining wealth). The next seven rows in table 1 display examples of comparative survey responses based on this set of questions.

Row 2 in table 1 displays perceptions of the importance of lack of ability in explaining who is currently poor. It is immediately obvious that on this question the responses in all three Chinese surveys are off the charts in comparison with any ISJP country, whether advanced capitalist or postsocialist. In all the China

Table 1. Perceptions of current inequalities (%)

	East European Postsocialist				Advanced Capitalist							
	China	Russia	Bulgaria	Hungary ^a	Czech Republic	Eastern Germany	Poland	United States	Great Britain	West Germany	Japan	
	2004	2009	2014	1996	1996	2005	2006	2006	1991	1991	2006	1991
1. National income gaps (somewhat large + too large)	71.9	75	81.5	86.3	84.8	94.9	88.6	69.7	65.2	75	78.4	72.6
2. Poverty and lack of ability (large + very large)	60.7	64.7	63.6	28	28.8	30.8	26.6	34.8	35.2	32.8	36.5	25.7
3. Poverty and low effort (large + very large)	54	64.7	62.1	39.1	45.3	28.5	32	42.8	47.8	34.9	44	62
4. Poverty and unfair economic structure (large + very large)	21.9	15.1	23.8	72.6	44.6	63.2	71.9	65.2	44.9	48.1	44.6	36.2
5. Wealth and ability (large + very large)	68.9	72.7	71.3	48.3	54.5	42	51.8	46	59.7	53.9	59.5	65.1
6. Wealth and hard work (large + very large)	61.3	67.4	68.3	38.1	53.5	26.5	50	32	66.2	60.2	62.5	48.4
7. Wealth and dishonesty (large + very large)	18.4	17.9	20.7	74.1	64.9	48.1	43	62.4	42.9	35.5	33.3	27.8
8. Wealth-unfair economy (large + very large)	26.8	20.5	28.8	72.7	57.8	65.5	57.4	52.2	39.4	44.5	35.6	53
9. Equal opportunities exist (agree + strongly agree)	37.8	37.9	36.9	22.8	31.2	11.9	20.3	25.5	65.9	41.8	31.8	38.1

Source: Comparative data from ISIP surveys, various years.

Note: Question wording:

1. Do you think that the current income gaps among people in this country are too large, somewhat large, appropriate, somewhat small, or too small?
2. In your opinion, to what degree does [lack of ability or competence] currently cause people to become poor: a very large degree, a large degree, to some degree, a small degree, or is not at all a factor in these people's poverty?
3. In your opinion, to what degree does [lack of individual effort] currently cause people to become poor?
4. In your opinion, to what degree does do [problems in the economic structure] currently cause people to become poor?
5. In your opinion, to what degree does [possessing ability or competence] currently cause people to become wealthy?
6. In your opinion, to what degree does [working hard] currently cause people to become wealthy?
7. In your opinion, to what degree does [dishonesty] currently cause people to become wealthy?
8. In your opinion, to what degree does [unfairness in the economic structure] cause people to become wealthy?
9. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Currently, the opportunities to be successful are the same for all people? (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree)

^a For Hungary, the figure in row 1 is from the 1996 survey.

surveys 61–65 percent feel that lack of ability plays a large role in explaining why some people remain poor, with only small differences across the three surveys. (Unlike on the national income gap question in row 1, if anything, views in the recent China surveys are more positive than in 2004.) In all of the ISJP countries only 26–37 percent share this view.

Row 3 displays responses to a comparable question about the role of lack of individual effort in explaining poverty. Here the Chinese responses are not as starkly different from other countries, but they tell much the same story. With the exception of Japan, none of the other countries rate lack of individual effort as so important in explaining poverty as do Chinese, and in Eastern Europe the rankings are substantially lower (29–45 percent versus 54–65 percent for China), with advanced capitalist countries more variable (from 35 percent to 62 percent). Once again the trend over time is for respondents in the more recent China surveys to rate lack of individual effort as even more important in explaining poverty than their 2004 counterparts. In sharp contrast, in row 4 only 15–24 percent of Chinese rate unfairness of the economic system as important in explaining who is poor, compared with 36–48 percent in advanced capitalist countries and 45–88 percent in East European postsocialist countries.

We now move on to explanations of why some people are rich. Row 5 displays responses to the perceived importance of talent and ability in explaining who is rich. The Chinese responses in all surveys give substantially greater emphasis to this merit factor (69–73 percent) than in any other country, with East European postsocialist countries stressing it the least (only 34–55 percent). Similarly, Chinese respondents believe in the role of hard work in explaining who is currently wealthy (61–68 percent, see row 6), with East European postsocialist countries emphasizing this factor much less (only 27–54 percent).

Row 7 displays responses to a question about the perceived role of dishonesty in explaining who is rich. The Chinese responses here are almost unbelievably low (only 18–21 percent stress this factor), much lower than advanced capitalist countries (28–43 percent), which are in turn much lower than East European countries (43–82 percent).²⁵ On this question the responses in all three Chinese surveys are quite uniform, with only a slightly stronger emphasis in 2014 than in the earlier surveys. Similarly, in row 8, when asked about unfairness of the current economic

25. That Chinese respondents place such low emphasis on dishonesty as a route to wealth was a surprise, particularly in view of the widespread public discussion in recent years about the seriousness of corruption. A couple of considerations put these responses in context. First, in any society when people answer questions such as these, they are most likely thinking of rich and poor people in their immediate social environment, not about distant and largely unknown new millionaires or not very visible rich relatives of high officials. Also, the question in row 7, replicated from ISJP, asks about dishonesty (*buchengshi*), but not specifically about corruption (*fubai*), as a source of wealth. If the question asked specifically about corruption as a source of wealth, most likely Chinese respondents would have emphasized this factor more.

structure as a factor explaining who is wealthy, in all of the China surveys respondents stressed this factor much less than in any other country (21–29 percent). Although this response is higher in the 2014 Chinese survey than earlier, it remains much lower than in any of the ISJP countries.

Finally, row 9 displays responses to a statement that currently the opportunities to be successful are the same for everyone in society. Here the American respondents in 1991 are off the charts, with almost 66 percent agreeing that equal opportunities exist for all. The figures for China, where 37–38 percent agree in each survey, are roughly comparable to the figures for the advanced capitalist countries other than the United States (32–42 percent), and substantially higher than in any of the East European countries (7–31 percent).

To summarize the comparisons in table 1, in almost all cases Chinese citizens perceived current inequalities substantially less critically than their counterparts in postsocialist Eastern Europe. While for some questions Chinese perceptions were similar to the advanced capitalist countries, for others they were substantially more favorable. In general Chinese are more likely to perceive current inequalities as based on merit, and therefore as fair, than their counterparts elsewhere. Regarding changes over time in Chinese attitudes, on only one question (views on national income gaps, in row 1) is there any indication of Chinese attitudes becoming steadily more critical over time. In the other rows the differences across the three China surveys are relatively small, although on balance there are slight tendencies for the 2009 respondents to be least critical of current inequalities, and for the 2004 and 2014 respondents to be slightly more critical. Clearly there is no support here for the view that China's distributive injustice social volcano is heading toward an eruption.

Optimism versus Pessimism about Upward Mobility and Social Justice

The second domain of distributive justice attitudes concerns optimism versus pessimism about the opportunities for ordinary people to improve their standard of living and obtain social justice. Row 1 in table 2 displays responses to a question about what respondents predict their family's economic situation will be five years later, with each cell displaying the sum of those responding "much better" and "a little better." Unfortunately this question was not asked in several of the ISJP country surveys or in any of the advanced capitalist ones. Nevertheless, the exuberant optimism in all the China surveys on this question (with 62–76 percent expecting improvement), compared with the much more pessimistic views in the available East European surveys (only 21–22 percent optimistic), is quite striking. And on this question the 2009 respondents express even more optimism than their 2004 counterparts, and the 2014 respondents still more.

The next two questions ask respondents to predict whether the percentage of people in their society who are poor, and who are rich, will increase, remain

Table 2. Optimism versus pessimism (%)

	China				East European Postsocialist				Advanced Capitalist					
	2004	2009	2014	1996	Russia	Bulgaria	Hungary ^a	Czech Republic	Eastern Germany ^b	Poland	United States	Great Britain	West Germany	Japan
1. Family income in 5 years (better + much better)	61.7	72.9	76.3	22	20.5	21.1	...	...	22.3	...	...	...	...	...
2. Percentage poor in 5 years (increase)	26.7	13.1	17.9	47.9	75.1	77.4	...	...	79.6	74.5	69	58	43.1	37.2
3. Percentage rich in 5 years (increase)	60.2	61.9	59.7	41.5	32.4	42.3	...	...	45.1	57.9	29.1	34.5	46.3	36.7
4. Hard work always rewarded (agree + strongly agree)	61	65.5	58.4	10.7	2.8	25.9	22.7	22.7	34.7	8.5	37.4	18.7	47	16.6
5. No sense in talking of justice (agree + strongly agree)	34.9	36.8	40.4	45.5	50.1	43.3	41.2	41.2	52.7	49.2	27.6	34.4	46.1	28.6
6. Can't tell justice meaning (agree + strongly agree)	38.9	35.1	43.3	54.4	62.7	64.8	59.9	59.9	65.2	64.1	58.8	61.9	52.3	62.9
7. Officials don't care (agree + strongly agree)	50.2	45.2	52.5	69.7	76.3	58.8	70	76.6	76.6	72.3	64	66.5	65.9	74.7

Source: Comparative data from ISJP surveys, various years.

Note: Question wording:

1. Five years from now, do you estimate that your family economic situation will be much better, a little better, no change, a little worse, or much worse?

2. In the next five years, do you think the percentage of poor people [those who cannot support basic living conditions like food, clothing and housing] in our country will increase, decrease, or stay the same?

3. In the next five years, do you think the percentage of wealthy people [those who can pretty much buy anything for themselves] in our country will increase, decrease, or stay the same?

4. In our country, hard work will always be rewarded. (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree)

5. Since we are unable to change the status quo, discussing social justice is meaningless. (same response categories)

6. Looking at things as they are now, it is very difficult to clarify what is just and what is unjust. (same response categories)

7. Government officials don't care what common people like me think. (same response categories)

^a For Hungary figures in rows 1, 2, 3, and 7 are from the 1996 survey.

^b For Eastern Germany the figure in row 1 is from the 1996 survey.

about the same, or decrease in the next five years. Only a minority of respondents in each Chinese survey expect the proportion who are poor to increase, with the figure in the 2009 survey strikingly low, only 13 percent, and only slightly higher in 2014. In contrast, a large majority in most East European countries expects the proportion of people who are poor to increase, and respondents in both the United States and in Great Britain were also quite pessimistic. (West Germans and Japanese were less pessimistic but still markedly more so than their Chinese counterparts.)

On the flip side, row 3 displays responses about the expected proportion of rich people. Here the contrast with the Chinese figures is not quite so striking, but nonetheless in all three Chinese surveys higher percentages expect the proportion who are rich to increase (60–62 percent) than in any of the ISJP surveys. The percentage of Chinese who express agreement with the (dubious) social mobility statement that “hard work is always rewarded” is displayed in row 4. Chinese were again more likely to agree (61 percent in 2004, 66 percent in 2009, and 58 percent in 2014) than in any of the other countries. West Germans, Americans, and East Germans fall far behind Chinese levels of agreement that hard work is always rewarded, and most other East European countries show strong disagreement (only 3 percent of Bulgarians and 9 percent of Poles agree).

The next three questions ask for reactions to pessimistic statements about social justice. Row 5 displays the sum of those who agree or strongly agree with the statement that it doesn't make sense to talk about social justice because you can't change things anyway. The percentages of Chinese agreeing with this fatalistic statement (35–40 percent) are modestly lower than the figures in all of the East European surveys (41–53 percent), but they are in the middle range in comparison with advanced capitalist countries. On this question the levels of Chinese fatalism increase from survey to survey, but only modestly. Next, when asked whether under current conditions it is hard to say anymore what is just and what is unjust (row 6), Chinese are substantially less likely to express agreement than their counterparts in any of the ISJP countries. While Chinese responded more pessimistically in 2014 than earlier, they were still below the levels of pessimism in the other countries.

Finally, row 7 displays levels of agreement with the general statement “government officials do not care what common people like me think.” Here about half the Chinese in all three surveys agree with this statement (45–53 percent), but they are still markedly less likely to do so than their counterparts elsewhere. Once again the most pessimistic views were expressed by East Europeans, although Japanese respondents also had surprisingly jaundiced views. These Chinese responses are particularly surprising because in all of the other countries displayed here, citizens have regular opportunities to express their displeasure with government officials through the ballot box via direct elections, a mechanism available to Chinese only at the rural village level.

A summary of the results for the attitude domain of optimism versus pessimism about opportunities and social justice (table 2) is similar to the previous domain of perceptions of the fairness versus unfairness of current inequalities. In all of these comparisons Chinese respondents express views that are either fairly similar to, or more optimistic than, their counterparts in the ISJP surveys. Comparing Chinese attitudes across time, except for the question about expected family income five years from now (row 1), respondents in 2014 had slightly more negative attitudes than their counterparts in 2004 and 2009, but these differences are modest. Again we find no sign here that Chinese anger over blocked opportunities and injustice is particularly high or systematically on the increase, contrary to social volcano scenario claims.

Preferences for Greater Equality versus Approval of Income Differentials

The third and final inequality attitude domain involves whether respondents would prefer greater social equality and a more active role by the government in promoting equality, versus whether they approve of, and recognize the positive incentive effects of, prevailing income differentials. When asked whether distributing wealth and income equally to all is the fairest approach (in row 1 of table 3), there is relatively strong Chinese support, with around a third of respondents in each survey expressing agreement. This was higher than in any of the ISJP country surveys with the curious exception of Japan in 1991, where almost 38 percent agree. So despite the fact that Chinese have more positive views than their counterparts elsewhere about current income gaps (tables 1 and 2), they also express relatively strong support for total equality of distribution, although slightly less so in 2014 than in 2009.

When asked whether the government should guarantee a minimum standard of living for everyone (row 2), Chinese support is much higher, and this support increased across surveys, from 81 percent in 2004 to 89 percent in 2014. On this question the United States is the outlier, with only 56 percent of Americans approving of a government minimum income guarantee. The much higher levels of support compared with the United States expressed by Chinese is not, however, all that unusual in a broader comparison. In the other ISJP surveys, support for minimum income guarantees ranged from 76 percent to 93 percent, placing Chinese responses roughly in the middle of the pack.

However, when presented with the statement “in order to meet everyone’s needs, there should be redistribution from the rich to the poor” (row 3), Chinese respondents in all three surveys are relatively unenthusiastic, with the least support for income distribution expressed in the most recent Chinese survey (25 percent, down slightly from 27 percent in 2009 and 30 percent in 2004). Responses in the ISJP countries are quite variable, with Germans east and west along with Hungarians strongly supportive of income redistribution (67–80 percent) but Czechs

Table 3. Favor equality or differentials (%)

	East European Postsocialist								Advanced Capitalist				
	China		Russia	Bulgaria	Hungary	Czech Republic	Eastern Germany	Poland	United States	Great Britain	West Germany	Japan	
	2004	2009	2014	1996	1996	2005	2006	2006	1991	1991	2006	1991	
1. Fairest-equal distribution (agree + strongly agree)	29.3	35.9	32.5	28.6	32.4	22.5	13	30.9	19.1	19.2	28.9	22.3	37.5
2. Govt minimum income floor (agree + strongly agree)	80.6	85.8	88.7	90.8	92.5	90.9	77.5	86.4	85.3	55.9	82.1	76.2	80.6
3. Fair-redistribute to meet needs (agree + strongly agree)	29.9	27.4	24.9	44.9	36.8	67.2	34.2	79.6	50.9	45	46.7	69.3	30
4. Government limit top income (agree + strongly agree)	33.9	31.1	32.7	39.5	43.7	60.9	22.6	59.1	44.3	16.7	37.9	40	33.4
5. Business profits benefit all (agree + strongly agree)	38.7	27.4	15.3	39.2	13.1	17.7	34.5	32.3	49.5	51.1	42	38.9	51.3
6. Income gap fosters hard work (agree + strongly agree)	50.6	46.1	38.4	41.7	39.3	20.2	42.9	52.3	65.5	61.3	62.7	58.4	48.5
7. Fair-keep what you earn (agree + strongly agree)	62.8	69.5	72.3	80.1	68.1	54.9	75.8	85.9	63.8	92.9	81.2	84.7	65.9
8. Fair-rich kids better education (agree + strongly agree)	64.6	58.3	59	60	60.1	30.3	35.1	37.4	67.9	65.2	56.3	42.8	50.9

Source: Comparative data from ISJP surveys, various years.

Note: Question wording:

1. Distributing wealth and income equally among people is the most just method. (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree)
2. The government should assure that every person is at least able to maintain a minimum standard of living. (same response categories)
3. In order to satisfy everyone's needs, even if you must take from the rich to assist the poor, it should be done. (same response categories)
4. The government should regulate the highest level of income for an individual. (same response categories)
5. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: If businesspeople make profits, in the end everyone in society benefits. (same response categories)
6. Only when income differences are large enough will individuals have the incentive to work hard. (same response categories)
7. People have the right to keep what they have earned, even if the result is gaps between rich and poor in society. (same response categories)
8. It is fair that those who are able to pay for it can obtain better educational opportunities for their children. (same response categories)

and Japanese almost as unenthusiastic (30–34 percent) as their Chinese counterparts. Both Chinese and Japanese responses to the questions in rows 1 and 3 seem paradoxical, with relatively strong support for equal distribution but weak support for redistribution in order to achieve that goal.

The negative Chinese view of official efforts to penalize the rich is confirmed by responses to whether a maximum income limit should be placed on all individuals (row 4). Here Chinese again show a fairly low level of support (31–34 percent). Among ISJP countries the United States is again the outlier, with only 17 percent approving of income limits. The other countries display as much or greater approval of income limits as do the Chinese, with the greatest support in Eastern Europe (except for the Czech Republic, where only 23 percent approve).

We now shift to questions involving approval of income gaps and material incentives. Row 5 displays responses to the Adam Smithian statement that it is all right for businesspeople to make profits, because in the end everyone in society benefits. Chinese responses show a change over time toward substantially more negative responses—from 39 percent of Chinese surveyed in 2004 agreeing with this statement to only 15 percent in 2014.²⁶ Support for this view is generally stronger in the advanced capitalist countries (39–51 percent) and somewhat weaker in Eastern Europe (except for Russia and Poland), with Bulgarians (13 percent) and Hungarians (18 percent) about as unlikely as Chinese in 2014 to agree that everyone benefits when businesspeople make profits.

Another question asked for reactions to the statement that only when income differences are large enough will individuals have the incentive to work hard (row 6). This view is in line with the “functionalist” argument conveyed early in the reform era by Deng Xiaoping’s famous statement that “some people in rural areas and cities should be allowed to get rich before others” (because envy of the newly rich will provide incentives for others). The Chinese surveys show declining support for this view, from 51 percent in 2004 to 46 percent in 2009 and only 38 percent in 2014. These Chinese responses are toward the low end compared with ISJP surveys—higher than for Hungary (only 20 percent), but in the same range as Bulgaria, Russia, and the Czech Republic, and less approving of income differentials than respondents in the advanced capitalist countries (as well as East Germany and Poland).

At the same time, however, most Chinese feel it is fair for people to keep what they have earned, even if this results in a gap between rich and poor (row 7). Agreement with this view has increased across time in the Chinese surveys, from

26. In the 2000 pilot survey in Beijing that preceded our first national survey, 64 percent of respondents agreed that businesspeople making profits was beneficial to society, perhaps indicating an even more dramatic decline in support for this view over a longer period.

63 percent in 2004 to 72 percent in 2014.²⁷ However, this is still lower than approval of keeping what you earn in several of the ISJP countries, both post-socialist and capitalist. Finally, row 8 displays responses to a statement that it is fair for rich families to obtain better schooling for their children. On this question we see a modest decline in Chinese levels of agreement over time (from 65 percent in 2004 to 58–59 percent in the two later surveys). Compared with ISJP countries, however, this is still moderately high agreement, a bit below the levels in the Polish (68 percent) and US surveys (65 percent), similar to Russia and Bulgaria (both 60 percent), but substantially higher than in Hungary, the Czech Republic, and East Germany, as well as in West Germany and Japan.

How can we make sense of the variety of patterns in table 3? Chinese respondents obviously have disparate views on these questions rather than a simple preference either for equality or for income differentials. They favor equality pursued via leveling up of the poor rather than leveling down of the rich.²⁸ Chinese also appear to believe that allowing people to keep their wealth is a simple matter of fairness, rather than being justified because this will promote incentives for others, economic productivity, and societal prosperity.

Summing Up: Trends in Chinese Attitudes vis-à-vis Distributive Injustice

Taken together, the trends in Chinese responses between 2004 and 2014 shown in table 3 convey a different message than tables 1 and 2. Those earlier tables indicate that Chinese hold unusually accepting and even on some questions increasingly positive views about the fairness of the current structure of income inequalities and about the opportunities for ordinary citizens to pursue prosperity and obtain just treatment within that structure. In other words, there is little indication in those two attitude domains of rising dissatisfaction with the status quo, despite the fact that income inequalities in China have continued to increase.

However, a different message is conveyed by the responses in table 3: that Chinese citizens would like to see greater equality pursued through more measures to assist their poor and disadvantaged fellow citizens and that they are also skeptical of claims that current income gaps are necessary or desirable. In some respects these critical sentiments strengthened between 2004 and 2014. So in terms of preferences for equality versus inequality, the results in table 3 reveal some ris-

27. The trends in Chinese responses shown in table 3, rows 5 and 7, appear contradictory. The view that business profits play a positive role in society has been increasingly rejected, while views on individuals keeping what they earn have become more positive. Perhaps these contrary trends suggest that more Chinese respondents in recent years feel that many businesspeople have not earned the profits they are making.

28. During the Cultural Revolution Mao Zedong mainly promoted equality by leveling down, with practices that violated normal views on equitable distribution. See the discussion in Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano*.

ing dissatisfaction with the status quo.²⁹ But this rising dissatisfaction with current income inequalities mainly involves concern about those Chinese citizens who remain impoverished, rather than resentment against the rising and lavishly displayed wealth of the nouveau riche (although businesspeople have lost some favor). Even in this one domain of rising dissatisfaction, then, we see no evidence of a distributive injustice social volcano that is heading toward an eruption.

WHY HAS THE DISTRIBUTIVE INJUSTICE SOCIAL VOLCANO REMAINED DORMANT?

In view of the sharp rise in the gap between rich and poor, why does the average Chinese continue to hold such approving views on the fairness of current inequalities? Two trends are likely responsible for this acquiescence with rising income gaps: substantial trickling down of the benefits of China's robust and sustained economic growth, as well as the positive impressions created by the "growth with equity" and "harmonious society" government initiatives and rhetoric of recent years.

Taking the first factor first, it is important to stress the broad improvements in their lives that the overwhelming majority of Chinese citizens have experienced during the reform era. Critics sometimes talk of the "bottom billion" of Chinese who are being left out as a minority get rich,³⁰ but most of our respondents do not agree. The optimism about future improvements in their family incomes displayed in table 2 (row 1) is rooted in their own recent experiences, as well as in what they see happening to their neighbors and friends.

Table 4 presents available indicators of trends in personal well-being across our China surveys. In 2004 63 percent of respondents reported that their family's economic situation had improved compared with five years earlier, with this figure rising to 79 percent in 2014 (row 1). Other indicators in the table show that respondents in the most recent survey were doing at least as well as, and in many cases significantly better than, those we interviewed in 2009, who were in turn doing better than their 2004 counterparts. For example, we see in these figures steady gains in ownership of refrigerators, computers (as well as access to the Internet), and automobiles, as well as modest increases in satisfaction with their living standard and even ratings of their physical health.

So despite publicly aired criticisms about corruption and the ill-gotten gains of the very rich, most Chinese feel they have continued to benefit by working within current structures of inequality, and for the most part they expect to be able to

29. For more details on this point, based on just the 2004 and 2009 surveys, see Whyte and Im, "Is the Social Volcano Still Dormant?"

30. See, e.g., John Lee, "As China Gets Richer, Its People Get Poorer," *New Straits Times* (Singapore), October 6, 2009.

Table 4. Material condition of Chinese (%)

	2004	2009	2014
Family living standard compared with 5 years earlier (better)	63	75.4	79.1
Satisfaction with current living standard (positive satisfaction)	31.8	40.5	43.6
Rating of own physical health (fairly good or very good)	56.7	61.1	63.5
Covered by public medical insurance? (yes)	24.7	85.3	93.6
Covered by public old age insurance, pension? (yes)	20	25.9	48.5
Own current residence? (yes)	81.9	84.1	84
Household possessions (percentage that owns):			
Color TV	79.5	95.6	97.2
Refrigerator	37.4	53.9	88.1
Motorcycle or scooter	35.3	51.2	50.8
Computer	13.8	27.3	59.1
Automobile	5.1	8.4	28.7
Use the Internet? (at least some)	26.9	35.8	51

continue to do so in the future. In other words, it is not simply Party propaganda and censorship of critical ideas that promote acceptance of current inequalities as relatively fair but the personal experiences of average Chinese families.

The work of Albert Hirschman on the tolerance of ordinary people around the world toward inequality in the course of economic development helps explain these results. Hirschman used the analogy of a “tunnel effect” to characterize the situation: if two lanes of cars are stuck in a tunnel and only one lane starts to move, do drivers in the lane that is still stuck get angry or feel hopeful? Hirschman argues that at least initially, they will feel hopeful that the good fortune of drivers in the other lane is a sign that their own lane will soon start to move. He also notes, however, that if this situation continues too long, the hope of the stuck drivers may turn to intense anger.³¹ By the evidence of our surveys, in 2004, 2009, and still in 2014, the buoyant growth of the Chinese economy and the resulting steady improvements in family living standards were still inspiring hopefulness about the future despite the rising gaps between rich and poor.³²

31. Albert Hirschman, “The Changing Tolerance for Inequality in the Course of Economic Development,” *World Development* 1, no. 12 (1973): 29–36.

32. Also supportive of the idea of the continued operation of a tunnel effect are responses to a new question we added in 2009 about how respondents perceived people who lived around them were doing compared with five years earlier. An astounding 82.3 percent responded that their neighbors were generally doing better or much better, and in 2014 this figure increased further to 85.1 percent. Another possible influence on acceptance of current income gaps is China’s historical tradition. For centuries prior to 1911, China had paternalistic rulers presiding over a very unequal society, but one that was also characterized by high rates of social

The most dramatic improvement displayed in table 4 is the sharp rise in coverage by public medical insurance, from only 25 percent in 2004 to 85 percent in 2009 and then 94 percent in 2014. This impressive progress points to the second proposed explanation for Chinese acquiescence with widening income gaps—state policies designed to reduce inequality. This dramatic rise is the result of a high-priority government-led effort to rapidly spread a very modest level of medical insurance coverage in order to avoid the financial devastation earlier experienced by many poor families who could not afford needed medical care. The expansion of medical insurance coverage is only one of several “harmonious society” official policies that were implemented and widely publicized during the period covered by our first two surveys, with efforts continuing after 2012 (without using that slogan) under Xi Jinping. Those programs also included a waiving of tuition fees for the first nine grades of education, eliminating the grain tax, offering minimum livelihood assistance payments to urban and then to rural families, and targeted efforts to improve livelihoods in designated impoverished rural counties.³³ While not quite as dramatic, the sharp rise in public old age insurance coverage, from only 20 percent in 2004 to 49 percent in 2014 (row 5) is also impressive. Given trends such as these, even families who did not benefit much from these policies are still likely aware of these state-directed social equity efforts. They may well be persuaded that China’s leaders are genuinely concerned about improving the lives of the nation’s poor and disadvantaged citizens.

My contention, then, is that the combination of robust economic growth and a wide range of highly publicized policies aimed at helping the poor has acted to keep the distributive injustice social volcano dormant. If this contention is correct, then ensuring that this threat to political stability remains dormant in the future will depend on sustaining an acceptable level of economic growth that provides broad benefits to ordinary Chinese, as well as on the leaders’ ability to continue to adopt measures that convey that they care about the lives of the disadvantaged. China’s leaders have an impressive track record so far of using their considerable financial, bureaucratic, and communication resources to make sure that the distributive injustice social volcano remains dormant. Even with the somewhat slower economic growth rates expected in the future, it seems likely that the Party can continue to prevent the distributive injustice social volcano from erupting.

mobility. Arguably, China has returned to a similar and thus familiar social order after the unusual detour through Mao’s socialist system, which involved less inequality but also less mobility, after the 1950s. See my discussion in Martin K. Whyte, “Sub-optimal Institutions but Superior Growth: The Puzzle of China’s Economic Boom,” in *China’s Economic Dynamics: A Beijing Consensus in the Making?*, ed. Jun Li and Liming Wang (London: Routledge, 2014), 31–33.

33. For a more systematic analysis of a wide variety of harmonious society programs, see Li, Sato, and Sicular, *Rising Inequality in China*.

CHINA'S ACTIVE SOCIAL VOLCANO

The fact that the average Chinese citizen accepts the large and growing gap between rich and poor has not translated into a satisfied and quiescent society. There has been rising social turbulence that can be mainly attributed to anger directed at another injustice target—at inequalities in power rather than in income. What is the evidence that China faces a more active social volcano fueled by power gaps and resulting procedural injustices?

Unfortunately, I am unable to provide the same kind of systematic survey evidence on levels and trends in popular anger about abuses of power, official corruption, lack of redress for mistreatment, and other forms of political injustice, and for a very simple reason. Investigating injustices stemming from power inequalities via surveys as systematically as we have examined distributive injustice issues remains off limits politically. We were not able to include more than a few questions related to procedural injustices (to be reviewed below) in our surveys, and that situation is unlikely to change. Indeed, most observers agree that the Party has become even more sensitive about criticisms of abuses of power since Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, with tightened controls over information about protest activities and increased harassment and arrests of activists and lawyers who try to publicize official abuses.³⁴

In making my claim about injustices stemming from power inequalities being a more serious threat to Party rule than distributive injustices, I am primarily relying on journalistic accounts and research reports on a wide variety of protests in recent years that involve very diverse groups (peasants, migrant laborers, factory workers, urban homeowners, pensioners, religious believers, ethnic minorities, etc.) and specific issues (e.g., agricultural land seizures; environmental threats and disasters; urban housing demolition; oppressive treatment of labor; coercive enforcement of family planning; destruction of places of worship; failure to protect the public from food contamination, environmental pollution, and other hazards; etc.).³⁵ Even though systematic survey research on these issues is not feasible, a considerable amount of information has now accumulated—through field observations, in-depth interviewing, and other methods—about the mass protests that have erupted in recent years.

34. See Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–43.

35. See, e.g., Chung, Lai, and Xia, "Mounting Challenges to Governance in China"; Thomas Lum, *Social Unrest in China* (Washington, DC: US Congressional Research Service, 2006); Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Yongshun Cai, *Collective Resistance in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Eli Friedman, *The Insurgency Trap: Labor Politics in Post-socialist China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

When viewing this evidence about China's active social volcano, one is struck by the fact that almost nowhere in these protests are there indications of anger directed at the very rich. Instead, the targets of popular anger are generally authority figures—sometimes employers and managers of polluting factories or makers and sellers of adulterated food products but even more often political authorities. Usually these are local political leaders, with protestors not infrequently appealing to higher-level officials or even the top leadership in Beijing to intervene and correct injustices. Nevertheless, China's leaders are clearly very worried that such local protests could escalate and, if not handled promptly and effectively, erupt into political protests directed at higher levels and the entire system. The Chinese leadership is aware that this is precisely what happened in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in 1989–91, as well as in the more recent Color Revolutions and the Arab Spring.

Even though we could not systematically explore procedural injustices in our China surveys, we were able to include a few questions that provide some insight into how average citizens feel about power vis-à-vis income inequalities. Table 5 contains available comparisons that deal with feelings of fairness or unfairness regarding two contrasting features of contemporary China: the wealth differences that have resulted from market reforms versus institutionalized inequalities stemming from China's socialist political system. The latter involves two different types of institutional features: (a) the categorical discrimination experienced by those who hold a rural or agricultural household registration (*hukou*) as against those who have an urban household registration, and (b) the special treatment received by people in positions of power. In other words, the questions displayed in table 5 concern advantages enjoyed by some Chinese (and the disadvantages ex-

Table 5. Attitudes toward income versus power inequalities (%)

	2004	2009	2014
1. Fair-rich obtain better schooling for kids (agree + strongly agree)	64.6	58.3	59
2. Fair-rich obtain better housing (agree + strongly agree)	58.8	53.8	46.8
3. Fair-rich obtain better medical care (agree + strongly agree)	47.6	38.7	35.7
4. Fair-urban hukou have more opportunities (agree + strongly agree)	25.3	20.6	18.4
5. Fair-rural migrants unable to get urban hukou (agree + strongly agree)	14.9	11.4	9.9
6. Fair-migrants unable to get urban benefits (agree + strongly agree)	9.3	8.6	8
7. Fair-those in power receive special treatment (agree + strongly agree)	21.9	16.2	13
8. Inequalities exist to benefit rich and powerful (agree + strongly agree)	51.2	43.3	48.6
9. Unfair treatment by local officials in last 3 years (agree + strongly agree)	26.7	10.4	12.9
10. Officials don't care what ordinary people think (agree + strongly agree)	50.2	45.2	52.5

perienced by others) as a result of market competition versus the advantages reaped through bureaucratic power and preferences.

The first three rows display responses to whether it is fair for rich people to use their financial resources to obtain better schooling for their children (a repetition of row 8 in table 3), better housing than others, and better medical care. Two patterns are visible in these responses. First, a majority or near majority in all three surveys agree or strongly agree that it is fair for rich families to obtain better schooling for their children and better housing than others, but the approval level is lower regarding access to medical care (although a substantial minority agree). Second, on all three questions there is a clear drop in approval levels between 2004 and 2009, and on housing and medical care this decline continues through 2014. Evidently support for the idea that rich people are entitled to use their incomes to obtain better access to basic public goods has weakened somewhat over time.

In urban China today one's access to opportunities and services is affected not only by income but also by where you were born and by the resulting distinction between having a rural (agricultural) or urban (nonagricultural) household registration. Urban migrants are systematically discriminated against in multiple ways, no matter how long they have lived and worked in a city, although in recent years the Party has pledged to eventually eliminate this bias.³⁶ This bureaucratically determined barrier is a legacy of the socialist institutions of the Mao era, and granting or denying opportunities based on the location of one's birth and the registrations of one's parents rather than on one's own abilities and performance obviously conflicts fundamentally with the declared principles of China's market reforms.

In any case, rows 4–6 in table 5 display responses on whether it is fair for urban *hukou* holders to have more opportunities than people with rural registrations; whether it is fair for rural migrants to be unable to obtain urban registrations; and whether it is fair for rural migrants to be denied access to urban welfare benefits. On these questions again there are two clear patterns visible. First, only relatively small minorities in each survey (8–25 percent) agree or strongly agree that such discrimination against migrants is fair, substantially fewer than approve of rich families using their wealth to obtain advantages. Second, there is less support in 2009 for discrimination against migrants than in 2004, and even less so by 2014. Obviously the figures from rows 1–3 and 4–6 are not exactly comparable, since they are asking about different kinds of advantages and disadvantages. Nonetheless, this comparison suggests that there is a much stronger sense of unfairness surrounding discrimination based on one's *hukou*, a holdover from Chi-

36. Recently official statements proclaim that the distinction between agricultural and nonagricultural *hukou* should no longer be used to discriminate, but the continuing distinction between those with a local *hukou* and outsiders perpetuates systematic discrimination against de facto urban residents with rural origins.

na's socialist bureaucratic system, than about the advantages the rich have acquired due to market reforms.

The final four rows of table 5 display responses to questions that get closer to the fairness or unfairness of contemporary power inequalities: the percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree that it is fair for those in positions of power to enjoy special treatment; levels of agreement that inequalities exist because they benefit the rich and the powerful; the percentage who state that they or someone in their family experienced unfair treatment by local officials within the past three years; and finally row 10 repeats the responses (from table 2, row 7) to the statement that "government officials don't care what common people like me think."

The patterns in these last four rows are not quite as easy to interpret as the first six rows, and again they involve indicators that are not that comparable. It is clear from row 7 that power holders receiving special treatment is seen as about as unfair as rural migrants not being treated the same as urban citizens (and more unfair than rich families enjoying advantages). The figure in row 9 of 27 percent reporting mistreatment by local officials within the past three years in the 2004 survey seems very high, and even the 10 percent in 2009 and 13 percent in 2014 seem anything but trivial. About half of the respondents in all three surveys agree with the jaundiced statements that inequalities exist to benefit the rich and powerful (row 8) and that officials don't care what ordinary people think (row 10). Overall the results in table 5 indicate that power inequalities are resented more than income inequalities, lending support to my claim that procedural injustices are the more active social volcano in China today.

However, the trends over time in these survey results do not provide clear evidence that China's power inequality social volcano is approaching an eruption. True, fewer respondents in each successive survey think it fair for those in power to receive special treatment (row 7), but on the other three power inequality questions (in rows 8–10), the 2009 respondents had less critical views than their predecessors in 2004, although rebounding to somewhat more critical attitudes in 2014.

We also obtained insight into another domain of concerns, popular fears about environmental hazards, through questions we added only in the more recent surveys. In 2009 and 2014 we added questions about perceived vulnerability to pollution. The percentage who judged their local air quality to be deficient or very deficient in 2009 was 12.7 percent and increased in 2014 to 22.4 percent. The comparable figures about deficient or very deficient local drinking water were 17.6 percent in 2009 and 21.6 percent in 2014; regarding danger of exposure to chemical pollutants, the figures rose from 22.8 percent in 2009 to 32.3 percent in 2014. Not surprisingly, when we added a new question in 2014 about whether respondents felt their health was being endangered by environmental pollution, fully 73.5 percent said yes. Clearly on the environmental front, many Chinese citizens have a

growing feeling that they are not being protected from harm by the powers that be.³⁷

On official abuses of power and corruption, several questions asked only in 2014 also raise concern. One in 10 respondents reported that within the last three years they or a member of their family had experienced official confiscation of their farmland or housing, while roughly the same proportion reported that in this same timeframe they or a member of their family had to offer a “gift” to an official in order to get something taken care of. When asked in 2014 how seriously they viewed official corruption, fully 82.6 percent judged it was a serious or very serious problem. A follow-up question ought to provide some relief to leaders: 62.1 percent of respondents said they had some or much confidence in the government’s ability to solve the problem of official corruption. However, another 24.5 percent said they had very little or no confidence at all.

When it comes to the fairness of the social welfare distributions that the Party counts on to earn public favor, the 2014 survey revealed substantial popular distrust. One of the important policy changes since 1999 has been to develop a system of minimum livelihood assistance payments (referred to as *dibao*) for poor urban families, and then after 2006 to extend the program to poor rural families as well. Our surveys suggest that 80–90 percent of Chinese should view this program with approval (table 3, row 2). However, when asked how easy or difficult it would be to obtain *dibao* assistance if they needed it, 50.4 percent of respondents in the 2014 survey judged it would be difficult or impossible. Furthermore, fully 67.1 percent agreed with the statement that some people who qualify for *dibao* payments fail to receive them, while 66.7 percent agreed that some people receive *dibao* payments who are not eligible to receive them.³⁸ In short, there are substantial feelings of injustice surrounding the administration of a much vaunted social welfare program that in theory should help bolster support for the Party. To sum up, the limited number of questions we were able to ask (particularly new questions added in 2014) regarding inequalities based on power and about a sense of unfairness in how citizens are currently being treated show a higher per-

37. The connection between pollution problems and procedural injustice feelings is vividly conveyed by an online plea for support for activists such as Chai Jing (the maker of a 2015 documentary on China’s environmental crisis, *Under the Dome*): “In this messed-up country that’s devoid of law, cold-hearted, numb and arrogant, they’re like an eye grabbing sign that shocks the soul” (quoted in Christopher Buckley, “Documentary on Pollution Stirs Chinese,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2015).

38. An earlier survey in 2003–4 conducted in China’s 35 largest cities produced estimates that 71 percent of those surveyed who should have qualified to receive *dibao* payments were not receiving them, while 43 percent who were receiving such payments should not have qualified for them. See Martin Ravallion, Shaohua Chen, and Youjuan Wang, “Does the *Di Bao* Program Guarantee a Minimum Income in China’s Cities?,” in *Public Finance in China: Reform and Growth in a Harmonious Society*, ed. Jiwei Lou and Shulin Wang (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2008). Thanks to Dorothy Solinger for this reference and other information about the *dibao* program.

centage of Chinese expressing discontent on this front than are critical of the growing gap between rich and poor.

WHY ISN'T THE PARTY DOING MORE TO ADDRESS INJUSTICES STEMMING FROM POWER INEQUALITIES?

For close to two decades, Party leaders have sounded alarms about the potential dangers posed by China's growing income gap, and they have launched a variety of programs designed to combat the potential eruption of a distributive injustice social volcano. However, the idea that growing income gaps are the primary threat to political stability and Party rule is a misconception. Our surveys indicate that most Chinese are not that angry about the gap between rich and poor and that the numbers who feel disgruntled on that front have not increased systematically over time.

China's leaders have also warned about the dangers posed by injustices and malfeasance within the political realm, and they have proclaimed their intention to promote the rule of law, combat corruption, and undertake other countermeasures. However, in terms of actual reforms and structural changes, as opposed to simply propaganda and temporary campaigns, efforts to combat procedural injustices have made much less headway. Why, if power inequality is a greater threat to Party rule than income inequality, is less headway being made to combat this danger?

The answer to this puzzle lies in considering what is involved in efforts to combat distributive versus political injustices. The former require the mobilization of financial and bureaucratic resources to try to reverse the growing gap between rich and poor, or at least to provide greater relief and assistance to the poor. As discussed earlier, China's leaders have considerable financial and bureaucratic resources at their disposal, and they have used these on multiple fronts to promote distributive justice. In some cases (as in coverage by public medical and old age insurance) dramatic progress has been made. These efforts also do not confront strong resistance from entrenched interest groups.

When it comes to combatting injustices within the political sphere, the situation is quite different. How can one combat injustices such as shady deals by officials to confiscate farmland and urban housing, diversion of public resources for official enrichment, local governments' failures to protect the public from toxic chemical spills and adulterated food products, coercive enforcement of family planning, crackdowns on religion, and incarceration of critics of official abuses? What would be required is not so much financial and bureaucratic resources but rather structural reforms that place limits on the arbitrary power of those in authority. However, efforts that could in theory be taken to implement such limits—such as by making courts more autonomous, allowing freedom of the press, requiring mandatory disclosure of the finances of officials and their families, and

guaranteeing genuine freedom of speech and assembly, not to mention through allowing electoral challenges to those in authority—confront two major obstacles. Such reforms would threaten very powerful vested interests among the political elite devoted to the preservation of the status quo. They also would undermine the Leninist operating procedures that the Party uses to remain in power, thus hastening the weakening of Party power that the leaders are so desperate to avoid.

Even the recent high-profile campaign against official corruption launched by Xi Jinping has not broken this pattern, since decisions about which “tigers and flies” will face corruption charges are still monopolized internally by organs of the Party, not made by independent anticorruption agencies operating transparently. Furthermore, activists who promote measures that might help in this anti-corruption effort, such as demanding public disclosure of official assets, regularly face harassment and arrest. No matter how many victims this campaign claims, it cannot do much to reassure ordinary Chinese that the problems of corruption and other forms of political malfeasance have been successfully brought under control. Efforts to combat procedural injustices without carrying out basic reforms in the structures of power are not likely to make more than a superficial and temporary difference. Unless China's leaders are willing to change their basic operating procedures, break this impasse, and devise ways to more effectively combat abuses of power and other procedural injustices, there is no guarantee that they can keep China's active social volcano from eventually erupting.