



Is the social volcano still dormant? Trends in Chinese attitudes toward inequality



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ABSTRACT

Data from two China national surveys, in 2004 and 2009, focusing on popular attitudes toward current inequalities and mobility opportunities, are compared to examine two key questions: (1) Did the continued rise in income gaps and the impact within China of the global financial crisis lead to rising popular anger about the unfairness of current inequality patterns in 2009? and (2) Did the social contours of attitudes toward current inequalities shift over the five years between surveys? Through systematic comparisons of data from both surveys, we conclude that there is no general increase in anger about inequalities in the 2009 survey, and that the predictors of variations in these attitudes had changed relatively little, with the unexpectedly positive views of villagers still visible in 2009, although a bit muted. Trends in Chinese society between 2004 and 2009, and in the personal experience of survey respondents, are used to explain why popular acceptance of current inequalities remains widespread, despite continuing increases in China's income gaps.

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1. Introduction

Despite China's extraordinary success over more than three decades in generating economic growth, raising popular standards of living, and reducing poverty, one other trend has worried analysts and Chinese leaders since the late 1990s—the sharply increased income gaps that have accompanied China's growth. During the reform era, China has gone from being a relatively equal to a quite unequal society, as shown by the trend lines in the Gini statistics of household income distribution for selected countries displayed in Fig. 1. Many worry that popular anger over rising income gaps and unequal mobility opportunities may threaten China's political stability. For example, in an article in the *New York Times*, Kahn (2006) stated, "Because many people believe that wealth flows from access to power more than it does from talent or 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."

In 2004 Whyte and colleagues conducted the first national survey designed to examine the accuracy of this "social volcano scenario"—the claims that most Chinese are increasingly angry about high and rising levels of inequality, that the disadvantaged are particularly angry, and that such anger is likely to pose a threat to China's political stability. The survey results showed that in 2004 the social volcano scenario was a myth, or at least that the distributive injustice volcano was then quite dormant (see Whyte, 2010). Specifically, regarding most aspects of income inequality and chances for ordinary

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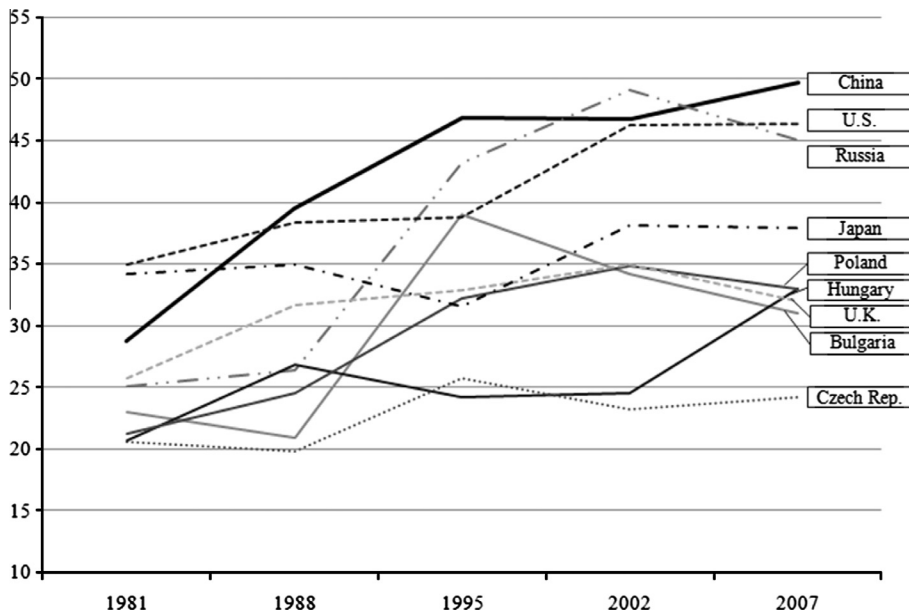


Fig. 1. Trends in Gini coefficients of income inequality, selected countries. Source: United Nations University, World Inequality Database Version 2.0c.

citizens to get ahead, the predominant views of Chinese citizens were acceptance and optimism, with more favorable attitudes than found in comparable surveys in other countries.¹

In addition, the social contours of inequality attitudes in 2004 were quite different from the usual pattern found in surveys in other societies. Most studies elsewhere report the prevalence of a “self-serving attribution bias” (or simply the self-interest principle), with individuals with high status or who have been upwardly mobile tending to view current patterns of inequality as fair (justifying their success), while low status and downwardly mobile individuals view them as unfair (with their poor standing undeserved)—see, for example, Meltzer and Richard (1981), Kluegel and Smith (1986), Mezulis et al. (2004). In analyzing the 2004 survey results, however, we found that objective status measures (such as income and Chinese Communist Party membership) were generally poor predictors of inequality attitudes, while in some instances our findings were directly contrary to what one would expect based on the principle of self-interest. The most dramatic and unexpected departure from conventional patterns was that on many inequality attitude measures, favored urbanites had somewhat more critical attitudes, while highly disadvantaged rural respondents had relatively more positive attitudes (for details, see Han, 2009; Whyte, 2010, Chaps. 5–9). (Rural vs. urban is not simply a question of location in China, but arguably the sharpest social cleavage in that society, structured by the household registration (*hukou*) system, a legacy of Mao’s socialism, that continues to make those of rural origins a separate and lower social caste—see Chan, 1994; Wang, 2005.)² These findings provided the basis not only for viewing the social volcano scenario as a myth, but also for concluding that it was a mistake to view rising income gaps and unequal mobility opportunities as a primary source of the popular anger that has often erupted to the surface in China in recent years.³

However, the 2004 survey data were a one-time snapshot of popular attitudes, and thus it was not possible to examine one basic element of the social volcano scenario—the claim that popular anger about distributive injustice issues is increasing over time. Furthermore, after the global financial crisis erupted in 2008 it appeared that China would be severely affected because of heavy dependence upon manufactured exports to fuel growth. Early in 2009, for example, there were media reports that more than 20 million migrant workers in export-oriented factories had been laid off. Given this context, Whyte and colleagues carried out a five-year follow-up survey late in 2009 to see whether or how the attitudes of Chinese citizens regarding issues of inequality and distributive injustice had changed compared with five years earlier.

The 2004 and 2009 China surveys were designed and carried out by a collaborative team, with Whyte as the principal investigator (see the listing of participants in the acknowledgments that follow this text). Both surveys employed spatial

¹ Comparisons of Chinese attitudes with national samples in other countries (both post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe and the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and West Germany) are presented and discussed in Whyte, 2010, Chapter 4. Comparative data will not be considered in the present paper.

² Throughout our survey analyses here we divide respondents into three groups according to their current location and household registration status: rural residents, rural to urban migrants, and urban citizens. When we refer to urbanites or urban citizens, we mean only those urban respondents whose household registrations (*hukou*) are in their current location, not to the migrants who are living in those same cities but do not possess urban *hukou*.

³ Based upon the 2004 survey findings and on the research of others on popular protest movements in China, we contend that it is procedural injustice issues, abuses of power, and the inability of citizens to obtain redress from such abuses that lie behind most mass protests, not rising income gaps and envy of the rich. Unfortunately we could not examine such procedural injustice issues in our China surveys, which focused specifically on distributive injustice issues.

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