

Revisiting China's Social Volcano: Attitudes toward Inequality and Political Trust in China

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Abstract

Existing literature suggests that despite rising inequality in China, Chinese people tend to tolerate inequality, so it would be unlikely that rising inequality would cause sociopolitical instability. Few studies, however, have systematically explained Chinese people's attitudes toward inequality, analyzed attitudinal changes over time, or examined the relationship between such attitudes and political trust. The author's analysis of national surveys in 2004, 2009, and 2014 yields three findings. First, critical attitudes toward inequality consistently correlate with a structural understanding of inequality and skepticism of procedural or institutional justice. Second, Chinese people's attitudes toward inequality changed little between 2004 and 2009, but between 2009 and 2014, there was increasing criticality of both inequality and its seeming disjuncture with China's socialist principles. Third, people who are discontent with income inequality in China are more likely than others to distrust the local government, and those who draw on socialism to critique inequality are also more likely to distrust the central and local governments. Together, these findings suggest rising inequality could have political ramifications.

Keywords

inequality, socialism, social volcano, political trust, China

Research in recent decades has systematically documented growing income and wealth inequality in many parts of the world (Alvaredo et al. 2017; Piketty 2014). Media, scholarly, and public attention to economic inequality is on the rise (Wright 2015). Extant studies suggest the need to attend not only to inequality but also to the actual and potential political effects of its growth, such as the emergence of the Occupy movement in the United States and the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) movement in France (Gerbaudo 2017; Giraud, Korreales, and Poggi 2019; Wright 2015). Thomas Piketty's (2014) influential work *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* did much to highlight the issue of contemporary inequality, yet critics argue that the book pays insufficient attention to the role and responses of social movements (Chase-Dunn and Nagy 2017). This research suggests an "inequality-conflict link," or the idea that rising inequality may lead to a "social volcano" of class conflicts, social movements, violent rebellion, or even revolution (Cramer 2005; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Meltzer and Richard 1981).

Nonetheless, scholars across a number of disciplines contest the direct link between rising inequality and public discontent, arguing that it is the perception of or attitudes toward

inequality, rather than the actual rate of inequality, that has important consequences for politics and public policy (Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Niehues 2014; Whyte 2010). Research on perceived inequality conducted by economists, political scientists, and psychologists using a variety of methodologies and analyzing different kinds of data converges on two often neglected facts. First, there is both widespread ignorance about and misperceptions of the actual level of inequality. Second, it is the perceived rather than actual level of inequality that correlates significantly with demands for redistribution and conflict between rich and poor (Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso 2018; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Hauser and Norton 2017). Accordingly, political scientists Gimpelson and Treisman (2018) contended that "most theories about political effects of inequality need to be reframed as theories about effects of perceived inequality" (p. 27).

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Consistent with Gimpelson and Treisman's assertion, scholars find that critical attitudes toward inequality, rather than the actual level of inequality, explain participation in protests (Jo and Choi 2019; Justino and Martorano 2016). These findings, as a whole, suggest the critical importance of understanding the subjective aspect of inequality.

This study joins the scholarly effort to analyze the subjective aspect of inequality and its potential political effects in an important and intriguing context, China, the second largest economy in the global capitalist system with an official ideology of socialism and an authoritarian regime. As Piketty and his colleagues have shown on the basis of their analysis of tax and national account data, China had a very low inequality level in the 1970s, but ironically, it has become one of the most unequal countries on the globe in terms of income and wealth distribution four decades after the country's 1978 economic reform (Alvaredo et al. 2017; Piketty, Yang, and Zucman 2019). Scholars who analyze survey data have, similarly, demonstrated a rapid increase of income and wealth inequality in China (Li and Wan 2015; Xie and Jin 2015; Xie and Zhou 2014). Rising inequality in China prompts questions about the subjective aspect of inequality and its political effects. As one of the four countries in the world that still have socialism as the official ideology in the constitution, the seeming decoupling between the level of objective inequality and the country's socialist principles makes the Chinese context particularly intriguing. China's authoritarian regime further magnifies the significance of the potential link between perceptions of or attitudes toward inequality and sociopolitical conflicts. The state's awareness of this risk is suggested by the fact that it stopped publicly releasing China's Gini coefficients, statistical measures that gauge economic inequality, between 2002 and 2012 (Riskin 2014).

Growing inequality in China and media discussion of how said inequality could lead to discontent and social instability have prompted scholars to examine Chinese people's attitudes toward inequality. Essentially, the focus has been on three issues: to what extent Chinese people tolerate inequality, how to explain attitudes toward inequality, and whether rising inequality is politically consequential. The scholarly consensus is that Chinese people tend to tolerate inequality, even when it is on the rise, making it unlikely to cause sociopolitical instability. This is so, scholars argue, because Chinese people consider inequality an inevitable outcome of meritocracy and a by-product of economic development; in addition, they remain optimistic about their own chances for mobility (Whyte 2010; Xie 2016).

Despite the efforts to study attitudes toward inequality in China, several inadequacies still exist. First, existing research does not directly analyze attitudes toward inequality in relation to China's socialist roots. This fails to take into consideration the country's unique political and historical context and how it might shape attitudes. Despite China's economic reform, many socialist slogans that promise to eliminate

economic polarization remain salient in people's daily lives. For example, even though the reform architect Deng Xiaoping began to tell Chinese people to "let some people get rich first," in 1985, in his famous 1992 Southern Tour talk that reconciled the reform with socialism, Deng (1993) stated, "The essence of socialism is liberation and development of the productive forces, elimination of exploitation and distributive polarization, and the ultimate achievement of prosperity for all" (p. 373). Principles like this have been written in textbooks, memorized by Chinese people, and tested in all kinds of exams in China. The coexistence of China's rising inequality and socialist principles leads to the question of how Chinese people relate inequality to socialist doctrines.

Second, existing studies suggest that Chinese people more or less accept or tolerate inequality because of the cultural norm of meritocracy in China and people's optimistic expectations of mobility (Whyte 2010; Wu 2009; Xie et al. 2012). Extant empirical analyses, however, do not systematically and simultaneously consider other factors that might influence people's attitudes toward inequality, such as a structural understanding of inequality or perceived fairness of the procedures and institutions distributing resources (Larsen 2016; Mijs 2019).

Third, most studies have analyzed survey data at only one point in time and have used cross-society or cross-country comparisons to interpret their results (Whyte 2010; Wu 2009; Xie et al. 2012). Research that compares the Chinese case with others often suggests that Chinese people more or less accept or tolerate inequality. One exception, however, is the work of Martin Whyte and Dong-Kyun Im (2014), who analyzed two waves of national surveys in 2004 and 2009. Despite continuously growing income inequality between 2004 and 2009 (Xie and Zhou 2014), Whyte and Im did not find increased discontent about inequality among Chinese people in this period. They contended there was no overall shift toward more critical views. In another article analyzing survey data in 2004, 2009, and 2014, Whyte (2016) similarly argued that "there also is no clear increase in such anger over time" (p. 9). Nonetheless, recent research analyzing Chinese Internet users' keyword search reveals that public concerns about inequality and mobility grew steadily after 2009 (Dai et al. 2018; Li, Chen, and He 2019). Studies of workers, college students, intellectuals, and activists also show that there is rising discontent with the apparent disjuncture between inequality and China's socialist principles in recent years (Blanchette 2019; Pun 2019). These findings suggest that Chinese people's attitudes toward inequality have indeed changed to some extent since 2009.

Fourth, we know little about the potential political effects of attitudes toward inequality. As mentioned, research has shown that the perception of and attitudes toward inequality do have political ramifications (Alesina et al. 2018; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Hauser and Norton 2017; Jo and Choi 2019; Justino and Martorano 2016). Whyte (2010) engaged

with the inequality-conflict link but only to declare concerns about emerging social volcanos a myth and argued instead that Chinese people tend to have a higher level of tolerance of inequality compared with people in other countries. His analysis did not delve into the relationship between attitudes toward inequality and sociopolitical stability. Xie (2016) made a similar assertion without providing empirical evidence on the relationship between inequality and any political outcomes. Recently, Zhou and Jin (2018) contended that the first step to appraise the political effects of inequality is to examine the link between inequality and political trust. Identifying a negative relationship between provincial-level inequality and individual political trust in the local government, Zhou and Jin argued that a social volcano does indeed exist in China. However, Zhou and Jin's work did not examine the relationship between attitudes toward inequality and political trust.

To address the gaps in the literature identified above, in this article I explain Chinese people's attitudes toward inequality, analyze attitudinal changes over time, and examine the relationship between attitudes toward inequality and political trust on the basis of an analysis of national surveys in 2004, 2009, and 2014. In so doing, the study provides new evidence to evaluate conventional understandings about Chinese people's attitude toward inequality. Contrary to existing studies suggesting that belief in meritocracy and perceptions of general mobility explain Chinese people's attitudes toward inequality, I find that critical attitudes toward inequality consistently correlate with a structural understanding of inequality and skepticism regarding procedural or institutional justice. Second, whereas previous research suggests a static acceptance of economic inequality in China, I find that criticality of inequality rose between 2009 and 2014 and has noteworthy political ramifications given the country's socialist history. Specifically, an increasing proportion of Chinese people during this time period reported discontent with the level of economic inequality and the disjuncture between such inequality and the country's socialist principles. This rising discontent occurs across the board. Furthermore, people who are discontent with income inequality in China are more likely than others to distrust the local government, and those who draw on socialism to critique inequality are more likely to distrust both the central and local governments. Together, these findings suggest that the social volcano previously argued not to exist in China may now be forming (Whyte 2010). This study contributes to the literature on the subjective dimension of inequality and its political effects in and beyond China.

The Subjective Dimension of Inequality and Its Political Effects

Explaining Attitudes toward Inequality

Existing studies suggest that Chinese people tend to accept or tolerate inequality compared with people in other countries

(Whyte 2010; Wu 2009; Xie 2016; Xie et al. 2012). Sociologists offer two major explanations for this, particularly given the country's socialist ideology of egalitarianism. First, it is argued that Chinese people tolerate inequality because of the cultural norm of meritocracy (Wu 2009; Xie 2016). This argument can be further unpacked into two components: (1) there is a cultural norm that accepts different distributional outcomes on the basis of differences in individual merit, and (2) people think that income and wealth inequality does, to a larger extent, reflect difference in individual merit. Discussion in previous research tends to focus on the first component. Scholars argue that traditional Chinese political ideology has promoted merit-based inequality because certain institutions in Chinese history, particularly the traditional imperial examination systems, provided a channel for upward mobility and sustained the ideology of merit-based inequality (Wu 2009; Xie 2016). People believe that they can improve their own lives or those of the next generation through hard work, regardless of their family origins. On the basis of this reasoning, Yu Xie (2016) argued that traditional Chinese culture is, in fact, "tolerant of inequality" (p. 345).

A second argument reasons that because the standard of living of Chinese people has increased tremendously across the spectrum in the postreform period, inequality has a positive rather than negative connotation, signaling better opportunities for upward mobility in general for Chinese people. This argument compares life in the postreform period with that during Mao's China, when inequality was lower simply because most people were poor. Albert Hirschman's (1973) concept of the tunnel effect is relevant here. Hirschman coined the term to refer to a widespread sense of gratification regarding the advances of others; in other words, even if some people fall behind economically, they still expect to make the same progress eventually, thus outweighing any sense of relative deprivation. Drawing on this idea, Whyte (2010) argued that Chinese people likely view "both increased incomes and wider inequalities as positive trends" (p. 183) and see rising inequality as "representing new opportunities rather than injustice" (p. 95).

But recent literature that analyzes attitudes toward inequality outside or beyond China challenges the conventional understanding that Chinese people tend to accept or tolerate acceptance compared with people in other countries. Larsen (2016) analyzed data from 38 countries, including China, from the 2009 International Social Survey Program and examined acceptance of income difference against the actual income distribution. She found that among the five countries with similar levels of inequality, China ranked lower than the United States and the Philippines in terms of acceptance of that inequality. In addition, among the seven countries with similar levels of acceptance of income inequality, three countries (Argentina, Chile, and South Africa) had higher levels of inequality than China. Larsen's findings suggest that China is situated in the middle rather

than at the top in terms of acceptance of inequality compared with similar countries.

Although research on attitudes toward inequality outside or beyond China diverges from that in the Chinese context in terms of whether Chinese people are more likely to accept inequality comparatively, researchers posit similar theories about why people are critical or tolerant of economic inequality. The first theory postulates that how people understand inequality influences the extent to which people tolerate inequality. Specifically, when people justify inequality in nonmeritocratic or structural terms (e.g., a person's family wealth and connections), they are more likely to be critical of inequality. Conversely, when people justify inequality in meritocratic factors (e.g., hard work), they are less likely to challenge inequality (Mijs 2019). Mijs (2019) argued that rising inequality is legitimated by the popular belief that the income gap is meritocratically deserved. This line of research resonates with Xie's (2016) and Wu's (2009) argument about people's acceptance of inequality in China, but it shows that justification of inequality on the basis of meritocracy is not a unique "Chinese" phenomenon.

The second theory suggests that perceptions of general mobility matter. When people believe that they are likely to move upward, they are able to tolerate economic inequality (Larsen 2016). This line of reasoning resembles Whyte's (2010) work in the Chinese context, as they are both built upon Hirschman's (1973) conception of the tunnel effect, but it does not link the application of the tunnel effect to unique local experiences, such as Chinese people's experience under Mao's rule.

The third theory states that belief in procedural or institutional justice in the distribution of resources influences attitudes toward inequality (Rawls 1971). When people consider the procedures or institutions tasked with resource distribution unfair, they are more likely to question the outcome of economic inequality and vice versa (Larsen 2016).

Building upon the aforementioned literature on attitudes toward inequality in and beyond the Chinese context, I propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: People who understand economic inequality in nonmeritocratic or structural terms are more likely to be discontent with economic inequality.

Hypothesis 1b: People who understand economic inequality in meritocratic terms are less likely to be discontent with economic inequality.

Hypothesis 1c: People who think that they are likely to move upward are less likely to be discontent with economic inequality.

Hypothesis 1d: People who consider the procedures or institutions that distribute resources to be unfair are more likely to be discontent with economic inequality.

As mentioned, previous studies analyzing attitudes toward inequality in China also failed to examine such attitudes in

relation to China's socialist roots. Although, as Whyte suggested, most people would not want to return to Mao's era, Chinese people still draw on socialist principles, which are not limited to Mao's ideas, when thinking about inequality. Indeed, the Chinese state itself has creatively reinterpreted and reinvented socialism and socialist principles in its effort to justify China's economic reform (Myers 1995). Deng Xiaoping's (1993) well-known statement that a socialist market economy would eliminate exploitation and distributive polarization and lead to prosperity for all is an example of such reinvention. Research shows that certain social groups, such as former state-owned enterprise (SOE) workers, younger generations of workers, students, and activists, turn to socialist ideas to contest inequality (Blanchette 2019; Lee 2007; Pun 2019). Considering, therefore, the literature on attitudes toward inequality in relation to China's socialist roots, I develop the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: People who understand economic inequality in nonmeritocratic or structural terms are more likely to think that the current level of inequality violates China's socialist principles.

Hypothesis 2b: People who understand economic inequality in meritocratic terms are less likely to think that the current level of inequality violates China's socialist principles.

Hypothesis 2c: People who think that they are likely to move upward are less likely to think that the current level of inequality violates China's socialist principles.

Hypothesis 2d: People who consider the procedures or institutions that distribute resources to be unfair are more likely to think that the current level of inequality violates China's socialist principles.

Possible Changes of Attitudes toward Inequality

The understanding that Chinese people are accepting of inequality is also subject to challenge from a temporal perspective. In his theorization of the tunnel effect, Hirschman (1973) emphasized the importance of situating tolerance of inequality in relation to the dynamics of economic development.

Recent research suggests possible changes of attitudes toward inequality over time. A study in which Internet users' keyword searches in China's major search engine between 2008 and 2014 were analyzed revealed rising public concerns about inequality and class immobility—the persistence of inequality—since about 2009. The authors suggested that such rising concerns are related to changes in China's macro-level socioeconomic conditions, specifically, skyrocketing housing prices and growing economic inequality (Li et al. 2019). Literature on China's housing market helps demonstrate the macro-level socioeconomic changes in the post-2009 period. To maintain economic stability after the global

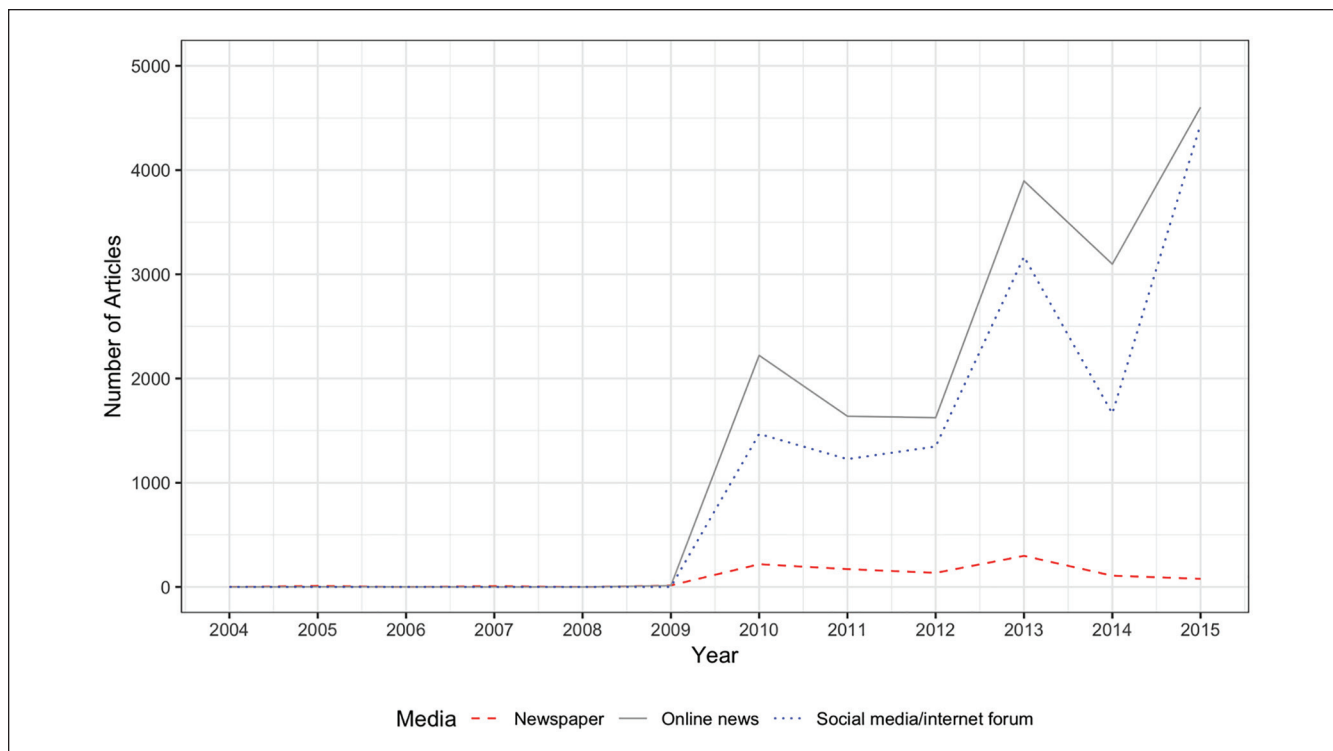


Figure 1. Number of articles about inequality and class immobility.
Source: WiseSearch.

financial crisis, the Chinese state in 2008 announced a 4 trillion yuan stimulus package. The loans went to both real estate developers and consumers, leading to speculative real estate investment and skyrocketing housing prices, amplifying wealth inequality among residents, and even undermining trust among citizens (Chen, Ye, and Huang 2018; Dai et al. 2018). Furthermore, the latest research on student and worker activism in China, on the basis of in-depth interviews, revealed growing discontent with inequality among student activists and workers (Pun 2019). Indeed, when interviewed by media about their motivation, Marxist student activists responded that they stood with workers and took collective action because they were extremely upset with growing inequality, corruption, and materialism in Chinese society (Hernández 2018).

I analyzed the number of articles in newspapers, Internet news, social media (public accounts), and Internet forums that expressed concern about inequality and class immobility between 2004 and 2015, on the basis of a search of WiseSearch, a professional database. Figure 1 plots the number of articles about inequality and class mobility in Internet news, social media, and Internet forums.¹ It clearly indicates

¹The development of social media, Internet forums, and blogs changed over time, as some forms of media became popular (e.g., WeChat) and others became obsolete (e.g., Internet forums), but Internet news and newspapers were already very mature and stable back in 2004 and remain stable.

that concern about inequality and mobility began to increase in 2009. The trend shown in Figure 1 is consistent with Li et al.'s (2019) research. The above findings, together, suggest an across-the-board increase in criticality of inequality after 2009 and support the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a: Chinese people, in general, became more discontent with economic inequality after 2009.

Hypothesis 3b: Chinese people, in general, became more likely after 2009 to think that the current level of inequality violates China's socialist principles.

Attitudes toward Inequality and Political Trust

Although Whyte (2010) argued that rising inequality does not have significant political ramifications in China, political scientists Yingnan Joseph Zhou and Shuai Jin (2018) argued that rising inequality has indeed had adverse consequences on regime stability, on the basis of their study of the relationship between inequality and political trust in China. Political scientists consider political trust an important indicator of an authoritarian regime's legitimacy and sustainability (Dickson, Shen, and Yan 2017; Tang 2016). When an authoritarian state has problems generating political trust, it has to expend much more energy and expense to maintain social stability, as evidenced by the enormous budgets that local governments in China devote to this task (Lee and Zhang 2013). Zhou and Jin reasoned that in democratic

countries, periodic elections allow people to vent their resentment over inequality; because China lacks such a mechanism, discontent around inequality could indeed lead to a “social volcano” and ultimately undermine the authoritarian regime. Analyzing a national survey conducted in 2010, Zhou and Jin found that provincial-level inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient has negative effects on individuals’ trust in local governments. Although they did not find a relationship between provincial-level inequality and trust in the central government, they argued that inequality does constitute a social volcano in China, because distrust in the local government implies distrust in the central government.

Like Zhou and Jin (2018), I too think that growing inequality could have political ramifications, but I focus on the relationship between attitudes toward inequality and political trust in the government by drawing on literature that considers the subjective aspects of inequality (Alesina et al. 2018; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Hauser and Norton 2017). Why would Chinese people discontent about inequality blame the government? As political scientist Wenfang Tang’s (2016) research demonstrates, in the Chinese context, people have high expectations for the government to address their needs and societal problems. It is clear, at least to people with an average level of education, that state policies and institutions, such as those related to household registration, have an enormous impact on the distribution of resources across sectors, social groups, and regions. Accordingly, if and when Chinese people consider inequality a problem, one would expect them to blame actors with the power to shape that distribution.

One might wonder how Chinese people would place blame on different levels of the government for China’s rising inequality, considering Chinese people’s bifurcated views of their central and local governments. Indeed, literature on Chinese politics has well established that Chinese people tend to have more trust in higher levels of the government, clearly distinguishing between the central government and local authorities. Specifically, even when they may not be satisfied with policy implementation, Chinese people tend to believe that the central government’s intent is beneficent (Li 2004, 2016). My point here is not to contest this hierarchical trust in government, but I do argue that we need to look at attitudes toward not only policy implementation but also policy making. Precisely because people recognize the immense power of the central government to shape institutional and policy contexts, it seems likely that they would assign it, along with local governments, blame if and when the public becomes more disgruntled about inequality. Therefore, I postulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4a: Chinese people who are discontent with economic inequality are more likely to distrust the central government.

Hypothesis 4b: Chinese people who are discontent with economic inequality are more likely to distrust the provincial government.

Hypothesis 4c: Chinese people discontent with economic inequality are more likely to distrust the county-level government

Hypothesis 4d: Chinese people who think that the current level of inequality violates China’s socialist principles are more likely to distrust the central government.

Hypothesis 4e: Chinese people who think that the current level of inequality violates China’s socialist principles are more likely to distrust the provincial government.

Hypothesis 4f: Chinese people who think that the current level of inequality violates China’s socialist principles are more likely to distrust the county-level government.

Data and Methods

I analyze three waves of the China National Survey on Inequality and Distributive Justice, a nationally representative survey, conducted in 2004, 2009, and 2014. Whyte, one of the principle investigators, designed the survey along with colleagues at several universities to examine Chinese people’s attitudes toward inequality. The survey incorporates questions from and also received feedback from the International Social Justice Project, an international collaborative research project that investigated popular beliefs and attitudes on social, economic, and political justice across a dozen countries.²

The Research Center for Contemporary China (RCCC) at Peking University implemented the three waves of the survey. RCCC used spatial probability sampling to obtain cross-sectional national samples that were representative of all Chinese between the ages of 18 and 70 in each survey year. The sampling method overcomes the limitation of traditional sampling based upon household registration lists. I follow the instructions provided by RCCC on the use and analysis of the data (e.g., the use of weights). Whyte’s book and article contain detailed information about the sampling design, survey questions, and the survey implementation process (Whyte 2010; Whyte and Im 2014). To the best of my knowledge, no other national survey in China systematically collects information about perception of inequality and spans such a significant period of time. As such, the three waves of survey data provide valuable information about how people view inequality over time.

Dependent Variables

My analysis includes five dependent variables. The first dependent variable identifies people who are discontent with

²The Fafu Research Foundation joined the China National Survey collaboration for the 2014 survey.

income inequality in China. Following previous research that examines criticality or acceptance of economic inequality (Larsen 2016; Mijs 2019), I created the first dependent variable from a question that asks, “Are income differences in China too large, somewhat large, appropriate, small, or too small?” As Larsen (2016) and Mijs (2019) mentioned in their work, the same question was asked in international surveys, such as the International Social Survey Program and the International Social Justice Project. Indeed, most previous research has examined this single variable to gauge acceptance or criticality of economic inequality. As such, my selection of this dependent variable follows the most common practice in international research on attitudes toward inequality. I collapsed the response by coding “too large” and “somewhat large” as 1 and the other choices, including “don’t know” and no response, as 0 because I am interested only in the comparison of people who clearly have a critical view on inequality and those who do not (Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009).

The second variable identifies people who challenge the seeming disjuncture between inequality in China and the country’s socialist principles. I generated the variable from people’s responses to the following statement: “The current level of inequality in China has violated the principle of socialism.” This question helps connect people’s attitudes toward inequality to China’s socialist roots. It is the only question in the surveys that mentions China’s socialist principles. Although responses to the question do not reveal how people understand socialist principles, they still provide valuable information about people’s attitudes toward inequality in China’s unique socialist context.³ I dichotomized the variable by coding “strongly agree” and “agree” as 1 and “neutral,” “disagree,” “strongly disagree,” “don’t know,” and no response as 0, because I am interested in the comparison of people who explicitly express a critical view and those who do not.

The third, fourth, and fifth variables measure distrust of the central-level, provincial-level, and county-level governments, respectively. The response categories are “a great deal of trust,” “some trust,” “not so much trust,” “no trust at all,” and “don’t know.” Following previous research, I dichotomized the two dependent variables, recoding “no trust at all”

and “not so much trust” as 1 and others, including no response, as 0 (Han, Lin, and Tao 2019). It should be noted that only the 2014 survey contains questions about political trust, so my analysis of the relationship between attitudes toward inequality and distrust of the governments is restricted to the 2014 survey.

In sum, the five dependent variables are all dichotomous. The methodical decisions I made are based primarily on my substantive interest in respondents who clearly express critical views on inequality or distrust in the government and secondarily on practices in previous research (e.g., Han et al. 2019; Levi et al. 2009). Furthermore, there have been different views on how to treat “don’t know” responses in survey data. In attitudinal surveys, it is common for there to be a considerable proportion of such responses.⁴ Although some studies treat them as missing values or “neutral” between agreement and disagreement on the Likert-type scale, more and more studies now question such practices and show that respondents really mean “don’t know” when they answer “don’t know” (Denman et al. 2018; Iannario et al. 2018; Shen et al. 2019). On the basis of my substantive interests and methodological considerations, I decided to focus on the comparison between people who explicitly express their discontent or distrust and those who do not.

Independent Variables

I examine the relationship between people’s attitudes toward inequality (i.e., the first two dependent variables) with a series of covariates. The first main covariate is the survey wave, a categorical variable. I use the 2009 wave as the reference category as recent research suggests that concerns about inequality and mobility rose only after 2009 (Li et al. 2019).

To examine the three theories that explain attitudes toward economic inequality, five covariates are included in the analysis. First, to measure the extent to which people think inequality results from structural or nonmeritocratic factors, I generated a covariate from responses to the following three statements: “In China, poverty results in part from prejudice or discrimination”; “In China, people become economically successful because they benefit from unequal opportunities from a very early stage”; and “In China, people become economically successful because they benefit from their social connections.” Discrimination, opportunities, and social connections are all nonmeritocratic factors. I took the average of the responses to these statements to create a covariate. Second, to measure the extent to which people think inequality is based on meritocracy, my analysis includes a covariate based on responses to the following statement: “In China, people become economically successful because of their

³In my research based on 150 in-depth interviews with people across socioeconomic status, many of my interviewees mentioned that there should not be a high level of economic inequality in a socialist country such as China, because socialism is supposed to guarantee equality. A common expression among my interviewees is “People should not be classified into three, six, or nine categories like what we have today.” They also think people should have equal opportunity but that such equality does not exist in China. My interviewees, including peasants, workers, and the middle classes, complain that their children do not have equal opportunity to receive a good education. Some of them even complain that China is a capitalist country rather than a socialist country.

⁴In the surveys that I analyze, about 8 percent to 10 percent of respondents answered “don’t know” for the dependent variables.

hard work.” As Mijs (2019) explained, responses to this statement, more than measuring a person’s education or ambition, better capture belief in meritocracy, as education or ambition are more reflective of social background and family resources. Third, to assess the tunnel effect, I incorporate a covariate that appraises how people think about their prospects of mobility.⁵ Fourth, to measure the extent to which respondents consider resource distribution unfair, I incorporate two variables into the analysis: people’s attitudes toward the household registration system and toward the privileges accorded to people with political power, which in turn significantly influence income and wealth distribution (Huang 2008; Xie and Zhou 2014).⁶

My analysis also includes a series of control variables, including gender, age, household registration status (*hukou*), subjective social status, ethnicity, marital status, education level, party membership, occupation, income, geographic area, and whether respondents live in the place where they have local household registration status.⁷ Finally, because previous literature suggests that people who have had difficult experiences tend to have a more negative view of inequality (Whyte 2010; Whyte and Im 2014), I incorporate four variables that capture whether respondents were, in the past three years, laid off, struggling to pay health care or education expenses, or treated unfairly by government officials. In sum, the aforementioned variables are not the main foci of this study. I include them as control variables, following practices in the analysis of public attitudes in China (e.g., Tang 2016; Whyte 2010; Zhou and Jin 2018).

To analyze the relationship between critical attitudes toward inequality and distrust of the central and provincial governments, I use the first two dependent variables (i.e., discontent with income inequality and that of the apparent disjuncture between inequality and socialist principles) as the main covariates in this part of analysis. I incorporate all of the control variables I have mentioned in my analysis of discontent with income inequality. Because previous literature suggests that type of media use is related to political

attitudes toward the government in China (Lei 2011, 2016, 2017; Lei and Zhou 2015; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011), I included three variables regarding media use—namely, whether respondents use (1) the Internet, mobile phone apps, and social media; (2) TV; or (3) print newspapers and magazines to obtain news—as controlling variables.⁸

I present the descriptive statistics of data in the Appendix (Table A1). A few changes over time are notable. First, although Chinese people’s attitudes toward inequality changed little between 2004 and 2009, there was a growing criticality of inequality between 2009 and 2014. Specifically, the percentage of people who think that income inequality in China is somewhat large or too large grew from 74 percent to 81 percent, while that of respondents who think that the current level of inequality has violated socialist principles rose from 26 percent to 41 percent. Second, the number of people who understand economic outcomes in nonmeritocratic and meritocratic terms both increased over time, respectively, with a similar magnitude but in different time periods. There was a salient increase in the belief that meritocracy explains economic outcomes between 2004 and 2009, whereas there was a similar increase in the belief that nonmeritocratic factors account for economic outcomes between 2009 and 2014. Third, respondents’ optimism about their mobility remained the same between 2009 and 2014. Fourth, there was steady increase in people’s perceptions of unfairness in the household registration system between 2004 and 2014. The perceived unfairness of the privileges enjoyed by the politically powerful grew more between 2009 and 2014. Finally, people with difficult experiences in unemployment, health care, education, and interactions with local government officials decreased between 2004 and 2009 and, in general, remained more or less the same between 2009 and 2014.

Analytic Strategy

Because all five dependent variables are dichotomous, I apply logistic regression for statistical analysis. For the analysis of attitudes toward inequality (i.e., the first two dependent variables), I use polled data from the three surveys. My analysis begins with a model with the survey wave as the only covariate. Then I add control variables in the second model. The third model further includes the five covariates that seek to gauge attitudes toward inequality. I also conduct regression analysis for each wave of the survey separately, to observe the pattern of coefficients. For the analysis of political trust, I analyze only the 2014 survey because the previous waves of survey did not contain questions about political trust. Following previous research, listwise deletion of missing values is used in my

⁵The item states, “People like me are likely to significantly improve living condition in China.”

⁶I created a variable to measure the perceived unfairness of the household registration system on the basis of people’s responses to the following two questions: “It’s unfair for people with urban *hukou* to have more opportunity than people with rural *hukou*” and “It’s unfair that people with rural *hukou* cannot get urban *hukou* easily.” I took the average of the responses to generate the variable. I generate the covariate that measures people’s attitudes toward the exercise of political power from the following question: “It’s unfair for people with political power to have preferential treatment.”

⁷I control for whether people have local *hukou* because people with both rural *hukou* and urban *hukou* migrate domestically, and people without local *hukou* usually have to overcome more obstacles to access public goods and services.

⁸Although the 2014 survey included questions on media use, the 2004 and 2009 surveys did not contain these questions.

Table 1. Odds Ratios from Logit Regression Models Predicting Discontent with Income Inequality.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Wave (reference: 2009)			
2004	.871** (.050)	.765*** (.054)	.804*** (.058)
2014	1.493*** (.099)	1.210** (.096)	1.131 (.091)
Structural explanation			1.435*** (.065)
Meritocratic explanation			1.008 (.035)
Optimism about mobility			.949* (.029)
Perceived unfairness of the household registration system			1.244*** (.050)
Perceived unfairness of privileges accorded to people with political power			1.143*** (.034)
Female		.940 (.055)	.961 (.057)
Age		.999 (.003)	1.000 (.003)
Years of education		1.071*** (.010)	1.062*** (.010)
Marriage		1.105 (.093)	1.125 (.096)
Han Chinese		1.393*** (.131)	1.361*** (.130)
Rural household registration status		.725*** (.058)	.742*** (.060)
No local household registration status		1.229** (.102)	1.208** (.101)
Party membership		1.216 (.156)	1.232 (.160)
Income		1.010 (.008)	1.006 (.008)
Subjective social status		.892*** (.016)	.913*** (.017)
Occupation (reference: work in agriculture or fishery)			
Unemployed		1.174 (.172)	1.164 (.173)
Worker		1.108 (.115)	1.050 (.110)
Office employee		1.149 (.217)	1.087 (.207)
Private business or small business owner		1.211 (.161)	1.197 (.161)
Cadre, military, or police		.735 (.208)	.697 (.199)
Manager or professional		1.477** (.255)	1.379* (.240)
Retired		.993 (.107)	.978 (.107)
Others		.805** (.086)	.803** (.087)
Difficult experiences			
Being laid off		1.144 (.106)	1.085 (.102)
Cannot afford health care expenses		1.240*** (.091)	1.260*** (.094)
Cannot afford educational expenses		1.004 (.113)	1.020 (.117)
Being treated unfairly by local government officials		1.148* (.095)	1.081 (.091)
Geographic region (reference: North)			
Northeast		.574*** (.072)	.551*** (.070)
East		.920 (.103)	.900 (.101)
South Central		.900 (.102)	.907 (.104)
Southwest		.517*** (.072)	.540*** (.077)
Northwest		.631*** (.094)	.683** (.104)
Observations	8,741	7,431	7,431

Note: Values in parentheses are standard errors.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

analysis, but the results remain stable when I analyze imputed data instead (Larsen 2016; Mijs 2019).

Results

In this section, I present the results of logistic regression models. In all of the tables below, I show results as odds ratios, which are exponentiated coefficients. Odds ratios between 0 and 1, equal to 1, and greater than 1 indicate a negative relationship, no relationship, and a positive

relationship, respectively. I also interpret the results in terms of average marginal effects (i.e., additive change in probability), as such interpretation facilitates a more intuitive understanding of the results (Long 2014).

Attitudes toward Inequality

The logistic regression models in Table 1 predict the likelihood of discontent with income inequality on the basis of the analysis of the pooled data. Results from model 3 indicate

that people who think that economic inequality results from nonmeritocratic or structural factors, such as social networks, discrimination, and unequal opportunities, are more likely to be discontent with income inequality, controlling for other factors. The results thus lend support to hypothesis 1a. Calculations of probabilities from model 3 further show that, on average, a 1 standard deviation increase in belief in structural inequality yields a 4 percent increase in the probability of discontent with income inequality ($p < .001$).

However, the results of my analysis do not support hypothesis 1b or hypothesis 1c. I do not find a statistically significant relationship between belief in meritocracy and discontent with income inequality. Neither do the results of logistic regression suggest the existence of the tunnel effect (Hirschman 1973). I find that respondents' critical attitudes toward income equality are only marginally correlated with how they estimate their mobility (significant at only the .10 level).

Next, I move to hypothesis 1d. The results of the analysis support theories that explain attitudes toward inequality on the basis of perceived procedural or institutional justice (Larsen 2016; Rawls 1971). Specifically, respondents who think that the household registration system is unfair and those who think that preferential treatment on the basis of political power is unfair are more likely to be critical about income distribution in China, holding other factors constant. The results thus buttress hypothesis 1d. Calculations of the marginal effects show that increasing perceived unfairness of the household registration system by 1 standard deviation on average increases the probability of discontent with income equality by 2.8 percent ($p < .001$). Similarly, on average, a 1 standard deviation increase in perceived unfairness about the privileges of the politically powerful yields a 2.3 percent increase in the probability of discontent with income inequality ($p < .001$).

In Table 2, I present the analysis that examines people's attitudes toward the seeming disjuncture between the high level of inequality in China and the country's socialist principles. The results, to a large extent, resemble those regarding discontent with income inequality. First, results from model 6 support hypothesis 2a. The odds ratios show that people who think inequity results from structural factors are more likely to think the level of inequality in China violates the country's socialist principles, holding other factors constant. Calculations of the marginal effects further indicate that on average, a 1 standard deviation increase in belief in structural inequality yields a 7.3 percent increase in the probability of thinking China has deviated from its socialist roots ($p < .001$).

Neither hypothesis 2b nor hypothesis 2c is supported by the results of my analysis. There is no statistically significant relationship between belief in meritocracy or optimism about mobility, on one hand, and tendency to think that China's inequality has contradicted socialist principles, on the other hand, holding other variables constant. Although my analysis

of the survey data by survey year (as shown in Table A3) does show that people with higher levels of belief in meritocracy were less likely to be critical of China's inequality from a socialist perspective in 2004 and 2009, such a statistically significant association did not exist in 2014.

The results shown in Table 2 demonstrate that perceptions of the fairness of institutions or procedures of resource distribution matter and further specify which aspects of those institutions or procedures influence how people think about inequality in relation to socialism. The results do not reveal a statistically significant association between perceived unfairness of the household registration system and a critical attitude toward inequality on the basis of socialist principles. But respondents who think that preferential treatment on the basis of political power is unfair are more likely to think that the level of inequality in China has violated socialist principles, holding other variables constant. The results thus lend support to hypothesis 2d. Calculations of the marginal effects find that on average, a 1 standard deviation increase in perceived unfairness of the privileges accorded to people with political power leads to a 2.3 percent increase in the probability of being critical about China's inequality from a socialist perspective ($p < .001$).

As the results in Tables A2 and A3 show, the findings regarding hypotheses 1a to 1d and hypotheses 2a to 2d remain largely the same when I analyze each wave of the survey data separately.

The relationships between certain demographic and control variables and attitudes toward inequality are worth mentioning, although they are not directly related to the hypotheses. I first discuss discontent with income inequality. The results in Table 1 (model 3) and Table A2 show that people with higher levels of education are consistently more likely to be discontent with income inequality, whereas people with higher levels of subjective social status are less likely to be critical about inequality. The odds ratio in model 3 based on the pooled data shows that people with rural household registration status are less likely than people with urban status to be critical about inequality, holding other factors constant, even though they do not enjoy the kind of public welfare accorded to the latter. Nonetheless, as the results in Table A2 show, the negative relationship between rural household registration status and a critical attitude toward income inequality ceased to exist in the 2009 and 2014 surveys. In other words, although people with rural household registration status were less critical of income inequality than their urban counterparts (as Whyte 2010 also demonstrated in his work), this difference did not exist in the later surveys.

In terms of attitudes toward the seeming disjuncture between inequality in China and the country's socialist roots, results in Table 2 (model 6) and Table A3 show that a higher level of education is positively correlated with a more critical attitude. Although people in different occupation groups might have been influenced differently by

Table 2. Odds Ratios from Logit Regression Models Predicting Criticism of the Apparent Gap between Inequality and Socialist Principles.

	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Wave (reference: 2009)			
2004	1.150** (.065)	.986 (.066)	.996 (.068)
2014	1.989*** (.116)	1.705*** (.116)	1.613*** (.111)
Structural explanation			1.651*** (.065)
Meritocratic explanation			.953 (.030)
Optimism about mobility			1.009 (.027)
Perceived unfairness of the household registration system			.958 (.035)
Perceived unfairness of privileges accorded to people with political power			1.105*** (.030)
Female		.870*** (.046)	.884** (.047)
Age		1.010*** (.003)	1.009*** (.003)
Years of education		1.046*** (.008)	1.042*** (.009)
Marriage		.983 (.075)	1.009 (.078)
Han Chinese		.951 (.087)	.941 (.088)
Rural household registration status		.904 (.062)	.960 (.067)
No local household registration status		.982 (.066)	.984 (.067)
Party membership		1.031 (.100)	1.062 (.104)
Income		1.024*** (.007)	1.023*** (.007)
Subjective social status		.959*** (.015)	.982 (.016)
Occupation (reference: work in agriculture or fishery)			
Unemployed		1.140 (.142)	1.073 (.136)
Worker		1.239** (.113)	1.153 (.107)
Office employee		1.272* (.181)	1.189 (.172)
Private business or small business owner		1.157 (.129)	1.105 (.125)
Cadre, military, or police		1.110 (.254)	1.034 (.240)
Manager or professional		.857 (.113)	.804 (.107)
Retired		1.095 (.109)	1.035 (.105)
Others		1.108 (.114)	1.069 (.112)
Difficult experiences			
Being laid off		1.146* (.087)	1.086 (.084)
Cannot afford health care expenses		1.249*** (.083)	1.247*** (.084)
Cannot afford educational expenses		1.258** (.133)	1.247** (.134)
Being treated unfairly by local government officials		1.400*** (.102)	1.282*** (.096)
Geographic region (reference: North)			
Northeast		.911 (.096)	.917 (.099)
East		.998 (.087)	1.044 (.093)
South Central		.721*** (.065)	.785*** (.072)
Southwest		.501*** (.065)	.542*** (.071)
Northwest		.691*** (.090)	.774* (.102)
Observations	8,741	7,431	7,431

Note: Values in parentheses are standard errors.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

China's transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy, my analysis (model 6 in Table 2) does not find salient differences across occupation groups in terms of their attitudes toward the relationship between inequality and socialism.⁹ Furthermore, as previous literature suggests, people with difficult experiences such as those included in this analysis tend to have a more negative view of inequality (Whyte 2010; Whyte and Im 2014). Indeed, the odds ratios presented in

⁹The only exception is in the case of manufacturing workers, who are slightly more likely to have a critical attitude than farmers and fishers (the reference group) in model 5. But when the main covariates are added to the analysis, the statistically significant associations at the .05 level cease to exist.

Table 2 (model 6) show that among the experiences of being laid off, struggling to pay health care or education expenses, and being treated unfairly by local government officials, only being laid off is not correlated with a critical attitude.¹⁰

¹⁰Calculating the marginal effects, I find that the predicted probabilities of questioning the contradiction between inequality and socialism are 4.6 percent, 4.6 percent, and 5.2 percent higher for people who have struggled to pay for health care, have struggled to pay for education, and have been treated unfairly by local government officials, respectively, compared with people without such experiences. However, as Table A1 shows, the prevalence of such difficult experiences declined significantly between 2004 and 2009.

Changing Attitudes toward Inequality

Now, I present the results of analysis that examines attitudinal changes over time. I first focus on discontent with income inequality. Model 1 in Table 1 has the survey wave as the only regressor. As the odds ratios show, respondents in 2009 were slightly more likely than their counterparts in 2004 to be discontent with income inequality in China, and respondents in 2014 were more likely to be discontent with income inequality than those in 2009. Calculations of the marginal effects indicate that, on average, the probability of being discontent with income inequality is 2.7 percent greater for respondents in 2009 than those in 2004 ($p < .05$), and the probability of being discontent with income inequality is 6.9 percent greater for respondents in 2014 than respondents in 2009 ($p < .001$). In model 2, I add demographic variables and other control variables, but I do not include covariates for testing the three theories about attitudes toward inequality. Even after taking these variables into consideration, odds ratios still indicate an increase in discontent with income inequality between 2004 and 2009 and between 2009 and 2014. This suggests that discontent with income inequality rose at the societal level between 2009 and 2014. As such, hypothesis 3a is supported.

In model 3, I include the five covariates for testing the three theories about attitudes toward inequality. As shown in Table 1, the difference between 2009 and 2014 in terms of discontent with income inequality disappears. The results in model 3 suggests a structural understanding of inequality and belief in procedural or institutional justice could contribute to the growing discontent between 2009 and 2014. As shown in Table A1, a structural understanding of economic outcomes, perceived unfairness of the household registration system, and perceived unfairness of the preferential treatment given to people with political power all increased between 2009 and 2014. These changes, along with changes in demographic factors, can account for some increase in discontent with inequality. Indeed, conducting a multivariate decomposition analysis, I find that 48.50 percent of the attitudinal change between 2009 and 2014 is due to year differences in the magnitudes of the independent variables, especially an increase in education, understanding of inequality on the basis of structural factors, and belief in procedural or institutional justice (Powers, Yoshioka, and Yun 2011).

The results in model 3 show that respondents who struggled to pay health care expenses are more likely to be discontent with income inequality, but the prevalence of such experiences declined between 2004 and 2014. Furthermore, as the separate regression results of the three waves of survey data show (Table A2), the association between health care expense struggles and discontent with inequality disappeared in 2014. It is thus quite unlikely that changing experiences in health care led to rising discontent with inequality between 2009 and 2014.

Next, I discuss changes in how people think about the relationship between inequality and China's socialist principles. Model 4 in Table 2 has the survey wave as the only independent variable. The odds ratios show that the likelihood of thinking that current inequality has violated socialist principles decreased slightly between 2004 and 2009 but increased sizably between 2009 and 2014. Further calculations of the marginal effects indicate that on average, the probability that respondents would see current inequality as violating socialist principles decreased by 2.8 percent between 2004 and 2009 ($p < .05$) but increased by 15.2 percent between 2009 and 2014 ($p < .001$). After adding demographic variables and other control variables into the analysis, as the odds ratios in model 5 demonstrate, the difference between 2004 and 2009 in terms of likelihood ceases to exist, but respondents in 2014 remain much more likely than their counterparts in 2009 to think that the level of inequality in China has violated socialist principles. The results thus support hypothesis 3b that there is an across-the-board attitudinal change between 2009 and 2014.

As the results in Table 2 (models 4–6) show, when I add independent variables other than survey wave to the analysis, the odds ratios for the 2014 wave (compared with the 2009 wave) decline slightly. This suggests that a small proportion of the attitudinal changes between 2009 and 2014 could be attributed to changes in independent variables other than the survey year. My multivariate decomposition analysis shows that 23.79 percent of the attitudinal change between 2009 and 2014 is due to year differences in the magnitudes of the independent variables (Powers et al. 2011). Specifically, an increase in education, structural understandings of inequality, and the perceived unfairness of the privileges accorded to the politically powerful between 2009 and 2014 contributes to a certain degree to the growing perception that inequality in China contradicts socialist principles.

Attitudes toward Inequality and Political Trust

As shown in Table A1, I find that Chinese people have more trust in higher levels of government. Specifically, 30 percent, 17 percent, and 12 percent of the respondents in 2014 expressed distrust in the county-level, provincial-level, and central governments, respectively. This pattern is consistent with the extant literature (Li 2004, 2016), but what I am interested in is whether and how attitudes toward inequality are related to political trust.

The results in models 7 to 9 (Table 3) show there is no statistically significant correlation between discontent with income inequality, on one hand, and distrust of the central government, on the other hand. However, there is statistically significant correlation between discontent with income inequality, on one hand, and distrust of the provincial and county governments, on the other hand. My analysis thus suggests that people who are discontent with income inequality in China are not more likely than others to distrust the central

Table 3. Odds Ratios from Logit Regression Models Examining the Relationship between Distrust of the Government and Discontent with Income Equality.

	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
	Central Government	Provincial-Level Government	County-Level Government
Discontent with income inequality	1.257 (.232)	1.405** (.223)	1.423*** (.183)
Female	.673*** (.091)	.757** (.087)	.718*** (.069)
Age	.983** (.007)	.988** (.006)	.994 (.005)
Years of education	.988 (.021)	.977 (.018)	.984 (.015)
Marriage	.975 (.185)	.842 (.134)	.845 (.117)
Han Chinese	1.168 (.292)	1.121 (.224)	1.128 (.185)
Rural household registration status	.909 (.143)	.880 (.118)	.973 (.111)
No local household registration status	.927 (.141)	.999 (.130)	1.141 (.125)
Party membership	.640* (.171)	.908 (.187)	1.057 (.179)
Income	.981 (.012)	.983 (.011)	.993 (.009)
Subjective social status	.967 (.040)	.929** (.032)	.893*** (.027)
Occupation (reference: work in agriculture or fishery)			
Unemployed	2.683*** (.809)	2.137*** (.549)	1.115 (.256)
Worker	1.267 (.328)	1.136 (.242)	1.160 (.198)
Office employee	2.262*** (.642)	1.788** (.431)	1.318 (.273)
Private business or small business owner	1.495 (.404)	1.305 (.293)	1.154 (.213)
Cadre, military, or police	.347 (.368)	.354 (.273)	.238** (.151)
Manager or professional	1.479 (.532)	1.252 (.377)	1.348 (.331)
Retired	1.243 (.355)	1.234 (.279)	1.001 (.180)
Others	1.437 (.417)	.951 (.235)	.934 (.182)
Difficult experiences			
Being laid off	1.529** (.289)	1.432** (.234)	1.150 (.170)
Cannot afford health care expenses	1.204 (.219)	1.181 (.181)	.963 (.153)
Cannot afford educational expenses	.708 (.251)	.692 (.207)	1.303 (.278)
Being treated unfairly by local government officials	2.509*** (.453)	2.618*** (.411)	1.119 (.172)
Media use			
TV	.687** (.119)	.769* (.118)	.892 (.121)
Internet	1.291 (.216)	1.200 (.172)	1.068 (.131)
Newspaper	.846 (.149)	1.082 (.162)	.997 (.126)
Geographic region (reference: North)			
Northeast	.522* (.173)	.598** (.153)	1.157 (.238)
East	.842 (.170)	.561*** (.100)	.655*** (.104)
South Central	.548*** (.114)	.666** (.113)	1.464** (.218)
Southwest	.612* (.161)	.409*** (.097)	.573*** (.117)
Northwest	.356*** (.122)	.376*** (.103)	.623** (.139)
Observations	2,445	2,445	2,445

Note: Values in parenthesis are standard errors.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

government, although they are more likely than others to distrust the provincial and county governments. Therefore, hypotheses 4a is not supported, but hypotheses 4b and 4c are. Calculations of the marginal effects reveal that on average, the predicted probability of distrusting the provincial government is 5 percent higher for people who are discontent with inequality than those who are not ($p < .05$); the probability of distrusting the county-level government is 7 percent higher for people who are discontent with inequality than those who are not ($p < .01$).

Although discontent with income inequality is not correlated with distrust of the central government, as the odds ratios in model 10 to 12 (Table 4) indicate, people who think that the level of inequality has violated socialist principles are more likely than others to distrust the central, provincial-level, and county-level governments, holding other variables constant. My findings thus lend support to hypotheses 4d, 4e, and 4f. Calculations of the marginal effects show that on average, the predicted probability of distrusting the central government is 3 percent higher for people who think

Table 4. Odds Ratios from Logit Regression Models Examining the Relationship between Distrust of the Government and Criticism of the Gap between Inequality and Socialist Principles.

	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12
	Central Government	Provincial-Level Government	County-Level Government
Inequality in China has violated socialist principles	1.296** (.173)	1.265** (.143)	1.430*** (.136)
Female	.672*** (.091)	.757** (.087)	.717*** (.069)
Age	.983** (.007)	.988** (.006)	.994 (.005)
Years of education	.988 (.022)	.977 (.018)	.984 (.015)
Marriage	.976 (.185)	.846 (.135)	.845 (.117)
Han Chinese	1.193 (.298)	1.146 (.229)	1.154 (.191)
Rural household registration status	.910 (.143)	.879 (.118)	.973 (.111)
No local household registration status	.929 (.142)	1.001 (.130)	1.143 (.125)
Party membership	.632* (.169)	.893 (.184)	1.028 (.174)
Income	.980* (.012)	.982* (.011)	.991 (.009)
Subjective social status	.967 (.040)	.928** (.032)	.892*** (.027)
Occupation (reference: work in agriculture or fishery)			
Unemployed	2.689*** (.812)	2.145*** (.551)	1.127 (.259)
Worker	1.258 (.326)	1.134 (.241)	1.145 (.196)
Office employee	2.261*** (.643)	1.803** (.435)	1.331 (.275)
Private business or small business owner	1.528 (.412)	1.340 (.300)	1.190 (.219)
Cadre, military, or police	.336 (.357)	.345 (.266)	.232** (.148)
Manager or professional	1.516 (.546)	1.285 (.387)	1.402 (.345)
Retired	1.250 (.357)	1.243 (.281)	1.007 (.181)
Others	1.442 (.417)	.959 (.236)	.935 (.183)
Difficult experiences			
Being laid off	1.527** (.289)	1.420** (.232)	1.441** (.207)
Cannot afford health care expenses	1.176 (.215)	1.157 (.178)	1.066 (.139)
Cannot afford educational expenses	.713 (.253)	.701 (.209)	.793 (.196)
Being treated unfairly by local government officials	2.443*** (.443)	2.564*** (.404)	2.589*** (.371)
Media use			
TV	.693** (.120)	.787 (.121)	.910 (.124)
Internet	1.282 (.214)	1.188 (.170)	1.062 (.130)
Newspaper	.855 (.150)	1.105 (.165)	1.017 (.128)
Geographic region (reference: North)			
Northeast	.529* (.176)	.609* (.156)	1.182 (.243)
East	.863 (.174)	.577*** (.102)	.676** (.108)
South Central	.565*** (.118)	.684** (.116)	1.515*** (.226)
Southwest	.622* (.164)	.409*** (.097)	.583*** (.119)
Northwest	.364*** (.125)	.381*** (.104)	.636** (.142)
Observations	2,445	2,445	2,445

Note: Values in parenthesis are standard errors.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

that inequality in China has violated socialist principles than those who do not ($p < .05$), the probability of distrusting the provincial government is also 3 percent higher for people who think that inequality in China has violated socialist principles than those who do not ($p < .05$), and the probability of distrusting the county-level government is 7 percent higher for people who think that inequality in China has violated socialist principles than those who do not ($p < .001$).

Together, the results in Tables 3 and 4 show that China's central government, to a certain extent, is still more likely than lower level governments to avoid blame for inequality. Once Chinese people feel that levels of inequality have begun to violate socialist principles, however, they become more likely to distrust the central government. In other words, people's trust in the central government can still be tarnished by the apparent gap between inequality and China's

socialist principles. These findings suggest the potential political effects of perceived inequality.

Supplemental Analysis

I conduct three supplemental analyses to ensure the validity of my findings. First, I analyze people's perceptions of the fairness of economic distribution in China. Only the 2014 survey includes this question. Economic distribution in China is described as fair and unfair by 19.66 percent and 49.56 percent of the respondents, respectively, while others either had a neutral view or did not express their views. Consistent with the results I have presented, I find that people with a structural understanding of inequality or skepticism regarding procedural or institutional justice are more likely to consider China's economic distribution unfair. Again, I do not find a statistically significant correlation between belief in meritocracy or optimism about mobility, on one hand, and people's perceptions of China's economic distribution, on the other hand. Second, I considered incorporating personal experience with mobility (i.e., whether a respondent's economic situation has improved in previous five years) into my analysis. My analysis, however, reveals that people whose economic situation has improved are not less likely to be discontent with income inequality or critical about the apparent gap between inequality and China's socialist principles. Because this variable does not relate to the three theories I examine or significantly improve the model fit, I decided not to include it in the final analysis.

Third, I conduct a latent class analysis on the basis of 13 indicators to examine people's attitudes toward inequality comprehensively. The 13 indicators include respondents' perceptions of inequality between the rich and poor, perceptions of the social consequences of inequality, perceptions of social mobility, understanding of inequality, and normative judgments about the relevant institutions that influence inequality and social mobility. I identify three distinct groups from the analysis: the tolerant, the optimistically aware (i.e., people who are aware of inequality but still optimistic about their mobility), and the critical. Analyzing the composition of these groups, I find that Chinese people's attitudes toward inequality changed little between 2004 and 2009 but became more critical and less tolerant of inequality between 2009 and 2014. This trend is consistent with what I find in this study. Because latent class analysis tends to be less clear cut and is only rarely used in research on attitudes toward inequality, I decided to follow the most common practice in choosing my dependent variables (Larsen 2016; Mijs 2019).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study responds to the inadequate research on the subjective aspects of inequality and their potential political effects

in China, an authoritarian market economy with a socialist political regime. Existing literature tends to portray Chinese people as accepting inequality (e.g., Whyte 2010; Xie 2016), but recent research based on analysis of cross-national data challenges this portrait from a comparative perspective (Larsen 2016). The findings of the present study similarly challenge conventional understandings by demonstrating that 81 percent of respondents in 2014 think that income inequality is large in China, that 41 percent of these respondents think that the level of inequality has violated socialist principles, and that 49.56 percent consider China's economic distribution unfair.

My findings not only reveal a new level of criticality regarding income inequality in China but also deepen our understanding of why Chinese people have become more critical and how they view the disjuncture between inequality and the country's socialist principles. Existing literature suggests that how people explain inequality—in meritocratic or structure terms—influences what they think about it (Mijs 2019; Wu 2009; Xie 2016). As predicted, I find that people who interpret economic inequality in nonmeritocratic or structural terms are more likely to be discontent with income inequality and think that the level of inequality violates China's socialist principles.

However, contrary to previous literature, I do not find a statistically significant association between belief in meritocracy and attitudes toward inequality. This is, in part, because the two kinds of understanding of inequality can coexist. Consider a common public discourse about economic success in China, namely, that hard work and effort are *necessary but insufficient* conditions for economic success. Although Chinese people recognize the impact of hard work or individual merit on economic outcomes, many of them also understand that people have different “starting points” or unequal opportunities in the first place. Emphasizing people's belief in meritocracy without acknowledging their understanding of structural conditions oversimplifies Chinese people's understanding of inequality and overestimates their acceptance of inequality.

Although Hirschman's concept of the tunnel effect has been used in the literature to account for people's acceptance of inequality (Hirschman 1973; Larsen 2016; Whyte 2010), my findings do not lend support to the tunnel effect. I do find a significantly negative bivariate correlation between optimism about one's own mobility and skepticism about inequality from a socialist perspective, but such correlation ceases to exist after controlling for other variables.

Consistent with previous literature, on the other hand, my analysis does show that perceived unfairness of the institutions or procedures regarding resource distribution positively correlates with critical attitudes toward inequality (Larsen 2016; Rawls 1971). In the Chinese context, perceptions of the household registration system and of the privileges accorded to people with political power influence whether people are

discontent with income inequality. Criticism of the preferential treatment that comes with political power further increases the probability that people will think inequality in China has violated the country's socialist principles.

My findings also show clear attitudinal changes between 2009 and 2014. Consistent with Whyte and Im's work, I do not find a salient increase in criticality of inequality between 2004 and 2009 (Whyte 2016; Whyte and Im 2014). Nonetheless, discontent with inequality and, more important, criticism of inequality as violating socialist principles rose significantly between 2009 and 2014, a period when people's understanding of inequality in structural terms and the perceived unfairness of preferential treatment on the basis of political power were both on the rise. Hence, my findings are congruent with previous research that revealed rising public concerns about inequality and class immobility since 2009 on the basis of Internet users' keyword searches and my analysis of public discourse as presented in Figure 1 (Li et al. 2019). Previous literature suggests that laid-off SOE workers tend to be nostalgic about China's socialist past (Lee 2007). Recent research shows that younger generations of workers and student activists invoke socialist ideas in order to contest inequality. Some studies also reveal the revival of Maoism and Marxism among intellectuals and activists (Blanchette 2019; Pun 2019). I contribute to the literature by demonstrating an across-the-board rise in discontent with income inequality and in the view that current inequality violates China's socialist principles. Although such attitudinal changes should not be interpreted as an indication that Chinese people want to return to Mao's era or that socialist ideology still has a strong purchase on Chinese people's minds, the results do suggest that people recognize and question the contradiction between the level of inequality in China and China's socialist principles. That more and more Chinese people see a contradiction here should be taken seriously because, as recent protests organized by workers and Marxist students have shown, such views can be used to mobilize collective actions (Smith and Pun 2018).

Finally, although previous research revealed a relationship between objective inequality and political trust in the government in China, I identify a link between attitudes toward inequality and distrust in the government (Zhou and Jin 2018). Although the Chinese government, especially the central government, generally enjoys a high level of trust, when people think that the level of inequality in China has already violated socialist principles, their trust in both the central and local governments declines. This finding contributes to the broader literature that analyzes the relationship

between the subjective dimension of inequality and its potential or actual political effects (Alesina et al. 2018; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Hauser and Norton 2017).

It should be noted that my analysis is limited in two ways. First, the survey data do not allow me to examine how macro-level changes since 2009 have influenced people's attitudes toward inequality. Future research should attempt a more detailed analysis of shifts at the macro level and their connection to micro-level change. Second, I acknowledge the criticism that endogeneity bias could arise when attempting to explain attitudes with attitudes (Hu 2019; Jaeger 2006; Janmaat 2013). It is clear that the evidence presented here does not support any causal arguments, but I second Janmaat's (2013) comment that "the acknowledgement that correlations between attitudes say nothing about causality does not invalidate research into relations between attitudes. Again there can be good theoretical reasons for investigating these" (p. 368). In a similar vein, Hu (2019) and Jaeger (2013) also suggested studying the relations between attitudes on the basis of theoretical considerations. Indeed, several influential studies examine relations between attitudes or beliefs on the basis of theoretical reasons (e.g., Shi 2001; Xie et al. 2012). As such, I follow the above suggestion and ground my analysis in important theoretical discussions in the extant literature.

Together, my findings provide early hints that the social volcano argued not to exist in China (Whyte 2010) may, in fact, be forming. Considering that the 1949 Communist Revolution aimed to overthrow bureaucratic capitalism and thus remove the structural factors producing inequality, it is understandable that the perceived return or emergence of structural inequality and privileging of political elites has triggered criticism and skepticism. Although people can understand and interpret socialist principles in different ways, the 15 percent increase in people's criticism of the gap between China's inequality and socialist principles between 2009 and 2014 is, indeed, alarming because it points to the fundamental contradiction underlying the Chinese regime: the uneasy hybrid of a capitalist economy, a highly stratified society, and a socialist constitution (Goodman 2014). As political scientists argue, political trust serves as an important indicator of an authoritarian regime's legitimacy and sustainability (Dickson et al. 2017; Tang 2016). The link between criticality of inequality on the basis of socialist principles and distrust in the central government suggests that such criticality could one day undermine the Chinese state's legitimacy.

Appendix

Table AI. Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Waves					
	Three Waves			2004	2009	2014
	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Discontent with income inequality	0	1	.75 (.43)	.72 (.45)	.74 (.44)	.81 (.39)
Inequality has violated socialist principles	0	1	.31 (.46)	.29 (.45)	.26 (.44)	.41 (.49)
Distrust of the central government	0	1				.12 (.32)
Distrust of the provincial-level government	0	1				.17 (.38)
Distrust of the county-level government	0	1				.30 (.46)
Understanding of inequality in nonmeritocratic terms	1	5	3.21 (.69)	3.18 (.68)	3.16 (.69)	3.33 (.70)
Understanding of inequality in meritocratic terms	1	5	3.74 (.86)	3.60 (.85)	3.79 (.86)	3.88 (.85)
Optimism about own mobility	1	5	2.58 (1.01)	2.66 (1.02)	2.54 (.98)	2.54 (1.03)
Perceived unfairness of the household registration system	1	5	3.49 (.81)	3.42 (.85)	3.50 (.78)	3.56 (.78)
Perceived unfairness of privileges accorded to people with political power	1	5	3.63 (1.09)	3.56 (1.17)	3.60 (1.04)	3.75 (1.02)
Subjective social status	1	10	4.69 (1.71)	4.43 (1.86)	4.87 (1.56)	4.83 (1.63)
Female	0	1	.50 (.50)	.52 (.50)	.48 (.50)	.50 (.50)
Age	17	73	42.97 (13.75)	41.07 (13.18)	44.17 (13.69)	44.04 (14.28)
Year of education	0	22	8.12 (4.63)	7.70 (4.62)	7.60 (4.63)	9.31 (4.43)
Marriage	0	1	.83 (.38)	.81 (.39)	.85 (.36)	.83 (.37)
Han Chinese	0	1	.90 (.30)	.89 (.31)	.91 (.29)	.91 (.29)
Rural household registration status	0	1	.61 (.49)	.61 (.49)	.65 (.48)	.56 (.50)
No local household registration status	0	1	.20 (.40)	.18 (.39)	.18 (.38)	.25 (.43)
Party membership	0	1	.08 (.27)	.07 (.26)	.07 (.26)	.11 (.31)
Income group	1	16	5.76 (4.23)	4.58 (3.01)	5.92 (3.43)	7.00 (5.50)
Occupation						
Work in agriculture or fishery	0	1	.34 (.47)	.41 (.49)	.40 (.49)	.18 (.38)
Unemployed	0	1	.06 (.24)	.06 (.24)	.06 (.24)	.06 (.23)
Worker	0	1	.15 (.36)	.15 (.36)	.15 (.36)	.16 (.37)
Office employee	0	1	.04 (.20)	.02 (.13)	.02 (.15)	.09 (.29)
Private business or small business owners	0	1	.07 (.26)	.05 (.22)	.06 (.23)	.12 (.33)
Cadre, military, or police	0	1	.01 (.12)	.01 (.11)	.01 (.09)	.02 (.14)
Manager or professional	0	1	.06 (.24)	.07 (.26)	.05 (.22)	.06 (.24)
Retired	0	1	.14 (.35)	.12 (.32)	.13 (.34)	.19 (.39)
Others	0	1	.11 (.32)	.11 (.31)	.12 (.32)	.12 (.32)
Difficult experience in recent three years						
Being laid off	0	1	.14 (.35)	.18 (.38)	.12 (.33)	.12 (.32)
Having difficulty in paying health care expenses	0	1	.25 (.43)	.35 (.48)	.21 (.41)	.17 (.38)
Having difficulty in paying educational expenses	0	1	.07 (.26)	.13 (.33)	.04 (.18)	.04 (.19)
Being treated unfairly by local government officials	0	1	.16 (.37)	.25 (.43)	.10 (.30)	.12 (.32)
Obtaining news from the Internet, mobile phone apps, or social media	0	1				.45 (.50)
Obtaining news from TV	0	1				.85 (.35)
Obtaining news from newspaper or magazines	0	1				.20 (.40)

Note: Sample weights were not applied. Observations: 3,267 in 2004, 2,967 in 2009, and 2,506 in 2014. The industrial and employment structure in China changed considerably between 2004 and 2014. According to statistics published by China's National Bureau of Statistics, the percentage of the employed population working in the primary sector declined from 46.9 percent in 2004 to 29.5 percent in 2014 (http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/qttjgb/qgqttjgb/200505/t20050519_30615.html; http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/SYrlzyshshzb/dongtaixinwen/buneyaowen/201505/t20150528_162040.htm). The changing industrial and employment structure explains the decreasing proportion of respondents who reported that they work in agriculture or fishery. Although China's gross domestic product growth rate decreased from 10 percent to 7.3 percent between 2004 and 2014, the 7.3 percent growth rate was still very high. China's economic growth contributed to the growth of family income between 2004 and 2014.

Table A2. Odds Ratios from Logit Regression Models Predicting Discontent with Income Inequality, by Survey Wave.

	Survey Wave		
	2004	2009	2014
Structural explanation	1.488*** (.113)	1.579*** (.132)	1.272*** (.104)
Meritocratic explanation	1.147** (.065)	.884* (.057)	.998 (.066)
Optimism about own mobility	.979 (.047)	.938 (.053)	.922 (.054)
Perceived unfairness of the household registration system	1.355*** (.081)	1.078 (.088)	1.332*** (.106)
Perceived unfairness of privileges accorded to people with political power	1.166*** (.050)	1.068 (.065)	1.245*** (.075)
Female	.957 (.091)	1.001 (.113)	.968 (.110)
Age	1.007 (.004)	.991 (.005)	.998 (.006)
Years of education	1.073*** (.016)	1.054*** (.018)	1.054*** (.018)
Marriage	.887 (.118)	1.383* (.233)	1.278 (.205)
Han Chinese	2.127*** (.356)	1.162 (.227)	1.603** (.308)
Rural household registration status	.580*** (.081)	1.012 (.162)	.774* (.106)
No local household registration status	1.425** (.208)	1.315 (.236)	.906 (.122)
Party membership	1.429 (.329)	1.276 (.311)	1.015 (.217)
Income	1.015 (.021)	.988 (.020)	1.007 (.011)
Subjective social status	.897*** (.025)	.982 (.038)	.952 (.035)
Occupation (reference: work in agriculture or fishery)			
Unemployed	1.325 (.333)	1.472 (.425)	.964 (.250)
Worker	.873 (.152)	1.122 (.220)	1.303 (.258)
Office employee	1.168 (.600)	1.225 (.601)	1.371 (.347)
Private business or small business owner	.596** (.138)	1.712* (.508)	1.855*** (.418)
Cadre, military, or police	.661 (.314)	.745 (.432)	.821 (.397)
Manager and professional	.854 (.220)	4.365*** (2.008)	1.182 (.368)
Retired	.627** (.116)	1.324 (.271)	1.230 (.247)
Others	.536*** (.090)	.866 (.180)	1.473* (.327)
Difficult experiences			
Being laid off	1.273* (.183)	1.224 (.227)	.847 (.153)
Cannot afford health care expenses	1.305** (.141)	1.233 (.182)	1.048 (.163)
Cannot afford educational expenses	1.071 (.156)	.526** (.152)	1.983** (.629)
Being treated unfairly by local government officials	.948 (.105)	1.789*** (.372)	1.207 (.224)
Geographic region (reference: North)			
Northeast	.420*** (.088)	.361*** (.100)	1.534 (.400)
East	1.042 (.195)	.436*** (.113)	1.496** (.295)
South Central	1.259 (.247)	.485*** (.129)	1.057 (.195)
Southwest	1.014 (.263)	.327*** (.112)	.505*** (.107)
Northwest	.812 (.214)	.738 (.282)	.844 (.206)
Observations	2,863	2,123	2,445

Note: Values in parentheses are standard errors.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Table A3. Odds Ratios from Logit Regression Models Predicting Criticism of the Apparent Gap between Inequality and Socialist Principles, by Survey Wave.

	Survey Wave		
	2004	2009	2014
Structural explanation	2.206*** (.160)	1.458*** (.110)	1.434*** (.092)
Meritocratic explanation	.889** (.047)	.863** (.052)	1.072 (.056)
Optimism about own mobility	.972 (.044)	1.029 (.054)	1.027 (.047)
Perceived unfairness of the household registration system	.924 (.052)	.947 (.072)	1.033 (.065)

(continued)

Table A3. (continued)

	Survey Wave		
	2004	2009	2014
Perceived unfairness of privileges accorded to people with political power	1.107** (.045)	1.008 (.058)	1.168*** (.057)
Female	.885 (.080)	.776** (.082)	.986 (.087)
Age	1.011** (.004)	1.012** (.005)	1.002 (.005)
Years of education	1.068*** (.016)	1.026 (.017)	1.042*** (.015)
Marriage	.911 (.113)	1.023 (.164)	1.207 (.160)
Han Chinese	1.028 (.180)	.825 (.163)	1.008 (.156)
Rural household registration status	.925 (.121)	1.145 (.165)	.870 (.092)
No local household registration status	.998 (.122)	1.135 (.165)	.906 (.094)
Party membership	.856 (.157)	1.078 (.209)	1.260 (.192)
Income	.985 (.019)	.977 (.018)	1.033*** (.008)
Subjective social status	.998 (.026)	.955 (.034)	.985 (.028)
Occupation (reference: work in agriculture or fishery)			
Unemployed	1.270 (.265)	1.400 (.351)	.759 (.170)
Worker	1.152 (.185)	.954 (.172)	1.350* (.218)
Office employee	1.528 (.536)	1.959* (.715)	1.010 (.198)
Private business or small business owner	1.276 (.280)	1.609** (.380)	.971 (.168)
Cadre, military, or police	.886 (.374)	.938 (.534)	1.242 (.440)
Manager and professional	.738 (.166)	1.406 (.377)	.672* (.154)
Retired	1.105 (.201)	1.214 (.230)	1.001 (.170)
Others	1.023 (.182)	1.199 (.242)	1.124 (.205)
Difficult experiences			
Being laid off	1.056 (.127)	.995 (.158)	1.004 (.142)
Cannot afford health care expenses	1.033 (.109)	1.217 (.165)	1.621*** (.202)
Cannot afford educational expenses	1.262 (.183)	1.410 (.388)	1.393 (.323)
Being treated unfairly by local government officials	1.273** (.135)	.997 (.176)	1.475*** (.208)
Geographic region (reference: North)			
Northeast	.827 (.158)	1.013 (.215)	1.004 (.142)
East	1.024 (.165)	1.301 (.244)	1.621*** (.202)
South Central	.745* (.127)	.779 (.153)	1.393 (.323)
Southwest	.681 (.174)	.308*** (.111)	1.475*** (.208)
Northwest	.761 (.196)	.891 (.253)	1.004 (.142)
Observations	2,863	2,123	2,445

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < 0.01$.

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Author Biography

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