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# Creating Wealth *and* Poverty *in* Postsocialist China

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# The Social Contours of Distributive Injustice Feelings in Contemporary China

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The dismantling of centrally planned socialism and the transformation of China into a market-based economy after 1978 have fundamentally altered that society's social order. In many respects China's reforms have been extraordinarily successful, with sustained high rates of economic growth, rising income levels, growing integration of China into the global economy, massive inflows of foreign investment, and sharp reductions in poverty. However, this transformation from a socialist to a market-based society has also had a number of more divisive consequences. Older Chinese who had learned how to survive by playing by the rules of Mao-era socialism had to adapt to a fundamentally changed distribution system in which there were plenty of losers alongside the many winners. Chinese society changed from being a society with relatively modest income disparities to one with large gaps between the rich and the poor. Many who felt they should have been honored for their contributions to building socialism found themselves unemployed, while suspicion was rife that many of China's new millionaires were the beneficiaries of corruption and official favoritism. In recent years China has been rocked by a rising tide of public protests by peasants, workers, and others who denounce the current social order as unjust.

The implications of these complex trends for popular attitudes of Chinese citizens toward current patterns of inequality have been the subject of sharp debate, both within China and among foreign observers. Some analysts contend that China's robust economic growth, improved living standards, and ample new opportunities promote general optimism, acceptance of current inequality levels, and little nostalgia for the bygone socialist era. According to this view, although some individuals and groups who experience unemployment, downward mobility, and abject poverty may be angry and feel that the current social order is unjust, for the bulk of the population the benefits produced by market reforms far outweigh the disadvantages and promote broad acceptance of the current system as at least relatively just. This broad acceptance of China's market system helps prevent local grievances and social protests from escalating into general challenges to the

system. So according to this view, China today might best be characterized as enjoying "rocky stability" (see Shambaugh 2000).

The contrary view is that rising income gaps and popular beliefs that current inequalities are unjust are threatening to turn China into a "social volcano," with China's social and political stability threatened. Perhaps stimulated by apparent sharp increases in recent years in local social protest incidents, the social volcano scenario has gained wide currency both in China and in the West.[1] For example, a poll of senior officials conducted by the Central Party School in 2004 concluded that the income gap was China's most serious social problem, far ahead of crime and corruption, which were ranked two and three (*Xinhua* 2004). On a similar note, a summary of the 2005 "Blue Book" published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (an annual assessment of the state of Chinese society) stated, "The Gini coefficient, an indicator of income disparities, reached 0.53 last year, far higher than a dangerous level of 0.4" (Ma 2005). Reports in the Western media echo these themes, particularly regarding rural protest activity. A recent edition of the *Economist* declares: "A spectre is haunting China—the spectre of rural unrest" (*Economist* 2006), while *Time Magazine*'s Asian edition tells us, "Violent local protests . . . are convulsing the Chinese countryside with ever more frequency," and continues its report with phrases such as "seeds of fury" and "the pitchfork anger of peasants" (*Time Asia* 2006).

China's current leaders have responded to fears that rising inequality and the discontent of peasants and other disadvantaged groups will threaten political stability by adopting a number of major reforms, such as announcing the abolition of rural taxes and fees and a planned waiving of school tuitions for rural students. Chinese Communist Party leader Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao claim they want to shift China from an emphasis on "growth at all costs" to "growth with equity" and to develop China into a "harmonious society."

The research we report here is designed to weigh in on this debate. Is China today enjoying "rocky stability," or is it a "social volcano" about to erupt? In late 2004 we participated in a collaborative survey project that for the first time collected systematic data on popular attitudes toward inequality and distributive justice issues from a representative national sample of Chinese adults.[2] What do we learn from our survey about how Chinese citizens view the fairness or unfairness of current patterns of inequality? There are two primary research questions of concern. The first is a comparative question: How relatively fair or unfair does the average Chinese citizen feel current patterns of inequality are, compared to citizens of other societies (particularly other postsocialist transition societies in Eastern Europe)? Analyses reported in earlier papers suggest that in many respects Chinese citizens are on average more accepting of and less angry about current patterns of

inequality than citizens of several other postsocialist societies (Whyte 2002; Whyte and Han 2003, 2005).[3] This chapter presents some evidence related to this comparative question by showing the greater prevalence of positive rather than negative responses to many questions about current patterns of inequality. However, our primary focus here is on a second question: Which groups and locales in China harbor the strongest feelings that current patterns of inequality are unjust?

Most previous analyses of Chinese popular attitudes adopt a straightforward approach in speculating about this second question, an approach based on the distinction between "winners" and "losers" in the reform process. Certain groups and locales are seen as objective beneficiaries of recent economic and stratification trends and, as a consequence, as being more likely than others to view the current social order as basically fair. A list of "winners" typically includes those with high incomes and the well-educated; white-collar workers (particularly intellectuals, managers, and professionals); members of the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP); private entrepreneurs; urban residents in general; residents of coastal provinces; perhaps men and young people; and anyone whose standard of living has been improving. On the other hand, those with low status or who have experienced downward social mobility are assumed to be more likely to feel that the current social order is unjust. A listing of "losers" in the reform process typically includes rural residents in general, perhaps particularly those still mainly engaged in agriculture; rural migrants living in cities; those with low incomes and little schooling; the unemployed; factory workers; those still employed by financially troubled state-owned enterprises; non-Party members; residents of China's interior (particularly Western provinces); perhaps women and those middle-aged and older; and anyone whose standard of living is threatened or has fallen. In the pages that follow, we examine whether this conventional approach is a good way to understand the social contours of feelings about distributive injustice in China today.

## MEASURING DISTRIBUTIVE INJUSTICE ATTITUDES AND THEIR PREDICTORS

How does one measure popular attitudes toward distributive injustice in a questionnaire-based survey? Our questionnaire contained a very large number of questions probing respondent attitudes toward issues regarding inequality and distributive injustice, and no single question or scale computed from several questions could summarize views on all aspects of distributive injustice. We focus our attention here on four measures designed to reflect a perception that current patterns of inequality are unfair (versus fair) and a variety of possible reactions to such a perception.

First and most central to our investigation of views on distributive injustice, we asked respondents to give their assessments of why some people in China today are poor, and why some others are rich. The list of possible reasons included such factors as ability, effort, luck, personal character, discrimination, dishonesty, personal connections, unequal opportunities, and system deficiencies. Respondents were asked to rate whether each trait mentioned had a very large importance, large importance, some importance, small importance, or no importance at all in explaining why some people are poor, or why some people are rich. Within this larger set of questions, we constructed a scale designed to assess the perceived importance of structural (i.e., not based on individual merit) explanations for why some people are rich while others are poor (seven items: discrimination, lack of equal opportunity, defects in the economic structure as explanations of poverty, dishonesty, unequal opportunities, personal connections, and unfairness of the economic structure as explanations of wealth).[4] We refer to this as our "Unfair Inequality" scale. The presumption is that individuals who score high on Unfair Inequality feel that external features (such as dishonesty, unequal opportunities, and discrimination) rather than individual merit are the main sources of current inequalities in China, which are therefore seen as unjust.[5]

Second, we include a measure of feelings of pessimism (versus optimism) about chances for getting ahead in Chinese society today, feelings we assume will be affected by how fair or unfair respondents perceive current inequalities are. For that purpose we rely on a single, global question: "Based on the current situation in the country, the opportunities for someone like you to raise their standard of living are still great," with the five response categories provided ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A high score thus indicates pessimism about ordinary people being able to improve their standard of living, and we refer to this as a measure of perceived "Lack of Opportunity."

If individuals feel that current inequalities are unfair and mobility opportunities are scarce and unequal, they may feel that the government should be taking active steps to limit income gaps and level the playing field of economic opportunities. The third measure we use is a summary scale derived from three questions about what role respondents think the government should (or should not) play in reducing inequalities in Chinese society. Each interviewee was asked to say whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the following statements: "The government should assure that every person is able to maintain a minimum standard of living"; "The government should provide an opportunity to work for every person willing to work"; and "The government has the responsibility to shrink the gap between high and low

incomes." These items were then reversed, so that a high score means support for an active role of the government in promoting social equality, and then the resulting scale is a common factor score computed from the three item scores. We refer to this as our "Government Leveling" scale. The presumption is that those who score high on this measure think that more active measures should be taken to reduce current inequalities (since none of these three things are currently being done much) and are willing to entrust the government with this role.

Another possible response to perceived unfairness of the social order is to react with fatalism and despair and to assume nothing can be done to improve things. A fourth and final scale is designed to tap such feelings of hopelessness about injustice. Three questions were used, again with respondents asked to give responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree to each statement: "Since we are unable to change the status quo, discussing social justice is meaningless"; "Looking at things as they are now, it is very difficult to say what is just and what is unjust"; and "Government officials don't care what common people like me think." Again we reversed these items, so that high scores indicate feelings of hopelessness and injustice, and then our scale is a common factor score computed from the three item scores. We refer to this as our "Feelings of Injustice" scale.[6] These four measures (Unfair Inequality, Lack of Opportunity, preferences for Government Leveling, and Feelings of Injustice) constitute the attitude domains we focus on in this chapter.

In the remainder of the chapter we investigate which social background traits are related to agreement versus disagreement with these four distributive injustice attitude measures. As we examine how attitudes in these four realms vary across the face of Chinese society, we start with a rather simple-minded set of expectations. Other things being equal, we expect that survey respondents who feel the current system is unjust will score high on all four distributive injustice attitude measures, while those who are comfortable operating in the current system and don't have strong feelings of distributive injustice will score low on all four measures.[7] In the analysis that follows, can we identify respondents with particular social backgrounds, or who live in particular locales, who fit these patterns, and thus are particularly aggrieved and pessimistic (versus satisfied and optimistic) about current Chinese patterns of inequality and social mobility opportunities?

In order to answer this question, we examine how scores on these four aspects of distributive injustice attitudes vary in relation to a range of social and geographical background characteristics of our 3,267 survey respondents. Our social background "predictors" of distributive injustice attitudes are of several types: categories of occupational and household registration status, measures of other objective demographic and status characteristics,

measures of subjective social status and experiences, and indicators of location within China's overall geographic and economic space. We measure the background predictors used in the present analyses as follows.

### *Occupational/Household Registration Status Groups*

Many observers agree that the most important social cleavage in China today is based on that society's distinctive system of household registration (*hukou*), which divides China socially into three status categories: rural residents, rural migrants residing in urban areas, and urban residents with urban *hukou* (see, for example, Wang 2005). This division overlaps with, but does not fully correspond with, another important basis of social status: occupation. For example, almost all farmers are rural residents, but many rural residents are engaged in other, nonfarming occupations. In order to capture this complexity, we rely on questions in our survey about place of residence, *hukou* status, and occupation to classify our respondents into the following nine occupational/household registration status categories:

1. farmers—current or retired farmers regardless of their *hukou* status
2. rural migrants—migrants from rural to urban areas regardless of their current employment or occupational status
3. rural nonfarming—agricultural *hukou* holders having a nonfarming job currently or before retirement
4. rural others—agricultural *hukou* holders who do not belong to categories 1–3
5. urban workers—current or retired workers with nonagricultural *hukou*
6. urban white collar—current or retired white-collar workers (e.g., professionals, managers, officials, clerks) with nonagricultural *hukou*
7. urban private—current or retired urban private business owners or the self-employed with nonagricultural *hukou*
8. urban unemployed—urban *hukou* holders who are currently not working and have been looking for a job over the past month
9. urban others—other nonagricultural *hukou* holders who do not belong to categories 5–8

### *Other Objective Demographic and Status Characteristics*

We include the following other objective demographic and socioeconomic characteristics as additional predictors of distributive injustice attitudes: gender, age, educational attainment, marital status, ethnicity, household income, Chinese Communist Party membership, and experience of working in a state-owned enterprise.[8] Together with our occupational/household registration status measure, these characteristics allow us to examine the influence of a range of objective social status and demographic background characteristics on our four indicators of distributive injustice attitudes.

*Indicators of Subjective Social Status and Experience*

Research in other countries has shown that subjective perceptions of personal and family status and of changes in social position over time often have about as much influence on distributive justice attitudes as objective indicators of current social status (e.g., Kluegel 1988; Kluegel, Mason, and Wegener 1995; Kreidl 2000). Therefore we include three measures of subjective social status and experiences. One is the response to a single question about how the respondent's family is doing economically compared to five years previously (ranging from 1 = much worse to 5 = much better), which we term "5 year standard of living (SOL) trend." Second, we created a summary scale of inequality-related bad personal or family experiences during the last three years, and we refer to the summary score of such experiences as a measure of "bad experiences."[9] Finally, our third measure, which we call "relative social status," is based on four questions asking respondents to compare their current living standards with that of their relatives, their former classmates, their co-workers, and their neighbors.[10] We expect that respondents who perceive they have been downwardly mobile, who have had many inequality-related bad experiences, and who feel they have low relative social status will have strong feelings of distributive injustice, no matter how they rank in terms of objective measures of current social status.

*Location in Geographic and Economic Space*

It is logical to assume that the views respondents have about distributive injustice will be influenced not only by their personal characteristics and social status, but also by where they work and live. For example, we noted earlier the common perception that people residing in coastal provinces of China have benefited disproportionately from the reform era and will thus support the status quo, while residents of inland provinces have seen few benefits trickling down to them (despite recent government efforts to "develop the West") and are likely to feel aggrieved. However, some coastal provinces (such as Guangdong) have benefited much more from market reforms than others (such as Liaoning), while within any province some people live in globally connected major cities while others live in isolated and poor villages. (See the critique of traditional groupings of provinces into regions presented in Skinner 2005.)

In order to try to capture the complexity of such location influences, we use three different measures here. First, we use the conventional division of China into Eastern, Central, and Western provinces as defined by China's National Statistics Bureau and classify each respondent by their current residential location. Second, we classify the distance to the nearest prefecture or higher-level city of the current de facto residence of each respondent.[11] Finally,

we utilize research conducted by scholars in China (Fan and Wang 2004) to incorporate a composite estimate of the relative degree of market transformation of each province included in our sample, with the values ranging from 3.61 for Ningxia to 9.74 for Guangdong (out of a possible 10).[12]

### *Unfair Inequality Attitudes as an Intervening Variable*

In our conceptualization of distributive injustice, as discussed earlier, we see the Unfair Inequality scale as a basic measure of the perceived unfairness (versus fairness) of actual patterns of inequality in China currently and our three other attitude measures as responses to such perceived fairness or unfairness—feelings of pessimism about getting ahead, a desire for the government to intervene to limit inequality, and despair about the chances for injustices to be corrected. In order to reflect this conceptualization, in addition to the variety of objective and subjective background "predictors" discussed above, when we examine variations in attitudes toward Lack of Opportunity, Government Leveling, and Feelings of Injustice, we use scores on the Unfair Inequality scale as a final "predictor" variable.

## THE SOCIAL CONTOURS OF DISTRIBUTIVE INJUSTICE ATTITUDES

Before focusing on the question of which social groups and locales have the strongest feelings that current inequalities are unfair, we want to briefly assess the general mood of Chinese citizens toward distributive justice issues. The weighted frequency distributions of responses of our entire sample to the questions included in our four distributive injustice measures are displayed in Table 13.1 (in panels 3–6), as well as responses to additional questions about current inequalities (in panels 1–2), which are included in the table to provide a broader context.

As suggested earlier, the pattern of responses shown in Table 13.1 does not suggest a dominant mood of anger at current patterns of inequality or pervasive feelings of distributive injustice. For example, while a large majority of respondents feel that national income disparities are too large (71.7 percent), much smaller proportions think that income differences within their own work organization or in their neighborhood are too large (39.6 percent and 31.8 percent), with the most common response being that such local inequalities are reasonable. Also, generally respondents rate individual merit factors, such as ability and hard work, as more important than external and unfair factors, such as dishonesty and unequal opportunity, in explaining why some people are rich while others are poor (compare panels 2 and 3), many more respondents are optimistic than pessimistic about

TABLE 13.1

*Responses to selected inequality and distributive justice questions (weighted distribution, row percentages)*

| | *Strongly disagree* | *Somewhat disagree* | *Neutral* | *Somewhat agree* | *Strongly agree* | *N* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Views on income gaps | | | | | | |
| Inequality too large (national)* | 1.4 | 4.4 | 22.5 | 31.6 | 40.1 | 3,254 |
| Inequality too large (work unit)* | 1.6 | 8.9 | 49.9 | 27.1 | 12.5 | 2,107 |
| Inequality too large (neighbors)* | 1.9 | 10.2 | 56.1 | 26.6 | 5.2 | 3,264 |
| 2. Merit-based inequality | | | | | | |
| Ability affects poverty** | 2.2 | 4.5 | 32.0 | 43.5 | 17.8 | 3,265 |
| Effort affects poverty** | 3.2 | 7.2 | 35.6 | 43.9 | 10.1 | 3,257 |
| Education affects poverty** | 3.0 | 8.6 | 34.0 | 37.8 | 16.6 | 3,239 |
| Ability affects wealth** | 1.8 | 3.8 | 25.0 | 46.3 | 23.2 | 3,265 |
| Effort affects wealth** | 1.5 | 5.7 | 31.1 | 49.5 | 12.3 | 3,261 |
| Education affects wealth** | 2.3 | 6.2 | 30.9 | 39.5 | 21.1 | 3,240 |
| 3. Unfair inequality | | | | | | |
| Discrimination affects poverty** | 7.2 | 18.8 | 52.8 | 16.9 | 4.3 | 3,261 |
| Opportunity affects poverty** | 4.3 | 15.2 | 53.1 | 22.3 | 5.2 | 3,261 |
| System defects affect poverty** | 5.4 | 11.8 | 61.8 | 16.1 | 4.9 | 3,258 |
| Dishonesty affects wealth** | 13.3 | 26.7 | 42.6 | 12.8 | 4.6 | 3,259 |
| Connections affect wealth** | 1.4 | 6.3 | 32.3 | 41.0 | 19.0 | 3,261 |
| Opportunity affects wealth** | 1.9 | 8.5 | 44.4 | 34.9 | 10.4 | 3,262 |
| Unfair structure affects wealth** | 3.6 | 14.4 | 56.0 | 19.5 | 6.5 | 3,258 |
| 4. Lack of opportunity | | | | | | |
| Lack of opportunity to get ahead | 9.6 | 47.2 | 23.5 | 15.3 | 4.3 | 3,262 |
| 5. Preference for government leveling | | | | | | |
| Ensure min. standard of living | .5 | 2.7 | 16.1 | 39.4 | 41.4 | 3,263 |
| Provide job for everyone | .5 | 3.9 | 20.0 | 45.6 | 30.1 | 3,261 |
| Reduce income gap | 1.8 | 10.3 | 30.6 | 34.2 | 23.1 | 3,260 |
| 6. Feelings of injustice | | | | | | |
| Meaningless to discuss justice | 6.1 | 23.0 | 36.5 | 27.5 | 6.9 | 3,261 |
| Don't know what justice is | 6.0 | 20.2 | 35.7 | 28.5 | 9.6 | 3,261 |
| Officials don't care | 4.5 | 16.5 | 28.9 | 31.2 | 18.9 | 3,260 |

SOURCE: 2004 China Inequality and Distributive Justice Survey, N = 3,267.

NOTE: Only questions in panels 3–6 were used in the distributive injustice attitude measures for this chapter. For full wording of the questions, see text.

*Actual questions asked respondents to evaluate these inequalities, with the response categories "too small," "a bit small," "appropriate," "a bit large," and "too large."

**Response category wording was actually "no influence at all," "little influence," "some influence," "large influence," and "very large influence."

the chances for ordinary people to get ahead currently, and there is some agreement but also considerable disagreement with our Feelings of Injustice questions (see panel 6). The one clear departure from this pattern of more acceptance than rejection of current patterns of inequality is in regard to Government Leveling (see panel 5). Very large majorities of Chinese respondents would like the government to take measures to alleviate poverty and reduce inequality. Apparently it is not necessary to harbor strong feelings that current patterns of inequality are unjust in order to favor government efforts to alleviate poverty and reduce overall inequality.[13]

We now proceed to the main focus of this chapter, examining how various social background "predictors" are related to scores on our four measures of distributive injustice attitudes. These results are displayed in Table 13.2, which shows the patterning of both correlations and regression coefficients that reveal the associations between the four measures of distributive injustice attitudes and the background predictors described earlier. (The bivariate correlation coefficients indicate the association between a particular injustice measure and the background variable indicated before controlling for any other predictors; the corresponding unstandardized regression coefficients displayed in the table tell us the strength of that same association while other predictors are all controlled statistically—in other words, the contribution of the background trait in question to explaining variation in the inequality scale in question, net of the other background traits.) Given the complexity of our statistical analyses, involving more than twenty predictor variables and four distributive injustice scales whose scores we are trying to predict, it is important to look for overall patterns, rather than to scrutinize each individual statistical coefficient. The search for general patterns necessarily involves a complex process of scanning results up and down the rows as well as across the columns within the table. As noted earlier, we are particularly interested in which social background characteristics are associated with the strongest feelings of distributive injustice, and whether the resulting patterns can be interpreted as the product of having a disadvantaged rather than an advantaged status in Chinese society today.

### *The Role of Occupational/Household Registration Status Group Membership*

In examining the statistical associations between occupational/household registration status group membership and distributive injustice attitudes (panel 1 in Table 13.2), it is immediately obvious that objective status within contemporary China is a poor guide to distributive injustice attitudes. By any reckoning, rural people in China, and those engaged in farming in particular, are at or near the bottom of the social order. However, rather than harboring

TABLE 13.2

*Predictors of distributive injustice feelings (bivariate correlations and unstandardized regression coefficients)*

| | UNFAIR INEQUALITY | | LACK OF OPPORTUNITY | | GOVERNMENT LEVELING | | FEELINGS OF INJUSTICE | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Correlation* | *Regression* | *Correlation* | *Regression* | *Correlation* | *Regression* | *Correlation* | *Regression* |
| Farmer | −.205*** | −.193*** | −.007 | −.264*** | −.170*** | −.152*** | −.118*** | −.249*** |
| Migrant | .005 | −.106+ | −.007 | −.086 | .028 | −.033 | .053** | −.028 |
| Rural nonfarming | −.018 | −.134* | −.060** | −.242** | −.056** | −.211*** | −.037+ | −.160* |
| Rural others | −.010 | −.109+ | −.024 | −.293** | −.172*** | −.372*** | −.013 | −.166* |
| Urban workers | .147*** | — | .106*** | — | .138*** | — | .099*** | — |
| Urban white-collar | .113*** | .022 | −.068*** | −.287*** | .154*** | .008 | −.029 | −.110* |
| Urban private | .037+ | −.069 | −.024 | −.113 | .044* | −.037 | .016 | −.086 |
| Urban unemployed | .055** | −.060 | .074*** | .121 | .083*** | .091 | .074*** | −.007 |
| Urban others | .025 | −.136** | .012 | −.063 | .056** | −.005 | .070** | .046 |
| Female | .009 | .024 | .020 | .035 | −.094*** | −.066** | −.020 | −.058* |
| Age | −.008 | .011+ | .199*** | .005 | −.013 | .005 | .071*** | .019** |
| Age2 | −.013 | −.000+ | .197*** | .000 | −.022 | −.000 | .058** | −.000* |
| Education | .156*** | .024* | −.113*** | −.009 | .234*** | .040*** | −.023 | −.013 |
| Married | −.057** | −.071* | .020 | −.045 | .012 | .053+ | .044* | .088* |
| Han ethnicity | .060** | .009 | −.023 | −.064 | .172*** | .100** | .033 | −.006 |
| Logged HH income | .123*** | .055+ | −.159*** | −.172*** | .141*** | .005 | −.090*** | −.212*** |
| Party member | −.004 | −.117** | −.001 | .052 | .104*** | .084* | −.065** | −.147** |
| SOE | .132*** | .037 | .096*** | .241*** | .137*** | .025 | .026 | −.071 |
| 5 year SOL trend | −.123*** | −.042** | −.254*** | −.168*** | −.023 | .028* | −.142*** | −.020 |
| Bad experiences | .058** | .033*** | .168*** | .027** | .021 | .018** | .141*** | .026** |
| Relative social status | −.047* | −.040* | −.228*** | −.146*** | −.059** | −.080*** | −.105*** | .015 |
| East | .085*** | — | −.066*** | — | .071** | — | .020 | — |
| Central | .000 | −.053 | .039* | .206*** | .089*** | .103** | .014 | .097* |
| West | −.124*** | −.164** | .044* | .300** | −.217*** | −.093+ | −.050* | .246*** |
| Distance to city | −.213*** | −.024** | −.011 | .003 | −.242*** | .004 | −.177*** | −.054*** |
| Marketization | .043* | −.026* | −.020 | .045* | .093*** | .026* | .048* | .040** |
| Unfair Inequality | — | — | .142*** | .213*** | .292*** | .195*** | .327*** | .361*** |
| Tucker-Lewis Index | — | .985 | — | .985 | — | .986 | — | .987 |
| RMSEA | — | .041 | — | .041 | — | .039 | — | .037 |
| $R^2$ | — | .105 | — | .160 | — | .215 | — | .194 |

+.05 < $p \leq .10$; *.01 < $p \leq .05$; **.001< $p \leq .01$; ***$p \leq .001$.

to get ahead, once other predictors are taken into account (see column 4), and they express stronger support for Government Leveling (see column 6) and stronger Feelings of Injustice (column 8). So in regard to the level of transformation to a market economy as well as in regard to distance to the city and regional location, living in a favored locale at the forefront of transformation to a market economy seems more often associated with *stronger* feelings of distributive injustice rather than the more favorable attitudes one might expect.

### *The Role of Perceptions of Unfair Inequality*

Finally, in the last row of Table 13.2 we show the associations between scores on the Unfair Inequality scale and the other three distributive injustice measures. Here we find few surprises. Those who perceive the difference between who is rich and who is poor as attributable particularly to external and unfair sources are, as expected, significantly more likely than others to perceive a Lack of Opportunities to get ahead, to favor Government Leveling, and to express strong Feelings of Injustice. Even when other predictors are controlled for statistically, these associations remain strong and statistically significant.

The figures at the bottom of each table show what proportion of the variance in the distributive injustice attitude in question we are able to explain with the set of predictors we employ. We have only modest success in explaining variations in whether current inequalities are perceived as fair or unfair (r-squared =.105). However, once we take into account scores on that scale as well as all the other predictors, we are more successful and quite respectable in explaining variations in the other three distributive injustice attitude scales (r-squared = .160, .215, and .194, respectively).[17]

## CONCLUSIONS: INTERPRETING THE SOCIAL CONTOURS OF DISTRIBUTIVE INJUSTICE FEELINGS

The findings from our 2004 nationally representative sample survey of Chinese popular attitudes about inequality and distributive justice issues challenge two widely held views. The first is that anger about growing inequality and social injustice is the dominant popular mood. Although this is not the primary focus of this paper, our survey respondents express more acceptance than rejection of the status quo (see again Table 13.1). The dominant mood might be characterized as "acceptance tinged by criticism." Large proportions of survey respondents think there is too much inequality nationally and would prefer that the government take more active measures to help the poor and thereby reduce income gaps. However, most don't attribute the inequality they see in Chinese society today mainly to unfairness in the system,

but are instead more likely to explain who is rich and who is poor in terms of variations in individual efforts and talents. Also, the dominant mood is optimism rather than pessimism about the chances for ordinary people to get ahead, while fatalism and despair about social justice issues is a minority view. Overall we don't find much support in our survey data for the "social volcano" scenario, and the alternative "rocky stability" characterization of contemporary Chinese society seems more appropriate.

The second challenge to conventional wisdom from our national survey results is equally pointed—the strongest feelings of distributive injustice in China are not to be found among those social groups, and in those locations, that are objectively the most disadvantaged, such as among farmers, rural migrants, and those living in remote interior locales. The social contours of feelings of distributive injustice are not well mapped by assuming that low status and disadvantage automatically produce anger and discontent.

How can we explain the counterintuitive pattern that on balance disadvantaged groups and locales are less critical of current inequalities than are more advantaged ones? Is it simply the case that the most disadvantaged groups in China are so isolated and ignorant that they do not realize how bad off they are and how unfairly society treats them? We don't think this is a plausible explanation, and in fact our results point to other, more persuasive explanations. Although objective status is a poor guide to perceptions of current inequalities as unjust, *subjective* measures of relative status and mobility experiences are a much better guide (revisit panel 3 in Table 13.2). The consistent and expected patterns of association between our subjective social status measures and perceptions of current inequalities as unfair resonate with research cited earlier from other societies (e.g., Kluegel 1988; Kluegel, Mason, and Wegener, 1995; Kreidl 2000). Distributive injustice attitudes in any society are influenced not simply by current objective status positions, but also and sometimes even more powerfully by subjective factors, such as perceptions of one's relative social status, past experiences with upward or downward mobility, relative aspirations, the reference groups used to judge one's own success or failure, the fates of relatives and significant others, and the climate of anxiety versus optimism about economic opportunities and family security that prevails within one's local community.

With these influences in mind, we might say that farmers and individuals living in isolated villages in China's interior display a Chinese version of the "Lake Wobegon effect" (pace Garrison Keillor), with adult respondents (rather than children) all above average. For such individuals what is happening to millionaires and the unemployed in distant cities is peripheral to their assessments of how fair or unfair current inequalities are perceived, with those perceptions shaped much more by what they see around them in their local communities and by their own recent experiences and those

strong feelings of distributive injustice, rural people in general, and farmers in particular, are less likely than the comparison group of urban workers to see the difference between wealth and poverty as due to unfair causes, more optimistic about chances for ordinary people to get ahead, less likely to favor government leveling to reduce inequality, and less likely to harbor strong feelings of injustice. The one rural group that is least distinctive (compared to urban workers) is rural migrants working in cities. Despite the indignities that many migrants experience on a regular basis, the tendency to harbor feelings of injustice seen at the bivariate level (in column 7) disappears when controls for other background traits are applied, and the only net distinctiveness of migrants compared to urban workers is a weak tendency to be *less* likely to see current inequalities as unfair (see column 2).

The most advantaged occupational groups in our categorization are urban white-collar workers and urban private entrepreneurs and the self-employed. However, in most respects these two groups do not differ that much from the comparison group of urban workers, once other background factors are controlled for, although there are modest but statistically significant net tendencies for urban white-collar workers to be less pessimistic about getting ahead than urban (blue-collar) workers and to harbor fewer feelings of injustice. At the bivariate level the most disadvantaged urban group, the urban unemployed, seems generally aggrieved about distributive issues (see columns 1, 3, 5, and 7), but when age, education, and other background factors are taken into account, the urban unemployed do not differ significantly from urban workers on any of our attitude measures.

To sum up, we propose a tentative generalization about how occupation/registration status groups in China vary in their views on distributive issues. Other things being equal, the strongest feelings of distributive injustice appear to be held by urban workers, perhaps followed by the urban unemployed, those in the urban private sector, and rural migrants. Somewhat more favorable views on distributive issues are held by urban white-collar workers. Finally, and surprisingly, the most positive attitudes about the fairness of current patterns of inequality are held by China's rural residents in general, including farmers. In viewing a national sample, we see here few signs of the "pitchfork anger" of the peasants alluded to in recent press accounts. We will have more to say about the role of occupation/registration status groups once we have discussed the remainder of our findings.

### *The Role of Other Objective Demographic and Status Characteristics*

Some, although not all, of the associations with other objective background traits (panel 2) also contradict the idea that having high status translates into viewing the current system as relatively fair. At the bivariate level, both those with high incomes and those with high levels of education are *more*, rather

than less, likely to emphasize external and unfair explanations of why some people are rich while others are poor, and these associations are weakened but still statistically significant when we control for other predictors in our models (compare columns 1 and 2). Membership in the Chinese Communist Party has been found in many studies to be associated with advantages in income, housing space, and other benefits, but CCP membership here is associated only with a weak tendency not to see unfairness in current inequality (in column 2) and to have slightly weaker feelings of injustice (in column 8), but also with being slightly *more* likely to favor government leveling (in column 6).

The most striking patterns found among the set of predictors in panel 2 of Table13.2 concern age, not social status. The association appears to be curvilinear, net of the effect of other background characteristics of respondents.[14] Those now in middle age express stronger feelings that current inequalities are unfair (in column 2) and stronger Feelings of Injustice (in column 8) than do their younger and older counterparts. This striking pattern, even though not repeated in our other two attitude scales, may indicate the profound importance in China even today of the disruption of people's lives and mobility opportunities caused by the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76. One of the distinctive features of social mobility patterns in post-1949 China is the extent to which adjacent birth cohorts often had dramatically different social mobility opportunities, due to the volcanic shifts caused by Mao-era political campaigns. Those who came of age during the Cultural Revolution experienced particularly severe disruptions of their schooling and careers (Davis-Friedmann 1985; Whyte 1985; Xie, Yang, and Greenman 2006). Those who came of age at that time are, of course, now middle aged. The strong curvilinear associations between respondent age and both perceptions of Unfair Inequality and Feelings of Injustice may reflect the acute feelings of resentment over lost opportunities held by many members of China's "lost generation." The associations between distributive injustice attitudes and other objective background measures (shown in panel 2) are generally weaker and less consistent.[15]

### *The Role of Subjective Social Status and Experiences*

When we examine the associations with our three measures of subjective social status and experiences (in panel 3 of Table 13.2), we see that in general how people *perceive* their status and trends in their standards of living is more closely and consistently related with distributive injustice attitudes than are most *objective* status indicators in panels 1 and 2. With some exceptions, the associations with these subjective status measures also fit more closely with the conventional wisdom that "winners" see little injustice in society, while "losers" feel aggrieved. Those who rate their relative status highly compared to their peers and those who perceive that their family's

living standard has improved compared to five years earlier tend to see current patterns of inequality as less unfair than others (in column 2) while being less pessimistic about chances to get ahead in China today (in column 4). Those who in the last three years had more bad experiences than the average respondent show the opposite tendency and see current inequalities as unfair and chances of getting ahead as relatively low.

The patterns in regard to Government Leveling and Feelings of Injustice are less consistent. At the bivariate level, those who perceive they have high relative status and who report their family living standard has improved are less likely than others to have strong feelings of injustice, while those with bad experiences are more likely to have such feelings. However, once other predictors are controlled for, only the tendency for those who have had bad experiences in the last three years to express feelings of injustice remains statistically significant (in column 8). In regard to government redistribution, in the regression models we see the expected pattern of those who report high relative status being less in favor of government leveling, while those who have had bad experiences are more likely to favor such a government role. However, unexpectedly, those who perceive their family living standard has improved are slightly *more* likely than others to favor government leveling. With some qualifications, in general these patterns provide some support for the notion that being a winner versus a loser in society has an impact on distributive injustice attitudes. However, what is important is whether individuals subjectively *perceive* that they have been winners or losers, rather than whether objectively or to the outside observer we classify them as belonging to groups that have been winners or losers.

*Location in Geographic and Economic Space*

In panel 4 of Table 13.2 are displayed the associations between distributive injustice attitude measures and our three indicators of geographic/economic location—region, distance to a prefectural or larger city, and degree of marketization of the province. From the figures in these tables, it appears that locational factors matter, but in complex ways that are not that easy to summarize or interpret. In column 4 we see an expected pattern of those living in Central and Western provinces of China perceiving fewer chances to get ahead than residents in the East. Also, once other predictors are controlled for statistically, residents of Central and Western provinces do express stronger feelings of injustice than residents of Eastern provinces (see column 8). However, residents of favored Eastern provinces are more likely to see current inequalities as *unfair*, while those in Western provinces and living far from cities are *less* likely to share this view (see columns 1–2).

The locational predictors of attitudes toward Government Leveling also are somewhat unexpected (see columns 5–6). We anticipate that support

for government leveling should be stronger in disadvantaged locales, but that appears to be the case here only in regard to those residing in the Central region. Residents in the least-favored Western region are significantly *less* likely to favor government redistribution, with views of residents of the most-advantaged Eastern region falling in the middle on the issue of government leveling. On balance it appears that being located in relatively disadvantageous places is associated with *more* opposition to, rather than support for, government leveling. Perhaps relative lack of trust in the government among those who live in China's periphery explains these unexpected patterns. We speculate that people living in disadvantaged locales might prefer a more equal society but do not trust the government to redress current gaps. China's leaders may declare their intent to "develop the West," but those living in the West may not expect much improvement to come from such proclamations.

Distance from prefectural or larger cities does not make a significant difference in perceived Lack of Opportunity (see columns 3–4 in Table 13.2). However, distance to the city shows similarly unexpected associations with the other three measures. Net of other factors, those who live far from cities are *less* likely to view current inequalities as unfair (see column 2), they demonstrate *less* support than others for Government Leveling (although the association is no longer statistically significant and turns slightly positive once other predictors are controlled for—compare columns 5 and 6), and they express *weaker* Feelings of Injustice than others (see columns 7 and 8). In some ways these patterns echo those seen earlier in regard to the occupational status groups in panel 1, with a sense of distributive injustice more associated with urban places and occupations than with distant rural ones and farmers.[16] However, it is not the case that these findings regarding residential location are explained by the "positive" views of farmers who reside in locales distant from cities. With the exception of the Government Leveling scale, these coefficients remain statistically significant even when occupational status groups and other predictors are controlled for statistically. Thus there is a net tendency of those living far from urban places to have weaker feelings of distributive injustice than those closer to or residing in cities, no matter what they do for a living.

Finally, our measure of living in a highly marketized province shows inconsistent patterns of association with the four injustice measures. The bivariate tendency of those living in highly marketized provinces to see current inequalities as unfair is reversed once other predictors are controlled for statistically, revealing a weak, predicted tendency for those in highly marketized provinces to be *less* likely to perceive current inequalities as unfair (see column 2). However, those residing in highly marketized provinces are quite unexpectedly *more* pessimistic than others about opportunities

of significant others in their lives. As we saw in Table 13.1, in general, respondents are not particularly likely to feel that such *local* inequalities are excessive, even though most feel that national inequalities are. When they look at rich and poor people in their immediate environment, it is plausible that they might find explanations of such differences based on corruption, unequal opportunities, and other external factors *less* persuasive than would people living in larger and more complex communities. We also speculate that rural people in general, who were for the most part locked into permanent subordination and isolation by the commune system and *hukou* restrictions imposed during the Mao era (Wang 2005), may feel that the loosening of those restrictions after 1978 and improved opportunities to leave farming and migrate to the cities *increase* the fairness of current inequalities, even if opportunities for upward mobility remain far from equal. Given how villagers were treated in the Mao era, in some sense their status and opportunities had nowhere to go but up. Perhaps the recent reductions in rural taxes and fees experienced by most farmers also contribute to improved feelings about the current system.[18]

Similar considerations lead us to conclude that the more negative views about current patterns of inequality held by urbanites in general and some relatively advantaged urban groups in particular are not so counterintuitive either. Objectively, Chinese urbanites have many more advantages over rural residents and migrants than is the case in most other societies (Khan and Riskin 2005; Whyte 1996). However, for the most part urban residents don't draw conclusions about the fairness or unfairness of the current system by comparing themselves with farmers. Rather, most likely they consider what has been happening to themselves and people they know in recent years, and they compare these fates with the rich and poor people they see in the much wider and more complex stratification systems (compared to those of villagers) in which they live. So urban workers and members of China's middle-aged "lost generation" will be confronted on a daily basis with images of the lavish and privileged existence of the newly rich and the powerful, and as a result they may have a sense of their own insecure status and lost opportunities powerfully reinforced. Unlike villagers, urbanites face not only the potential rewards of upward mobility, but also the hazards of downward mobility into unemployment and poverty. Those with high levels of education and high incomes should have a lot to celebrate, but if they compare themselves mainly with their richest and most successful neighbors, rather than with the "masses," they may also come to emphasize the unfairness of current inequalities.

Does the fact that we find relatively weak sentiments of distributive injustice in our national survey, and that such sentiments are not concentrated in the groups that are objectively the most disadvantaged, mean that

China's leaders can now take comfort in our findings and relax, and that they don't have to worry that political stability will be threatened if they do not take vigorous steps to make their society less unequal and more just? In our view such a complacent attitude would be misguided. Our study has focused only on distributive injustice issues, and there are many other kinds of injustice that can generate comparable or even stronger popular discontent. For example, individuals who feel they have lost their jobs through no fault of their own, who have had land confiscated for development without fair compensation, or who have contracted AIDS through tainted blood transfusions may legitimately be furious, even if these are not primarily distributive justice issues. By the same token, convincing Chinese citizens that the current social order is fair may depend more on such measures as improving the legal system and giving ordinary citizens increased voice in influencing the people and policies that govern their lives than it does on government redistributions from the rich to the poor.

Even in the distributive realm, the popular perception that China's leaders are concerned about excessive and unfair inequalities probably helps dampen feelings of distributive injustice among the population, feelings that could flare up if Chinese citizens saw their leaders becoming complacent about the problems of disadvantaged citizens. Furthermore, maintaining popular optimism about chances for people to improve their standards of living is probably only possible when a large proportion of citizens say they are doing better than they were earlier and feel this is the case also for many if not most of the people they know. Such feelings clearly characterized our survey respondents in 2004,[19] but a major economic downturn in China could undermine such confidence. As we noted earlier, the explanation of how distributive justice attitudes are formed that is suggested by our results also leads us to suspect that these attitudes may be somewhat volatile and subject to change in response to altered personal and family experiences and circumstances. In short, there is nothing in our survey results that says that the current "acceptance tinged by criticism" dominant popular view about current inequalities is guaranteed and permanent, or that China's political stability could not be threatened by a broader sharing of feelings of injustice, distributive and otherwise, in the future.

One final cautionary lesson can be drawn from our survey results. Our data suggest that some of the measures the Chinese government is taking to counteract feelings of distributive injustice may not be aimed at the most appropriate groups and locales. We do not advocate that reforms designed to improve the lives of China's farmers and people living in interior provinces should be abandoned because the average farmer or resident of the West is less angry about current inequalities than the average urban worker, migrant, or unemployed person. However, those concerned with China's future

social and political stability would be well advised to reject the assumption that objective status can be automatically equated with attitudes toward current inequalities. Assuming that feelings of injustice are an important source of potential instability, assessments of China's prospects could be more confidently made by directly asking citizens probing questions on a regular basis about how just or unjust they feel the social order is rather than by computing and monitoring Gini inequality coefficients.