

POPULAR ATTITUDES TOWARD INCOME INEQUALITY IN CHINA¹

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During the period of China's reforms since 1978, the income and consumption levels of the majority of Chinese families have improved considerably. However, it is clear that inequalities in the distribution of incomes in China have increased sharply as well, and that the "rules of the game" that determine how people are paid in their jobs, what benefits they are entitled to, and whether or how they can get ahead (or experience downward mobility) have changed in dramatic fashion as well. On the latter point and oversimplifying things, socialist distribution principles and bureaucratic allocation of income and benefits have been replaced by market distribution and heightened competition and risk. How do ordinary Chinese citizens react to these changes in the pattern of income distribution and social mobility in China? In evaluating the altered terrain of income inequality, how do the *laobaixing* weigh the "good news" of generally rising incomes against the "bad news" of increased inequality and the at least "problematic news" of having their lives governed by dramatically altered rules about what individuals and families have to do in order to get ahead or simply survive? How common is it for Chinese citizens to feel very angry about heightened inequalities and the altered pattern of who is rich and who is poor, despite awareness of the general increase in living standards in the past generation? How much nostalgia exists for the distribution principles and inequality patterns of the centrally planned socialist era? Is popular anger at inequality in China one of the most important problems that Chinese society and its

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leaders currently face, as some recent opinion polls suggest?² Or on the opposite side of the question, how common is it for Chinese citizens to feel satisfaction or even gratitude for all of these changes, even though they may recognize the problems or even unfairness of the more unequal society in which they now live? How much popular acceptance is there of the current leadership's claims that inequalities are necessary or even desirable as a way to stimulate further economic growth?

These are the sorts of questions that generated a collaborative research project that I have been involved with for the last several years with U.S. and Chinese colleagues, entitled "Social Inequality and Distributive Justice in China."³ The inspiration for this research stemmed in part from our awareness that research on these questions had been carried out during the 1990s in several of the transitional economies in Eastern Europe through the International Social Justice Project.⁴ We wanted to know not only how Chinese citizens view the changing patterns of income distribution produced by market reforms, but also how their views compare with those of citizens in Eastern Europe,

² For example, a recent poll of senior officials at the Central Party School in Beijing listed the "income gap" as the most serious problem facing China, at 43.9%, well ahead of "public security" and "corruption." See Xinhua News Bulletin, Nov. 29, 2004.

³ On the U.S. side the other researchers involved are Albert Park (economics, University of Michigan), Wang Feng (sociology, University of California at Irvine), Chen Jieming (sociology, Texas A&M University at Kingsville), and Pierre Landry (political science, Yale University). At Harvard I have been assisted by Tao Lin and Han Chunping. Our lead colleagues in China are Profs. Shen Mingming and Yang Ming of the Research Center on Contemporary China at Peking University. Funding for the project comes primarily from a grant to Harvard University from the Smith Richardson Foundation, with supplementary funds provided by Peking University, the University of California at Irvine, and Harvard University.

⁴ The ISJP project conducted two rounds of surveys, circa 1991 and 1996, to investigate distributive justice attitudes. The first round included a large number of capitalist and (formerly) socialist countries; the 1996 survey repeated the surveys in five of the former socialist societies: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, East Germany, Hungary, and Russia. Primary publications from ISJP are James R. Kluegel, David S. Mason, and Bernd Wegener, eds., Social Justice and Political Change: Public Opinion in Capitalist and Post-Communist States, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995; and David S. Mason and James R. Kluegel, eds., Marketing Democracy: Changing Opinion about Inequality and Politics in East Central Europe, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

where the “good news” of improved living standards has been hard to find, at least until more recently than the ISJP surveys.

In 2000 my colleagues and I carried out a pilot survey in Beijing to explore attitudes toward income inequality and related issues. In that year we prepared a module of questions on inequality issues for use in the 2000 Beijing Area Survey directed by Prof. Shen Mingming and his colleagues at Beida. That survey produced a final sample of 757 Beijing adults selected in the conventional way via probability-based sampling from household registration records. In addition, since we were aware that household registration records do not include a substantial number of de facto residents of the city, rural migrants, as an experiment we also selected five scattered neighborhoods from the 2000 Beijing sample and tracked down and interviewed as many migrants as we could within those neighborhoods. The resulting migrant sample consists of 128 individuals. Obviously Beijing is not typical of all of China, and the migrants we interviewed may not be typical of all Beijing migrants. However, up until now most discussions of how Chinese citizens feel about income distribution patterns and trends has been based upon even less systematic or representative data or on simple speculation. Therefore I hope this exploratory examination of the views of Beijing residents and migrants in 2000 regarding income inequality has some value.

Before examining some of the detailed results of our 2000 Beijing survey, we must confront the “compared to what?” question. If we see that X% of Beijing residents feel that a certain aspect of current income distribution is fair while Y% feel it is unfair, how are we to judge whether this pattern of responses represents unusual anger or relative satisfaction or even gratitude? Since there are no comparable survey data for Beijing or

other parts of China in earlier times, we cannot say whether the attitude patterns we found in our 2000 survey represent changes one way or another regarding popular satisfaction or dissatisfaction with income inequality trends.

The approach to this question taken in the pages that follows is to rely on a comparison with data collected by Polish colleagues in a very similar survey in Warsaw in 2001.⁵ While from our Beijing survey we cannot say what popular feelings toward income inequality trends look like nationally in China, or whether levels of popular dissatisfaction are rising or falling, we can at least examine how residents of the capital cities of two formerly centrally planned economies, China and Poland, compare in their levels of support for, or opposition to, the altered terrain of income distribution in their societies. In comparison with Warsaw residents, do Beijing residents express greater anger regarding the abandonment of “socialist justice” and the resulting inequality trends in their society, or on the other hand greater acceptance of the principles of “market justice” that leaders of both societies are actively promoting?⁶ And how do the attitudes of Beijing migrants compare with residents of that city?

Before presenting comparative data on attitudes toward inequality in Beijing and Warsaw, it is worth noting a few of the key ways that these two formerly centrally planned economies differ. Poland was a wealthier and more industrialized society than China on the eve of the reforms. China also adopted a more egalitarian set of distribution

⁵ The Warsaw Area Survey was directed in November 2001 by Bogdan Cichomski and the Institute of Social Studies at Warsaw University. The Warsaw Area Study survey incorporated translations of many of the questions used in our 2000 Beijing survey, a process facilitated as part of a larger “Social Hubble” comparative social survey project initiated by David Featherman at the University of Michigan. My thanks go to David for organizing the larger comparative survey effort and to Bogdan and his colleagues for initiating the Warsaw survey and making the results available.

⁶ The use of ISJP survey data to examine support for “socialist justice” versus “market justice” in Eastern Europe is described in James R. Kluegel, David S. Mason, and Bern Wegener, “The Legitimation of Capitalism in the Postcommunist Transition: Public Opinion about Market Justice, 1991-1996,” European Sociological Review, 199, 15:251-83.

principles during the 1960s and 1970s than did Poland or other countries in Eastern Europe.⁷ China's market reforms began earlier, in 1978 rather than after 1989, and China has also followed a pattern of more incremental reforms without moving toward a full embrace of market capitalism (for example, without substantial privatization of property rights), whereas Poland followed the urging of foreign advisors and attempted more systematic, or "big bang," market reforms.⁸ China has had an enviable record of economic growth and increased average living standards since the reforms were launched, while Poland initially experienced much the same economic depression that affected other countries in Eastern Europe after 1989, although since 1992 economic growth and income improvements have resumed. Finally, it is important to stress that the Communist Party still rules in China and maintains controls on the mass media which limit public debates on many issues including inequality and distributive justice (or injustice), while Poland has become a democratic political system in which governing parties have lost elections and power to opposition parties, and where vibrant and highly critical social commentary is regularly featured in the open and free mass media.

Popular Attitudes toward Income Inequality Compared

To begin our analysis of these issues, in Table 1 we present the distributions of responses to a number of survey questions regarding the current pattern of income inequality. The most global question included in these surveys, which concerns the national income distribution pattern, is presented in panel 1 of the table: "In your opinion,

⁷ For example, the use of material incentives was denounced in China during the Cultural Revolution and generally abandoned, while pre-1989 socialist Poland followed Soviet practice (condemned by Chinese leaders in the Mao era as "revisionist") by broadly emphasizing material incentives, piece rates, bonuses, and other means to stimulate work efforts.

⁸ See the debate about strategies for market transition between Wing Thye Woo ("The Real Reasons for China's Growth") and Thomas Rawski ("Reforming China's Economy: What Have We Learned?") in The China Journal, 41, January 1999, pp. 115-156.

are the income disparities among individuals in our country too large, somewhat too large, just right, somewhat too small, or too small?” The figures in Table 1 indicate that members of all three groups—Beijing residents, Beijing migrants, and Warsaw residents—feel that income inequalities in society are too large or somewhat too large—85-95% pick one of the first two categories. However, it is also worth noting that of the three groups, it is the Beijing residents who have the strongest opinion that income differences are too large, with almost 2/3 selecting the first response. From this pattern of answers it might appear that antagonism toward the current pattern of income inequality is common in formerly centrally planned economies such as Poland and China, with this sentiment especially common in China. However, when we begin to examine a variety of other questions regarding income distribution and distributive justice, it becomes clear that things are more complicated than responses to this one global question might suggest.

Table 1: Attitudes toward Income Distribution in Beijing and Warsaw

(all row percentages)	too large	somewhat too large	about right	somewhat too small	too small	N
1.Nat. income gap:						
Beijing residents	65.2	30.2	2.8	1.3	0.4	742
Beijing migrants	56.3	36.5	5.6	0.8	0.8	126
Warsaw residents	58.2	27	6.3	3.9	4.6	907
2. Work unit gaps:						
Beijing residents	19.3	29.1	42.2	7.6	1.8	683
Beijing migrants	10	42.2	42.2	5.6	0	90
	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree	N
3.Ineq.benefit rich						
Beijing residents	19.1	47.2	15.4	15.7	2.6	727
Beijing migrants	12.2	46.1	10.4	26.1	5.2	115
Warsaw residents	32.9	33.3	17.3	12	4.4	905
4.Ineq.benefit dev't.						
Beijing residents	4.6	26.4	20	37.7	11.3	724
Beijing migrants	5.2	32.2	20	34.8	7.8	115
Warsaw residents	7.8	13.2	19.3	31.4	25.3	897
5.Ineq.OK if =opp.						
Beijing residents	10.7	57.5	10.3	18.5	3	730
Beijing migrants	8.3	60.8	9.2	20.8	0.8	120
Warsaw residents	29	39.2	13.6	13.5	4.7	927
6.Keep what earn						
Beijing residents	9.8	57.8	17.6	12.9	1.8	721
Beijing migrants	6.8	43.2	19.5	27.1	3.4	118
Warsaw residents	22.2	30.7	20.6	19.7	6.8	907

When we asked about views on income distribution within one's own work enterprise (panel 2 in Table 1; unfortunately no comparable question was asked in the Warsaw survey), there was much less disapproval. The most common response was that income was distributed about right (42% for both residents and migrants), although a substantial proportion of respondents felt income was at least somewhat too unequally distributed in their work units.

The remaining four panels in Table 1 involved respondents being presented with attitude statements and being asked whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed. When the statement was “The reason why social inequalities continue to persist is because these inequalities benefit the rich and the powerful,” (panel 3 in Table 1), a majority of Beijing respondents agreed with this statement. However, Warsaw respondents expressed even stronger agreement with this statement than either category of Beijing respondents. When presented with an alternative explanation for the origins of contemporary income differences (“For the country’s prosperity there need to be large income disparities;” see panel 4), respondents in both Beijing and Warsaw are fairly evenly divided between agreement and disagreement, with Warsaw residents the most skeptical.

The two final panels in Table 1 display responses to two other attitude statements that can be seen as indicating acceptance of income differences: “As long as the opportunities are equal, it is fair if some people are richer than others,” (panel 5) and “Keeping the wealth earned by oneself is a basic right of a human being, even if this means there will be inequality in the society,” (panel 6). Both Beijing and Warsaw respondents voiced more agreement than disagreement with these statements, with the strongest agreement coming from Warsaw residents.

In both the Beijing and Warsaw surveys, respondents were also asked to say how important various criteria should be in determining the wage that an employee receives from his or her enterprise, and then how important they thought these same criteria actually are in determining the wages received by employees. Seven of the criteria asked about in the Beijing and Warsaw surveys were identical: education of the employee,

difficult working conditions, personal efforts, the size of the employee's family, the level of responsibility of the job, seniority on the job, and whether the employee is male or female.⁹ By adding up differences between how much influence each criterion should have in determining the wage of an employee versus how much they are perceived as actually having, we can compute a summary measure of the perceived inequity of wage-setting for each respondent. A score of 0 on this measure means a respondent feels that each of the seven wage criteria receives the same weight in reality that it should; in other words, the complete absence of inequities in determining wages (at least in regard to the seven criteria considered here). A maximum wage inequity score would be 28 (seven criteria X four categories difference between reality and what should happen). Viewed in this way, it is striking that Warsaw respondents feel the actual wage determination process is much more inequitable than does either type of Beijing respondent. For example, 55.6% of the Beijing respondents had scores of 4 or less on this wage inequity scale, while only 11.1% had wage inequity scores of 9 or higher. Beijing migrants were even less likely to see a gap between ideal and reality in wage-setting, with 73.1% having wage inequity scores of 4 or less and 11.3% with scores of 9 or higher. In contrast only 17% of Warsaw residents had wage inequity scores of 4 or less, while 46% had scores of 9 or higher.¹⁰

To sum up the results of these initial comparisons, in both Beijing and Warsaw large majorities say that overall income differences in their society are too large. On

⁹ The five response categories used for both the "should" and "actual" compensation questions were: a very large influence, pretty large influence, some influence, not much influence, and no influence at all.

¹⁰ The mean wage inequity scale scores also display the contrast between Beijing and Warsaw. Beijing migrants had the lowest average wage inequity score, at 3.35 (SD=2.28), with Beijing residents following close behind at 4.43 (SD=3.38). Both averages indicate that there was less than one category difference between ideal and reality in setting wages across the seven criteria. In contrast, the mean wage inequity score for Warsaw residents is 8.31 (SD=4.12), about twice as large.

balance respondents in both societies are more likely to agree than to disagree with the view that inequality exists to benefit the rich and powerful, and to express some skepticism toward the alternative view that income differences have a positive role in promoting national development. However, at the same time majorities of respondents in both Beijing and Warsaw agree that inequalities are justified if they are earned through individual effort and if opportunities to acquire income are distributed equally. Finally, Beijing respondents are not nearly so likely to feel that income inequalities in their own work units are too large or inequitable as is the case nationally, and they are much less likely than residents of Warsaw to see the current criteria used to determine wages as unfair. This general tendency of Beijing respondents to be very critical about some aspects of contemporary inequality but more accepting of the current distribution system than their Warsaw counterparts is a pattern we will see repeated in responses to many other questions included in these surveys.

Popular Attitudes toward Socialist Justice Principles

Since 1978 China has dismantled central planning in favor of market distribution of most goods and services. In a market society the welfare of individuals and families is less dependent upon the allocation of income and benefits through the bureaucratic agencies of the state than in a planned socialist economy, and ideally more dependent upon access to skills and opportunities that will produce success in market competition. How do Chinese citizens feel about these changed rules of distribution in their society? We can help answer this question by examining popular attitudes as revealed in response to a variety of survey questions designed to reflect either socialist or market justice

principles. Once again we will be comparing the attitudes of Beijing residents, Beijing migrants, and Warsaw residents.

We consider first the pattern of survey responses to five questions regarding both egalitarian socialist distribution practices and the role of the government in limiting income differences, as displayed in Table 2.¹¹

Table 2: Attitudes toward Socialist Justice Principles

(all row percentages)	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree	N
7. Fairest, =shares						
Beijing residents	3.4	13.8	9.2	51.5	22.1	746
Beijing migrants	1.7	34.7	9.1	43	11.6	121
Warsaw residents	8.2	10	10.8	29.2	41.8	941
8. Everyone need met						
Beijing residents	7.7	31.9	19.1	34.1	7.2	724
Beijing migrants	6.8	43.2	19.5	27.1	3.4	118
Warsaw residents	22.2	30.7	20.6	19.7	6.8	907
9. Govt income floor						
Beijing residents	56.6	38.7	3.1	1.3	0.3	745
Beijing migrants	34.4	58.2	4.1	3.3	0	122
Warsaw residents	51.2	31.7	10.2	4.1	2.8	953
10. Govt limit top \$						
Beijing residents	17.1	30.1	12.2	32.9	7.7	730
Beijing migrants	4.2	25.8	15	45.8	9.2	120
Warsaw residents	23.9	14.5	14.2	19.8	27.6	892
11. Gov lower \$ gap						
Beijing residents	35.7	43.5	8.4	10	2.4	742
Beijing migrants	14.9	43.8	19	19	3.3	121
Warsaw residents	31.8	25.4	19	13.8	10	911

¹¹ The five questions included in Table 2 are worded as follows (with five response categories, from strongly agree to strongly disagree):

7. The most fair way to distribute wealth and income is to distribute them evenly to everyone.
8. The most important thing is to let everyone have his/her needs met, even if this means society has to deprive the rich and to give to the poor.
9. The government should guarantee everyone a minimum standard of living.
10. The government should set a ceiling for the highest income one can receive.
11. The government has the responsibility to reduce the gap between people of high income and those with low income.

The majority of all three types of respondents disagree with a fully egalitarian principle of distribution (panel #7), with Beijing migrants expressing the most support for equal shares. However, if they are asked instead about redistribution from the rich to the poor so that everyone can have their basic needs met (panel #8), a majority of Beijing migrants and Warsaw residents express support, with Warsaw residents the most supportive. However, Beijing residents are about as likely to disagree as to agree with this idea of redistribution from the rich to the poor. The remaining three panels in Table 2 concern views on the role the government should take to limit income differences. Large majorities of respondents of all three types feel that the government should provide a minimum standard of living guarantee to all citizens, with Beijing residents expressing the strongest support for this principle (panel #9). However, opinions are much more divided about whether the government should place limits on the maximum incomes citizens can receive, with more disagreement than support for this principle, and with Beijing residents slightly more likely than the other two categories to voice support (panel #10). (It is worth noting in passing that actual Chinese socialism during the pre-1978 period contradicted these popular preferences. It effectively placed limits on the top income individuals could receive, but did not guarantee a minimum standard of living for all.) Finally, there is almost as much support for government action to limit the gap between high and low incomes in society as for providing a guaranteed minimum standard of living, with Beijing residents again the most supportive of the three groups (panel 11).

Taken together, the results in Table 2 do not indicate a high level of general support for egalitarianism in distribution in either Beijing or Warsaw. However, as in

many other societies there is considerable support for a distribution system that assures that the basic needs of the poor are met. There is much less support for, and even considerable opposition to, placing limits on maximum incomes or of redistributions from the rich to the poor. In general the differences in these attitudes among Beijing residents, Beijing migrants, and Warsaw residents are rather modest.

The next step is to examine another set of questions included in the Beijing and Warsaw surveys that concern justifications for inequalities and for market distribution in general. Six questions included in both surveys are displayed in Table 3.¹²

¹² The wording of the six questions in Table 3 is as follows (again with response categories ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree):

12. It is fair that children of people who can afford to pay can get better education.
13. It is fair that richer people can buy better housing than others.
14. It is fair that richer people can have better health care than others.
15. Only when the income disparity is sufficiently large can people have incentive to work hard.
16. It is acceptable that businessmen are earning profits, because it is going to benefit everyone in the end.
17. Unless there are more returns, people are not willing to take more responsibility in their work.

Table 3: Attitudes toward Market Justice Principles

(all row percentages)	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree	N
12.Rich better school						
Beijing residents	21.1	61.5	8.4	7.4	1.6	748
Beijing migrants	24	55.4	12.4	8.3	0	121
Warsaw residents	24.4	37	14.3	16.8	12.4	958
13.Rich better house						
Beijing residents	13.2	60.9	16.4	7.8	1.6	742
Beijing migrants	10.7	63.6	14	11.6	0	121
Warsaw residents	25.4	38.2	17	12	7.4	936
14.Rich better medic.						
Beijing residents	7.4	40.6	15.6	28	8.3	743
Beijing migrants	8.3	50	12.5	23.3	5.8	120
Warsaw residents	15	20.1	11.7	21.3	31.9	943
15.Incentive for effort						
Beijing residents	8.8	46.8	11.8	28.3	4.3	746
Beijing migrants	9.1	54.5	10.7	24	1.7	121
Warsaw residents	15.1	34	26.9	18.4	5.5	885
16.Business profit OK						
Beijing residents	7.5	56	15.3	18.2	2.9	730
Beijing migrants	10.8	68.3	9.2	11.7	0	120
Warsaw residents	10.1	31.1	25.5	23.5	9.8	912
17.Reward responsib.						
Beijing residents	10.9	48.3	13.4	24	3.4	741
Beijing migrants	5.9	47.9	11.8	30.3	4.2	119
Warsaw residents	29.5	45.6	10.4	11.3	3.2	936

The first three panels in Table 3 concern whether it is acceptable for rich people to use their higher incomes to obtain better schooling, housing, and medical care than others can obtain. In general there is very strong approval from all three categories of respondents for the rich obtaining better schooling and housing than others can obtain, with somewhat more Warsaw residents expressing disapproval (panels #12 and 13). However, respondents are less approving and more divided about whether it is acceptable for the rich to also use their incomes to obtain superior medical care (panel #14). More

Beijing residents and migrants express approval than disapproval for using income to obtain better medical care, but for Warsaw residents the opposite is the case.

The bottom three panels in Table 3 concern seeing income differences as incentives that benefit society, rather than as a problem. (One might note here the similarity with the post-1978 sentiment that “it is good for some people to get rich first,” rather than viewing material incentives as “the sugar-coated bullets of the bourgeoisie.”) Generally speaking a majority of respondents of all three types agree with each statement about the positive “functions” of material incentives and income differences. Warsaw residents are a little more likely than both types of Beijing respondents to be dubious about the proposition that businessmen’s profits are beneficial to society (panel #16), but at the same time they are somewhat less likely than Beijing residents or migrants to disagree with statements about the positive functions of material incentives (panels #15 and 16). These are modest differences, however, with the similarities in response patterns of Beijing and Warsaw respondents more apparent than the differences, as in Table 2.

On balance the evidence reviewed so far does not indicate a large amount of nostalgia for socialist distribution principles, or opposition to market distribution principles, in either Warsaw or Beijing. In both cities survey respondents say there is too much inequality and criticize the lack of economic security for the poor. However, at the same time they often disapprove of limits on maximum incomes, feel that it is all right for the rich to use their incomes to obtain better lives for their families, and accept the claim that material incentives that produce income gaps have positive effects for society. In general these attitudes are not that dissimilar to those found in advanced capitalist

societies, where market competition tempered by a welfare state and support for equal opportunities but not equal results are the dominant sentiments.¹³

Optimism and Pessimism Regarding Social Mobility and Social Justice

How fair or unfair do Chinese citizens feel the current structure of distribution and stratification is? Are they optimistic about their ability to compete and be successful in China's market society, no matter how unequal or unfair it is? Or do they look around them and see vast inequalities, rising unemployment, and economic protests and feel that the "rules of the game" are stacked against them? Our survey included a number of questions related to optimism versus pessimism both for the country generally and for the respondent personally, and a comparison of the responses of Beijing residents, Beijing migrants, and Warsaw residents is presented in Table 4.¹⁴

¹³ See James Kluegel and Eliot Smith, Beliefs about Inequality: Americans' Views of What is and What Ought to Be, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1986; and Kluegel, Mason, and Wegener, Social Justice and Political Change.

¹⁴ The English translation of the wording in these questions is as follows:

18. In the next five years, do you think the percentage of "poor people" will increase, decrease, or remain roughly the same?
19. In your opinion, will the percentage of rich people in our country increase, decrease, or remain roughly the same in the next five years?
20. Do you think the current economic condition of your family, as compared with that of five years ago, has become much better, somewhat better, roughly the same, somewhat worse, or much worse?
21. In five years from now, do you expect the economic condition of your family to be much better, somewhat better, roughly the same, somewhat worse, or much worse, as compared with today?
22. "Considering the current situation in our country, there is still a very large opportunity for people like me or families like mine to improve their standards of living." Do you strongly agree, agree, feel neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree?
23. "Because we cannot change social reality, it is meaningless to discuss the issue of social justice." (same responses)
24. "In the current situation, it is hard to say what is fair and what is unfair." (same responses)
25. "Government officials do not care what ordinary people like me think." (same responses)

Table 4: Optimism and Pessimism Regarding Mobility and Social Justice

(all row percentages)		increase	stay same	decrease		N	
18.% poor in 5 years							
Beijing residents		40.8	19.5	39.7		706	
Beijing migrants		22.5	14.2	63.3		120	
Warsaw residents		83.4	10.4	6.2		913	
19.% rich in 5 years							
Beijing residents		67.3	27.4	5.3		685	
Beijing migrants		72.5	20.8	6.7		120	
Warsaw residents		39.9	42.3	17.8		803	
		m. better	better	no change	worse	m.worse	N
20.Liv st change,5 yr							
Beijing residents	21.2	47.6	14.9	10.9	5.3	750	
Beijing migrants	39.7	47.6	5.6	4.8	2.4	126	
Warsaw residents	8.8	21.9	26.3	23.7	19.2	957	
21.Expect liv st,5 yr							
Beijing residents	19.6	48.1	18.6	10.7	3	591	
Beijing migrants	36.2	57.1	1.9	3.8	1	105	
Warsaw residents	8.1	29.6	30.2	21.1	8.9	814	
		strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree	N
22.Improve liv.std.							
Beijing residents	7.7	38.6	29.5	22.1	2.2	743	
Beijing migrants	13.6	52	24	10.4	0	125	
Warsaw residents	2.7	14.8	29.9	38.2	14.3	845	
23.Justice arg.futile							
Beijing residents	8.6	39.7	17.4	27	7.3	725	
Beijing migrants	1.9	29.5	21.9	36.2	10.5	105	
Warsaw residents	21.7	30	18.2	20.1	10	920	
24.Can't tell justice							
Beijing residents	9.8	33.8	18	30	8.4	713	
Beijing migrants	7.5	32.1	19.8	28.3	12.3	106	
Warsaw residents	23.5	35.7	14.3	16.5	10	919	
25.Officials not care							
Beijing residents	11.7	34.5	18.4	29.8	5.6	734	
Beijing migrants	9	28.8	24.3	30.6	7.2	111	
Warsaw residents	50.8	30.7	10.6	5.9	1.9	942	

In scanning Table 4 it immediately becomes clear that the contrasts between the responses of Warsaw residents and Beijing respondents here are much larger than in

earlier tables, and these contrasts display a consistent pattern of greater optimism and acceptance in Beijing, and greater pessimism and cynicism in Warsaw. In panel 18 we see, for example, that the great majority of Warsaw residents feel that the proportion of people in Poland who are poor will increase over the next five years, while only a sizeable minority of Beijing residents or migrants share this expectation. In panel 19 there is a similar pattern, with many more Beijing than Warsaw respondents expecting the proportion of people who will be rich will increase over the next five years. In general it is also notable in these figures that Beijing migrants, who are multiply disadvantaged compared to Beijing residents, are more optimistic nonetheless about poverty decreasing and the proportion of the rich increasing. The likely explanation for the greater optimism of Beijing migrants is that their framework of comparison is more with people back in their villages of origin and their own earlier experiences, rather than with Beijing residents.

When the questions concern not national prospects for poverty versus wealth but personal prospects, in panels 20 and 21, we see much the same pattern. Large majorities of Beijing respondents feel they are doing better economically than they were five years earlier, with Beijing migrants most likely to report improvement. In contrast, more Warsaw respondents report that they are worse off rather than better off when compared with five years earlier. In predicting the future, respondents in both cities tend to extrapolate from the past five years, so again the most optimistic about the future are Beijing migrants, followed by Beijing residents, and with Warsaw residents much less optimistic. In response to a related question about prospects for ordinary people to get ahead in the future (panel 22), again Beijing respondents are mainly optimistic, with

migrants particularly so. In response to this question once again more Warsaw residents are pessimistic than optimistic.

The final three panels in Table 4 show responses to statements about current injustice and responsiveness of officials to complaints about such injustice (panels 23-25). In general in response to these “statements of pessimism about social justice,” Beijing residents and migrants are quite divided in their views, with disagreement about as common as agreement. There is much more consensus among Warsaw respondents, with a majority agreeing with the pessimistic or cynical side of all three statements. It is particularly striking that in the capital city of democratic Poland, 81.5% of respondents feel that officials do not care what ordinary people think, whereas in the capital of authoritarian and still Leninist China, only 40-45% express this sentiment. Overall, only a minority of Beijing residents express agreement with any of these pessimistic statements in Table 4, whereas a majority of Warsaw residents are pessimistic and agree with critical statements about social injustice and officialdom in their society.

Popular Attributions of Poverty and Wealth

Why do many Chinese citizens feel there is too much income inequality in their society today? Are they objecting to the simple fact that some people have become very rich, while others languish in (or have descended into) poverty? Or is it more an objection to how and why some people are becoming rich while others remain poor? In other words, are the “rules of the game” that have produced wealth for some and poverty for many others seen as fair or unfair? Do ordinary Chinese feel that hard work, skill, and talent are the key factors differentiating the rich from the poor today (as the ideology of market distribution claims), or do they feel that income differences are mainly the

product of unequal opportunities, dishonesty, and corruption? As in other societies, we suspect that in China what makes people angry about the income distribution is not so much the size of income gaps today, but perceptions that the processes that enable some to prosper while others remain poor are unfair. We can examine how widespread such perceptions are through a series of questions used in both the Beijing and Warsaw surveys, as displayed in Tables 5 and 6. Table 5 shows responses to a number of statements about the relative influence of a variety of factors in explaining why some people are poor, while Table 6 presents parallel results regarding explanations for why some people are rich.¹⁵

¹⁵ Table 5 presents respondents with the statement, “In your opinion, to what extent is each of the following a cause for some people to be in poverty? Is it a causal factor to a great extent, to a fairly large extent, to some extent, to a small extent, or to no extent?” The potential influences they were asked to rate are as follows:

1. lack of talent and ability
2. bad luck
3. immoral behaviors (e.g. getting drunk)
4. lack of personal efforts
5. discrimination against some groups
6. lack of equal opportunities
7. the shortcomings of current economic institutions

In Table 6 are displayed responses to a parallel statement about who is rich: “In your opinion, to what extent is each of the following factors a cause for some people to be rich? Is it such a causal factor to a great extent, to a fairly large extent, to some extent, to a small extent, or to no extent?” Here the potential influences they were asked to rate are as follows:

1. talent and ability
2. good luck
3. dishonesty
4. hard-working
5. personal connections
6. having more opportunities from the very beginning
7. taking advantage of loopholes in the current economic institutions

Table 5: Popular Attributions of Poverty

Poverty due to: (all row percentages)	v. great influence	great influence	some influence	little influence	no influence	N
1.Lack of ability						
Beijing residents	14.4	44.5	29.6	7.5	4.1	737
Beijing migrants	17.6	54.6	21.8	3.4	2.5	119
Warsaw residents	8.7	25.6	34.2	23.5	8	895
2.Bad luck						
Beijing residents	2.4	12.1	42.4	25.4	17.7	741
Beijing migrants	2.5	10.2	44.1	28.8	14.4	118
Warsaw residents	8.5	27.7	39.2	18.9	5.8	904
3.Bad morals						
Beijing residents	8.3	36.8	32.7	16.4	5.8	737
Beijing migrants	9.6	30.7	36.8	16.7	6.1	114
Warsaw residents	28.8	39.7	22.9	6.6	1.9	934
4.Lack of effort						
Beijing residents	8.6	43.5	35.3	9.7	3	745
Beijing migrants	11.9	46.6	30.5	9.1	1.7	118
Warsaw residents	15.5	37.3	31	13.4	2.8	940
5.Prejudice,discrim.						
Beijing residents	2.1	16.2	38.5	28.5	14.7	709
Beijing migrants	2.7	15.3	51.4	18.2	12.6	111
Warsaw residents	7.6	16.7	30.2	33.3	12.2	882
6.Lack of opportunity						
Beijing residents	6.5	28.6	39	17.2	8.7	725
Beijing migrants	1.8	23.4	45	22.5	7.2	111
Warsaw residents	27.1	39.9	24	7.4	1.6	934
7.System failure						
Beijing residents	11	32.9	41.4	10.3	4.4	592
Beijing migrants	4.9	37.9	36.9	13.6	6.8	103
Warsaw residents	44.5	34.9	15.6	3.9	1.1	915

Looking across all of the panels in Table 5, we can see that in regard to the role of lack of effort (panel 4) and prejudice and discrimination (panel 5), there are only modest differences in how the three categories of respondents rank these factors in explaining why some people are poor. However, in regard to all of the other factors explaining present poverty, there are substantial differences between the views of respondents in Warsaw and in Beijing. Warsaw residents rank “structural” explanations (system failure,

panel 7; lack of opportunity, panel 6) as more important in explaining poverty than do Beijing residents, and they also rank bad morals (panel 3) and bad luck (panel 2) as more important. Beijing residents, in contrast, feel that lack of talent and ability is the most important reason some people are poor, and they rank this factor as much more important than do their Warsaw counterparts, with lack of effort the second most important cause. It would appear that many more Beijing than Warsaw respondents accept official claims that hard work and talent are the key things needed for financial success, and fewer of them accept the view that the structure of the distribution system is unjust. It is also notable that, where there are differences, it is the lower status Beijing migrants who believe most strongly in the role of lack of talent and effort in explaining poverty, rather than blaming prejudice, lack of opportunity, or system failure. In Table 6 we can see if the same differences appear in response to attributions of who is rich today.

Table 6: Popular Attributions of Wealth

Rich due to: (all row percentages)	v. great influence	great influence	some influence	little influence	no influence	N
1.Ability and talent						
Beijing residents	18.8	55.6	20.4	4	1.1	744
Beijing migrants	26.4	57.9	14	0.8	0.8	121
Warsaw residents	15.4	37.3	33.6	11.6	2	954
2.Good luck						
Beijing residents	7.1	30.3	44.1	12.9	5.6	746
Beijing migrants	4.2	25	49.2	16.7	5	120
Warsaw residents	15.7	37	32.9	12.4	2	964
3.Dishonesty						
Beijing residents	5	16.1	39.6	27.2	12.1	725
Beijing migrants	1.8	9.6	40.4	33.3	14.9	114
Warsaw residents	44.2	35.8	16.8	2.9	0.3	970
4.Hard work						
Beijing residents	9.7	45.9	29.6	11.8	3	743
Beijing migrants	12.7	61.9	22	3.4	0	118
Warsaw residents	15.9	35.8	29.8	16.7	1.8	968
5.Connections						
Beijing residents	21	43.3	27.5	7	1.2	743
Beijing migrants	14.3	41.2	29.4	12.6	2.5	119
Warsaw residents	62.1	28.9	7.5	1.1	0.4	976
6.Better opportunities						
Beijing residents	11.2	44.5	35.2	7.8	1.4	735
Beijing migrants	9.5	44	31	12.9	2.6	116
Warsaw residents	38.2	43.3	13.8	4.4	0.2	968
7.System loopholes						
Beijing residents	19.1	35.9	34.1	9.1	1.8	724
Beijing migrants	10.9	21.8	35.5	24.5	7.3	110
Warsaw residents	40	34.5	18.4	5.4	1.7	920

If anything the contrasts between the views of Warsaw and Beijing respondents are even more striking in Table 6. Here Warsaw residents view the use of connections, system loopholes, dishonesty, and unequal opportunities as the most important influences explaining who is rich today, with all four of these factors rated much more significant than they are by either category of Beijing respondents. Good luck is also seen as more important by Warsaw than Beijing respondents, and roughly equal to the role of hard

work or talent in influencing who becomes rich, although all three of these factors are seen as less important than the first four listed. Beijing respondents, in contrast, see ability and hard work as more important in determining who is rich than do their Warsaw counterparts, and about equal in importance to structural factors such as connections, unequal opportunities, or system loopholes (and much more important than dishonesty or good luck). As in Table 5, if anything it is the disadvantaged Beijing migrants who express the strongest support for the role of talent and hard work in determining who is rich, and fewer migrants than Beijing residents attribute wealth to factors such as system loopholes or personal connections.

Determinants of Popular Attitudes toward Inequality

What sorts of people are most likely to see contemporary Chinese society as too unequal and unjust? Who is most likely to accept the argument that income gaps provide useful incentives for hard work and economic growth? Are the predictors of popular attitudes toward inequality similar or different in Beijing and Warsaw? There is not space here to fully explore these questions using the full range of attitude questions discussed in earlier sections of this paper. And regarding our initial question about views on the size of income gaps in China (see panel 1 in Table 1), there is so much unanimity in viewing the gaps as too large that we cannot productively explore how respondents of various backgrounds differ in their views on this issue.¹⁶

In order to simplify our examination of the social background predictors of attitudes regarding inequality and social justice, we now restrict our attention only to Beijing and Warsaw residents, omitting Beijing migrants. We focus our attention here on

¹⁶ The only meaningful variation is between whether a respondent said the current income gaps are “too large” versus “somewhat too large,” and a preliminary analysis showed that this difference was not significantly related to things like educational level, income, and gender (results not shown here).

two attitude scales we created in both cities from the same survey questions. The first scale is a measure of popular preferences for government efforts to limit income gaps, as measured by questions 9-11 in Table 2. The second scale is a measure of feelings of fatalism about questions of social justice, as measured by questions 23-25 in Table 4.¹⁷ In Table 7 we display side by side both the correlations of each of these summary scales with selected social background characteristics, and then the OLS regression results achieved when each scale is regressed against these same background traits.¹⁸

¹⁷ In Beijing the two scales have average inter-item correlations of .22 (government redistribution) and .39 (feelings of injustice), and the two scales have an inter-correlation of .12. In Warsaw the comparable figures are .39, .36, and .33. Thus the process of scale construction reveals one apparent difference between Beijing and Warsaw residents: Warsaw residents appear to have attitudes toward these inequality issues that are more coherent than is the case for Beijing residents, as revealed by their higher inter-correlations. Both scales were constructed by taking the mean of the values of each included question. For Beijing the government redistribution scale had a mean of 3.91 (SD=.78) and the feelings of injustice scale a mean of 3.13 (SD=.89); for Warsaw the comparable figures were 3.58 (SD=1.02) and 3.68 (SD=.92).

¹⁸ We have tried to make the variables included in Table 7 as comparable as possible for the two cities. For gender, in each city the respondent was coded 0 if a male and 1 if a female. Age was measured by year of birth in both cities, with the direction of the statistical coefficients reversed. Education was a measure of level of education or degrees obtained in both cities. Subjective standard of living was a response to a request to rank oneself compared to others in society. In Beijing it called for ranking of one's family on a five point scale from lower level to upper level; in Warsaw the respondent was asked to place him or herself individually on a 10 point scale from those "on the bottom" to those "on the top." Five year upward mobility was based on responses in both cities to the question, "Do you think the current economic condition of your family, as compared with that of five years ago, has become much better, somewhat better, roughly the same, somewhat worse, or much worse? (with directionality of the coefficients reversed). Personal income was a summary estimate provided by respondents in both cities, with those not earning incomes given values of zero. For China a question about whether the respondent was employed in a state-owned enterprise allowed us to create a variable with 1=SOE employee, and 0=otherwise. In Warsaw there was nothing fully comparable, but we use here a measure of 1=permanent employee; 0=otherwise. In both cities those who were unemployed and looking for work were coded 1 for the unemployed variable, and 0 otherwise. Finally, we used detailed occupation codes in both cities to classify the jobs of respondents as white collar (=1) and other jobs (=0).

Table 7: Social Background Predictors of Inequality Attitudes

Government Redistribution				
	Beijing Survey		Warsaw Survey	
	Correlation	Regression	Correlation	Regression
Female	0.05	0.04	0.13 ***	0.1 *
Age	0.2 ***	0.2 ***	0.15 ***	0.04
Education	-0.17 ***	-0.08 *	-0.26 ***	-0.19 ***
Subj. st. of living	-0.17 ***	-0.09 *	-0.19 ***	0.03
5 yr upward mobil.	-0.17 ***	-0.06	-0.26 ***	-0.14 **
Personal income	-0.17 ***	-0.1 ***	-0.2 ***	-0.13 *
SOE/perm.job	0.04	0.12 **	0.13 ***	-0.06
Unemployed	0.11 **	-0.04	-0.09	-0.08
White collar job	-0.14 ***	-0.13 ***	-0.17 ***	-0.02
N	735-750	711	795-977	582
Adjusted R-Square		0.11		0.12
Feelings of Injustice				
	Beijing Survey		Warsaw Survey	
	Correlation	Regression	Correlation	Regression
Female	0.01	0.01	0.08 *	0.03
Age	0.09 *	0.06	0.1 **	0.03
Education	-0.19 ***	-0.14 ***	-0.21 ***	-0.12 *
Subj. st. of living	-0.12 ***	-0.03	-0.18 ***	-0.04
5 yr upward mobil.	-0.21 ***	-0.17 ***	-0.22 ***	-0.17 ***
Personal income	-0.05	0.03	-0.1 **	-0.02
SOE/perm.job	-0.07	-0.04	0.04	-0.05
Unemployed	0.1 **	-0.04	-0.04	0.02
White collar job	-0.11 **	-0.05	-0.16 ***	-0.03
N	739-747	706	785-966	575
Adjusted R-square		0.06		0.06

*= $p \leq .05$; **= $p \leq .01$; ***= $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed test)

Examining the results in Table 7, we see general patterns that are very similar for residents of both Beijing and of Warsaw, and which are also readily interpretable. Generally those who have low status and are disadvantaged are more likely to favor government efforts to limit income gaps but to be pessimistic about obtaining social justice, while the well educated and those with high incomes, white collar jobs, and experiences of improvement in their family's standard of living compared to five years earlier are less likely to favor government redistribution or to express pessimism about social justice. One finding that departs from this general pattern is that in neither city are

the unemployed more likely than others to favor government redistribution or express doubts about social justice, once we control for other predictors. While this “non-finding” may seem surprising and even counter-intuitive, it corresponds with the results of earlier research on similar attitudes in Eastern Europe generally.¹⁹ In addition to these results for measures of socio-economic status and social mobility, we see some evidence of a weaker pattern in which women and older individuals favor government income controls and are pessimistic about social justice, although for women the pattern is only visible in Warsaw, and only in Beijing does age retain some predictive ability (and only in regard to government redistribution), once other variables are controlled for statistically in the regression analysis.

Overall, the results in Table 7 show a pattern familiar from previous research in other societies. With some exceptions, such as the puzzling lack of a relationship between unemployment and attitudes toward inequality and the generally more optimistic and satisfied attitudes of Beijing migrants commented upon earlier, those who are most successful currently are understandably most satisfied and least critical of the status quo, while those who are not doing well are most likely to be critical of the current system and to favor efforts to change it. This pattern appears to be as true in Beijing as it is in Warsaw.

However, it would be a mistake to close this analysis by stressing the similarities of the results in Beijing and Warsaw. Even though the background predictors of attitudes toward inequality and social justice may be similar in the two societies, we need to keep in mind that the recent experience of market transformation in these two societies has

¹⁹ See James Kluegel and David Mason, “Market Justice in Transition,” in Mason and Kluegel, Marketing Democracy, especially Table 7.4.

been dramatically different. As we saw in Table 4, the robust economic growth of the last 25+ years has produced a context in which much higher percentages of Beijing than of Warsaw residents have experienced economic improvements and are optimistic about further improvements. These contrasts help to explain the generally darker and more critical views of Warsaw than Beijing residents toward a number of inequality and social justice issues, particularly those displayed in Tables 4-6.

Conclusions

The analysis presented in the preceding pages is only a first step. Obviously Beijing is not typical of all of China, and attitudes in that city may be more accepting and less critical of current patterns of income differences and their sources than would be found in other parts of the country. Furthermore, attitudes toward these issues may well change over time, so that Beijing residents and migrants in 2005 might now give different responses than we found in our survey in 2000. However, if we don't totally discount our Beijing survey findings for reasons such as these, they do raise questions about one common speculation—that China is a “social volcano” about ready to explode due to anger over rising income gaps.

To be sure, Beijing survey respondents are very critical of the overall extent of income gaps in Chinese society, and significant proportions of them express discontent with many specific features of the status quo and how people get to be rich or poor in contemporary China. However, at the same time there is little sign of any strong nostalgia for the principles and practice of “socialist justice,” and there is considerable popular support for the distributive principles of “market justice” embodied in China's post-1978 reforms and forcefully championed by Deng Xiaoping and his successors. As

in many other societies, large proportions of Beijing respondents feel that more should be done to provide jobs and economic security for the poor, but at the same time many express strong support for using income gaps and incentives to motivate talent and effort and allowing those who become rich to use their resources to benefit their families. Most Beijing respondents appear to believe that what differentiates the rich and poor in China today is more variations in talent and effort rather than the exercise of connections and corruption. Again, although this could have changed since 2000 in Beijing and may be different elsewhere in China, this opinion profile does not appear to represent a “social volcano” in the making.²⁰

In this regard the comparisons with survey data from Warsaw, Poland, in 2001 are particularly striking. Although there are many similarities in the survey results from both capital cities, where there are differences they indicate that Warsaw residents are less optimistic and more critical of the current system than are respondents in Beijing. We may speculate that this generally more critical pattern of attitudes toward inequality and distributive justice in Warsaw is due to a variety of factors, with the post-1989 economic depression in Eastern Europe being a primary factor (in contrast to China’s rapid economic growth and raised living standards), and with the free and more critical mass media of Poland also playing a role in amplifying doubts and criticisms of the status quo and social injustice. China’s leaders, in contrast, have much more ability than their counterparts in Poland to claim credit for past economic successes as well as to use official controls over the mass media to promote popular acceptance of “market justice”

²⁰ We note again that the most disadvantaged and exploited group in our survey, the Beijing migrants, are in many ways more accepting and optimistic about the current distributive system than are Beijing residents.

distributive principles. The result is that Warsaw looks closer to becoming a “social volcano” than Beijing.

However, this conclusion does not mean that China’s leaders can count on popular acceptance and support and become complacent about social justice issues. In China as in other societies, how citizens feel about how just or unjust their society is depends to a considerable extent on both perceptions of overall trends in creating new opportunities and improved living standards in society and on personal and family experiences in these realms. China’s current “rocky stability”²¹ is to a considerable extent a product of the fact that larger portions of the population remain optimistic than pessimistic about material prospects for China generally and for themselves and their families. It will be no easy task for China’s leaders to ensure that this continues to be the case in the years and decades ahead.

²¹ See the discussion in David Shambaugh, ed., Is China Unstable?, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000.