



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



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ABSTRACT

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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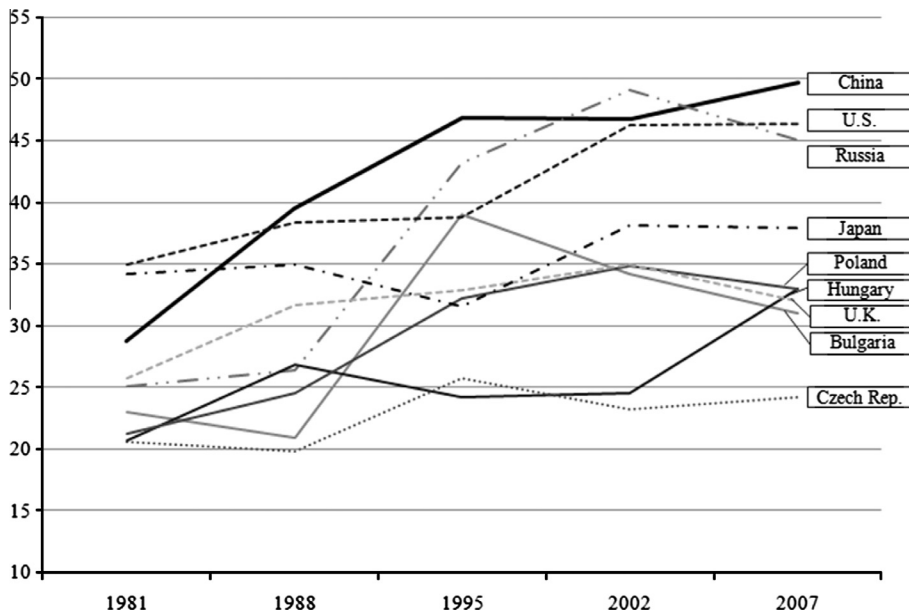


Fig. 1. Trends in Gini coefficients of income inequality, selected countries. Source: United Nations University, World Inequality Database Version 2.0c.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

probability sampling in order to obtain cross-sectional national samples that were representative of all Chinese between the ages of 18 and 70 in each survey year. Spatial probability sampling is a technique that overcomes the limitations of traditional sampling based upon household registration lists by selecting actual physical points in proportion to population density and then sending interviewers to attempt to interview one qualified respondent per household at each address within a defined spatial perimeter around each selected point (for further details see [Landry and Shen, 2005](#), and [Whyte, 2010](#), Chapter 2). Following this procedure, 3267 respondents located in 23 of China's 31 provinces were interviewed in 2004, with a response rate of 75%. The same sampling points were used for the 2009 survey, resulting in 2967 completed interviews in that year, with a response rate of about 70%.⁴

In comparing the results from these two national surveys, we focus on two central research questions: First, did continuing increases of China's income gaps, the onset of the global financial crisis, and other intervening events lead to more popular anger about inequality issues in 2009 than we had found in our interviews in 2004? Second, five years later was the unusual patterning of variation in inequality attitudes reported in 2004 still visible, with objective high status not generally correlated with acceptance of current inequalities, and with rural respondents in particular having unexpectedly positive views about current inequalities?

2. What things changed and how in the five years after 2004?

Before comparing results from the two China national surveys, it is worth considering how the external environment affecting Chinese citizens and their own personal and family situations changed over the time period demarcated by our surveys. In what respects did life become more difficult and in what respects did it improve? Are the changes in their lives and in the environment in which they live such that we would expect to find increasingly critical, or on the other hand more positive, attitudes over time regarding distributive justice issues?

In terms of the external environment, several post-2004 trends might be expected to have a positive influence on popular attitudes. Despite the onset of the global financial crisis, China's economic growth remained strong throughout the five-year period (with the official growth rate in 2009, 9.2%, not that much different from the 10.1% reported for 2004 ([World Bank, 2011](#))). During this same period the Chinese government implemented a number of "harmonious society" programs with the intended goal of easing the lot of disadvantaged citizens, and particularly rural residents, including waiving tuition fees for the first 9 years of schooling, eliminating the grain tax, and building a system of rural medical insurance plans to replace the prevailing out-of-pocket payments for medical treatment. In addition, the large scale urban layoffs of employees of state-owned enterprises that were carried out in the late-1990s and early in the new millennium (i.e. just prior to our 2004 survey) were phased out, with no comparable large scale downsizing to threaten Chinese urbanites during the five years between our surveys.⁵ Finally, a number of specific events, such as the nationwide mobilization to aid victims of the massive Sichuan earthquake in 2008 and the successful Chinese Olympic Games later that same year may have helped mobilize national pride.

On the other side of the ledger, and despite the government's "harmonious society" programs, the gap between rich and poor Chinese continued to grow during the years after 2004, as shown by the trend-line in [Fig. 1](#).⁶ Also, despite the generally robust overall economic growth that continued through 2009, some sectors of the economy were impacted negatively by the global financial crisis (particularly in the mass layoffs of migrant workers in export-oriented factories noted earlier). This period also saw a rising tide of city expansion and of rural land confiscations for commercial development, often without sufficient consultation and compensation of the villagers affected. The years since 2004 have also seen an increasing number of scandals over official corruption and failure to protect the public from hazards, ranging from poisonings and deaths caused by adulterated milk products, the collapse of substandard school buildings during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, and contamination of urban water supplies by toxic chemical dumping, incidents likely to heighten popular skepticism about claimed official care and concern for the populace. In addition, this period has seen a continuing rise in mass protest incidents referred to earlier, with 8700 reported nationally back in 1993, 87,000 in 2005, and 180,000 or more reported in recent years.⁷ Clearly China in the period of interest was rather far from becoming a "harmonious society."

This mixture of positive and negative trends in the external environment may or may not have had much impact on the attitudes of average Chinese citizens, since these events may be too distant, irrelevant, or in some cases even unknown to affect survey respondents. We can also examine changes in the life situation and material condition of those who participated in our surveys in order to speculate about how altered personal circumstances might affect attitudes toward

⁴ Spatial probability sampling includes respondents based on their de facto residence places, rather than where they are registered. Migrants, estimated at more than 200 million in recent years, are generally invisible and therefore missing from conventional surveys based upon household registers, but are automatically included in surveys based upon spatial probability sampling if they have a residential address. Since both the 2004 and 2009 surveys oversampled urban areas, when we present overall responses to inequality questions here we use sampling weights to correct for this oversampling. Since slightly revised sampling weights were constructed in order to make the 2004 and 2009 results exactly comparable, the figures reported here for the 2004 survey differ very slightly from those reported in [Whyte \(2010\)](#) and other publications based on that survey.

⁵ In 1995 urban state and collective enterprise employment stood at 141 million and was reduced to 80 million in 2002. The decline continued after 2002, but much more gradually, with 73 million still in these sectors in 2007 (figures from [Li et al., 2013](#), Chapter 8).

⁶ According to a report by Ma Jiantang, head of China's National Bureau of Statistics, China's Gini in 2004 was .473, and increased further to .490 in 2009, figures that correspond closely with the estimates used in [Fig. 1](#), but covering two additional years. See [China Internet Information Center \(2013\)](#).

⁷ China stopped reporting national totals of mass protest incidents after 2005, but media estimates yield the much higher numbers for recent years. In general on the trends and sources of mass protests, see [Chung et al., 2006](#).

Table 1

Material situation of Chinese citizens: 2004 vs. 2009. Source: All tables and figures (except for Fig. 1) are author calculations from the China Inequality and Distributive Justice Surveys, 2004 and 2009 (see text for details).

	2004	2009
Family living standard compared to 5 years earlier (% better)	63.0	75.4
Satisfaction with current living standard (% satisfied or more)	31.8	40.5
Rating of own physical health (% fairly good, very good)	56.7	61.1
Covered by public health insurance? (% yes)	24.7	85.3
Covered by pension benefit? (% yes)	20.0	25.9
Own current residence (% yes)	81.9	84.1
<i>Household possessions: (% who own):</i>		
Color TV	79.5	95.6
Refrigerator	37.4	53.9
Motorcycle or scooter	35.3	51.2
Computer	13.8	27.3
Automobile	5.1	8.4
Use the Internet (% at least some)	26.9	35.8

current inequalities. In Table 1 we present a brief summary of how respondents in the 2004 and 2009 surveys answered identical questions about their current situation.

The figures in Table 1 show that in terms of a broad array of indicators, 2009 respondents were on average doing somewhat or much better than their counterparts five years earlier. In both surveys the great majority of respondents reported that their families had improved their standard of living compared with five years earlier, but the respondents in 2009 were even more likely to report improvement (75.4%) than their 2004 counterparts (63%). Not surprisingly in view of this reported improved standard of living, more 2009 respondents were satisfied with their standard of living (40.5% vs. 31.8%), and higher proportions in 2009 owned each of our list of desirable items, with the increases being modest in some cases (from 81.9% to 84.1% owning their own residences, from 5.1% to 8.4% owning an automobile) and quite substantial in others (from 79.5% to 95.6% owning color television sets, from 37.4% to 53.9% with refrigerators, and from 13.8% to 27.3% having their own computers). The most striking change between surveys is the increase in coverage by public medical insurance, from only 24.7% in 2004 to 85.3% in 2009, testifying to the extraordinary national effort to extend some basic level of medical insurance coverage, particularly to rural Chinese.⁸ In view of this dramatic change as well as the continued improvement in average living standards and presumably diets as well, it is also not surprising that in 2009 a higher percentage of survey respondents rated their health as good or fairly good (61.1% vs. 56.7% in 2004).

To sum up, although the earlier discussion of changes in the external environment of Chinese society between 2004 and 2009 generates a mixed picture, with many positive trends but some negative ones as well, when it comes to the material circumstances of our respondents, there is no such ambiguity. On all indicators available to us the 2009 respondents reported better situations on average than their 2004 counterparts, with the improvements modest in some instances but dramatic in others. Insofar as they are influenced by their own personal and family circumstances in thinking about issues of inequality and distributive injustice, these comparisons appear to provide a basis for continued acceptance of current structures of inequality and social mobility, rather than the rising anger presumed in the social volcano scenario. However, it remains to be seen whether these improvements in fact translate into more positive views about current inequalities.

3. Views on inequality and distributive justice issues: 2004 and 2009 responses compared

With these preliminaries completed, the remainder of this paper will address our two key research questions: (1) Were Chinese citizens more angry about inequality and distributive justice issues in 2009 than in 2004?; and (2) Did the social contours of attitudes toward current inequalities shift over the five years between surveys? Taking the first question first, in summarizing Chinese popular attitudes toward current inequalities we rely on twelve separate measures, as no single measure can capture the complexity of popular views toward distributive justice issues. These measures cover three distinct domains of distributive justice attitudes: perceptions of the fairness or unfairness of current inequalities (4 measures), optimism vs. pessimism about opportunities to get ahead and obtain social justice (4 measures), and values and preferences regarding equality vs. inequality and the role of the government in promoting equality (4 measures). Here is a brief description of these twelve measures:

- Perceptions of Current Inequalities:

1. Excessive inequality: single item, view of national income gaps, with responses ranging from 1 = too small to 5 = too large.

⁸ According to figures from our two surveys, in 2004 only 15.4% of rural respondents had public medical insurance coverage, compared to 50.8% of urban residents (and only 9.2% of urban migrants); five years later 89.6% of rural respondents were covered, compared to 75.2% of urban residents (and 56.1% of urban migrants). In other words, rural coverage rates had surpassed those of urban citizens, although the portion of medical bills covered and the quality of the care provided are no doubt lower in the countryside.

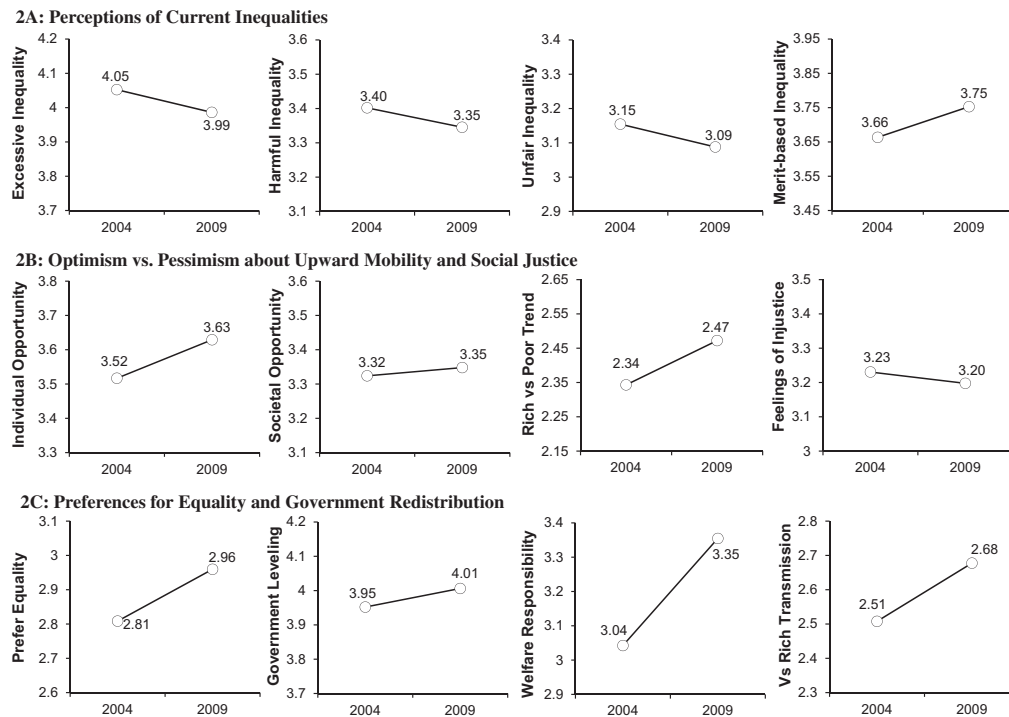


Fig. 2. Views on inequality and distributive justice issues: 2004 and 2009 compared. *Notes:* Weighted mean scores. All 2004–2009 differences are statistically significant, except for Societal Opportunity and Feelings of Injustice. *Source:* The China Survey of Inequality and Distributive Justice (2004, 2009).

2. Harmful inequality: 4 item mean scale: a. rich are getting richer, poor poorer; b. inequalities exist to benefit rich and powerful; c. current income gaps threaten social stability; d. current income gaps violate socialism: all ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.
3. Unfair inequality: 7 item mean scale of rating of importance in determining who is poor and who is rich: a. discrimination; b. unequal opportunity; c. bad economic structure (as causes of poverty); d. dishonesty; e. connections; f. unequal opportunity; g. unfair economic system (as causes of wealth); all ranging from 1 = not important at all to 5 = very important.
4. Merit-based inequality: 6 item mean scale of rating of importance in determining who is poor and who is rich: a. lack of ability; b. lack of effort; c. lack of schooling (as causes of poverty); d. talent; e. hard work; f. more schooling (as causes of wealth), all ranging from 1 = not important at all to 5 = very important.
- Optimism vs. Pessimism about Social Mobility and Social Justice:
 1. Individual opportunity: two item mean scale: a. expectation for family living standard five years from now, ranging from 1 = much worse to 5 = much better; b. opportunities for someone like you to raise living standards are still great, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.
 2. Societal opportunity: three item mean scale: a. equal opportunities to succeed exist; b. hard work is always rewarded; c. whether a person gets rich or stays poor is own responsibility; all ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.
 3. Rich vs. poor trend: 2 item mean scale: a. expectation regarding the trend in percentage of Chinese who will be poor five years from now, ranging from 1 = increase to 3 = decrease; b. expectation regarding percentage of Chinese who will be rich five years from now, ranging from 1 = decrease to 3 = increase.
 4. Feelings of injustice: three item mean scale: a. doesn't make sense to talk about social justice, as you can't change things; b. hard to say what is just and what is unjust; c. officials don't care what common people think; all ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.
- Preferences for Equality and for Government Role in Promoting Equality:
 1. Preference for equality: single item, distributing wealth and income equally among people is the most just method, with responses ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.
 2. Government leveling: three item mean scale: a. government should provide a minimum living standard for all; b. government should guarantee jobs for those who need them; c. government should reduce the gaps between the rich and the poor; all ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.
 3. Welfare responsibility: six item mean scale: a. health care; b. primary and secondary education; c. university education; d. employment; e. housing; f. care for the elderly; all ranging from 1 = the individual should be fully responsible to 5 = the government should be fully responsible.

4. vs. rich transmission: three item mean scale: a. fair, rich pay to get better schooling for their children; b. fair, rich pay to get better housing; c. fair, rich get better medical care; all ranging from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree.

Conceptually these are three distinct domains of attitudes about current inequalities, each of which can and, as we shall see, does display different trends over time. The results of these comparisons are presented in Fig. 2. Each of the twelve sub-charts in Fig. 2 follows the same format. First the weighted mean score of survey responses in 2004 on the measure in question is shown and then the comparable weighted mean score in 2009, with a line connecting the two to show the trend.⁹

3.1. Perceptions of current inequalities in 2004 and 2009

The first row of sub-charts in Fig. 2 displays responses to questions that focus on perceptions of current inequalities and specifically on how fair or unfair they are. For these four measures the trend between 2004 and 2009 is clear and unambiguous. In the latter survey year, the average respondent was less likely to say that national income gaps were excessive, less likely to see current patterns of inequality as harmful to society, and less likely to feel that the difference between who is poor and who is rich can be attributed to societal unfairness, while they were more likely to say that current rich-poor differences can be attributed to variations in ability, hard work, and education (in other words, due to merit). *T*-tests indicate that all four differences between the average pattern of responses in 2004 and 2009 are statistically significant.¹⁰ So the first conclusion we draw from these comparisons is that in terms of perceptions of fairness vs. unfairness, 2009 respondents were significantly more likely to view current inequalities as fair, despite the increases in the income gap between China's rich and poor citizens that continued during this period.

3.2. Optimism vs. pessimism about upward mobility and social justice in 2004 and 2009

The second domain of inequality attitudes concerns optimism vs. pessimism about chances for individuals and families to improve their livelihoods and to obtain social justice. The responses to our four measures in this domain are shown in the four sub-charts in Fig. 2B. In responding to these questions Chinese citizens generally were quite upbeat in 2004, and they were equally or even more so in 2009. The four sub-charts in the second row of Fig. 2 show that 2009 respondents were more optimistic than their 2004 counterparts about the opportunities for themselves and others to get ahead and more optimistic as well about the percentage of rich Chinese increasing and the percentage of poor Chinese decreasing, with both of these contrasts statistically significant. The other two sub-charts show similar but more modest trends, for the social environment enabling citizens to get ahead via hard work (Societal Opportunity) to have improved, and for fewer respondents to express strong feelings of pessimism regarding social justice. In these two instances the changes between 2004 and 2009 are not large enough to be statistically significant.¹¹ Still, on balance the changes between surveys displayed in Fig. 2B are once again positive, indicating greater optimism about the chances for Chinese citizens to get ahead and obtain social justice.

3.3. Preferences for equality and government redistribution in 2004 and 2009

One might assume given these trends toward less critical perceptions of current inequalities and more optimism regarding opportunities and social justice, that in 2009 survey respondents would be less likely than their counterparts in 2004 to favor combatting inequality and to advocate government redistribution. However, as the results in Fig. 2C indicate, that is decidedly not the case. Instead in the domain of preferences, Chinese attitudes turned more critical over the five years between surveys. In 2009 survey respondents were more likely than in 2004 to state that equality is the most fair distribution method, more in favor of government efforts to reduce the gap between rich and poor, more in favor of government taking the major role in meeting basic citizen needs, and more strongly opposed to rich families using their wealth to obtain better housing and medical care, as well as better schooling for their children. *T*-tests reveal that all four of these contrasts between 2004 and 2009 attitudes are statistically significant.¹² Although these trends appear to be contradictory to those displayed in Fig. 2A and B, a detailed examination of shifts in the individual items underlying these preference measures (details not shown here) indicates that 2009 respondents are not so much voicing rising anger against the rich and successful, but rather expressing a stronger desire than their 2004 counterparts for a comprehensive, government-provided social safety net to protect Chinese citizens.

⁹ Our focus on trends in mean scores might obscure other underlying changes, such as in attitude polarization. To examine this possibility we computed kurtosis scores as well for each of the measures used here, and for both survey years. The results (not detailed here) showed that for the majority of our attitude measures (9 out of 12), kurtosis increased from 2004 to 2009, indicating less attitudinal polarization in the more recent survey.

¹⁰ For Excessive Inequality, $p < .01$; for Harmful Inequality, $p < .001$; for Unfair Inequality, $p < .001$; and for Merit-based Inequality, $p < .001$.

¹¹ For Individual Opportunity, $p < .001$; for Societal Opportunity, $p > .05$; for Rich vs. Poor Trend, $p < .001$; and for Feelings of Injustice, $p > .05$.

¹² For Prefer Equality, $p < .001$; for Government Leveling, $p < .05$; for Welfare Responsibility, $p < .001$; and for vs. Rich Transmission, $p < .001$.

3.4. The meaning of attitude changes between 2004 and 2009

The trend lines in Fig. 2 show that in two domains (perceptions of the fairness vs. unfairness of current inequalities, optimism vs. pessimism about opportunities for economic improvement and social justice) respondents in our 2009 survey expressed more favorable attitudes than their 2004 counterparts. However, in the third domain, preferences for equality and for government redistribution, 2009 respondents were significantly more critical than their 2004 counterparts. Compared to five years earlier, they were more likely to favor increased government efforts to combat disadvantage and provide a basis social safety net, rather than to rely on market forces to distinguish the worthy from the unworthy. How can we interpret this combination of less and more critical attitude trends?

It might be noted that the changes our surveys detect contrast with much social criticism aired in recent years about the impact of market reforms on Chinese society and public morality. A common refrain in these critiques is the contention that most Chinese are now interested only in making money, and that as long as they can continue to do so successfully, they do not care about anyone else, and certainly not about the poor. We see, instead, a pattern in which most survey respondents are optimistic about their own chances for getting ahead and do not see the current gaps between rich and poor as particularly excessive or unfair. Nonetheless, they are more likely than their counterparts five years earlier to favor increased government efforts to reduce inequalities, primarily by strengthening the social safety net protecting China's poorest and most vulnerable citizens.

We speculate that two influences may help to explain the apparent contradiction between positive trends regarding perceptions of current inequalities and optimism about opportunities and social justice on the one hand, and more critical attitudes about promoting social equality and government redistribution on the other. Perhaps the rapid increase in living standards, the growth of China's middle class,¹³ and the rising proportion of the population that has access to first-world consumption standards and communication devices have helped to spread what earlier researchers refer to as a "post-materialist mentality" (see Inglehart and Welzel, 2005), in direct contrast to the critiques of market reforms just discussed. In other words, even though China is still much poorer than most societies to which the "post-materialism" framework has been applied, it may be that a rising share of China's population now feels prosperous and comfortable enough to look beyond meeting their own economic needs, and as a result to begin to give more thought to the welfare of their more disadvantaged fellow citizens.

Whatever the merits of this speculation, there is an additional influence that may also help explain the rising support for government efforts to promote social equality. The chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the poverty and entrenched inequality at the end of the Mao era helped discredit claims at that time that China's government-run socialist economy was the fairest and most desirable social order.¹⁴ The dramatic success of the market reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping after 1978 helped to promote the idea that markets were a fairer way of distributing goods and services than government allocation. However, in the new millennium, and particularly after Hu Jintao became leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2002 and promoted the slogan of making China a more "harmonious society," a sharply altered message has been conveyed to the Chinese people by their rulers. China's leaders now proclaim that the gap between rich and poor is getting too large and is potentially destabilizing, and they have also pointed with pride to the multiple government programs and substantial resources that are being devoted to combatting poverty, bettering the lot of the rural poor, and aiding isolated communities in China's interior. In other words, for a decade or more Chinese leaders have partially "rehabilitated" the idea of the government being responsible for providing a stronger social safety net and thereby promoting greater social equality. We are suggesting that the trends detected in attitudes toward promoting equality and government redistribution indicate that Chinese citizens have absorbed this altered and more pro-equality message but still find wanting the current levels of such government efforts.¹⁵

What final conclusions can we draw from this discussion? In regard to our first research question, clearly there is no overall trend toward more critical attitudes toward current inequalities in 2009 compared with 2004. In fact in two of our three attitude domains, attitudes have become more positive and accepting, although in the third they are somewhat more critical. So China's social volcano of potential anger at distributive injustice was clearly still dormant in 2009.¹⁶ Given the substantial improvements in the lives of Chinese citizens since 2004, as reflected in the figures reported in Table 1, our failure to find evidence of heightened anger in 2009 is not that surprising.

However, our data do not indicate that Chinese are increasingly satisfied with all aspects of current inequalities. Rather, even though they do not judge the sharp income gaps that characterize China today as particularly unfair, and even though most respondents feel quite optimistic about their own chances to get ahead, there are signs of rising dissatisfaction with the

¹³ According to a report by McKinsey & Company, in 2000 only 4% of urban Chinese households could be classified as middle class in terms of income, whereas in 2012 68% could be so classified (in purchasing power parity terms). See Bartin et al. (2013).

¹⁴ For a discussion of the sharp contradiction between the appearance of egalitarianism in Mao's socialism in the Cultural Revolution period and the reality of a rigidly stratified and unfair social order then, see Whyte, 2010.

¹⁵ Our results are relevant to the "thermostatic" model in public opinion research. According to that model, ordinarily the public responds to policy changes in a negative feedback fashion, moving toward wanting less or no change of the same type (see, for example, Wlezien, 1995). However, sometimes, particularly when the policy change is viewed favorably or involves issues of rising salience, positive feedback can occur (see Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). Our survey data point to China as a clear example of such positive feedback, with increases in welfare measures aimed at the poor (such as medical insurance coverage) associated with rising support for more of the same.

¹⁶ Although we have not conducted a comparable survey since 2009, we see no developments or trends in China that would suggest that the distributive injustice attitude social volcano is no longer dormant at the time of writing.

government's efforts to promote greater equality. Whether simply through improved living standards and the post-materialist sentiments thus promoted, or due to the persuasiveness of the government's own harmonious society messages, Chinese citizens increasingly expect their government to use its power and resources in a redistributive way, and thus to promote greater social equality and social justice. This is not the anger of people willing to take to the barricades to protest the manifest unfairness and moral bankruptcy of the current order, but instead a more reformist impulse—a growing desire for China to become a more benevolent and effective welfare state. Moderate though such critical sentiments may be, they nonetheless suggest that Chinese leaders have encouraged standards for judging their own performance that they may have difficulty meeting.

4. Variations in attitudes toward current inequalities: 2004 and 2009 compared

We turn now to the second research question: Did the social contours of attitudes toward current inequalities shift over the five years between the 2004 and 2009 surveys? We consider this question through an examination of ordinary least squares regression analyses for both survey years, using as our dependent variables the twelve inequality attitude measures discussed in the previous section and displayed in Fig. 2.¹⁷ In addition to a general interest in how variations in the pattern of critical vs. approving views on current inequalities may have changed between surveys, we are particularly interested in whether two unexpected patterns found in analyses of the 2004 data are still visible in the 2009 results: First, are most objective measures of social status, such as family income and CCP membership, still relatively poor predictors of attitudes toward current inequalities in 2009 (and poorer predictors than subjective measures of relative status and mobility experiences)? Second, is the unexpected tendency for rural respondents to have more positive attitudes toward current inequalities than urban citizens (despite their highly disadvantaged status) still visible in the later survey?

Given the complexity of presenting regression results with twelve distinct dependent variables, we use a standard set of objective and subjective predictors derived from our work on the 2004 survey in all statistical models, and we present the results in three tables, one for each of the inequality attitude domains discussed earlier: Perceptions of Current Inequalities (Table 2), Optimism vs. Pessimism about Upward Mobility and Social Justice (Table 3), and Preferences for Equality and for Government Redistribution (Table 4). In all columns of these tables the figures displayed are standardized regression coefficients, so that the strength of any association can be compared with the other coefficients in the same column (and, since the same variables are in the models for 2004 and 2009, across survey years).

The social background predictors we use in these standard models are as follows:

- Objective predictors:
 1. Location/*hukou* status: rural residents, rural to urban migrants, urban citizens (urban residents with urban *hukou*); rural residents are the omitted reference category in regressions.
 2. Age—years of age as reported to interviewers.¹⁸
 3. Female—gender, as recorded by interviewers; female = 1; male = 0.
 4. Married—marital status dummy variable; 1 = married; 0 = all other marital statuses.
 5. Education—years of schooling completed.
 6. Household income—natural logarithm of total household income for the prior year as reported by the respondent (in 2009 multiple imputation techniques were used to compensate for the larger number of cases of missing data on this variable).
 7. Han ethnicity—ethnic status dummy variable; 1 = Han Chinese; 0 = all other ethnicities.
 8. Party membership—member of Chinese Communist Party; 1 = yes; 0 = no.
 9. Distance to city—distance to the nearest prefectural or higher level city of the de facto residence of the respondent, as calculated by the research team from the sampling report (0 = 0 km; 1 = 1–19.99 km; 2 = 20–39.99 km; 3 = 40–59.99 km; 4 = 60–79.99 km; 5 = 80–99.99 km; 6 = 100–199.99 km; 7 = 200 km +).
- Subjective predictors:
 1. Subjective social status—self-rating on a scale from 1 (bottom of society) to 10 (top of society).
 2. Mobility experience—comparison of family economic situation with five years earlier, ranging from 1 = much worse to 5 = much better.
 3. Bad experiences—sum of how many of the following were experienced by the respondent or a member of their family within the past three years: serious illness, physical injury or damage to property, laid off or loss of work, difficulties in paying medical fees, dropping out of school due to difficulties in paying, received unfair treatment from local officials.

¹⁷ Two of these twelve attitude measures, Excessive Inequality and Prefer Equality, are single questionnaire items with five ordinal response categories, rather than interval scales. Technically we should use a form of logistic regression rather than OLS regression. However, in the interest of symmetry and comparability we display the OLS results for all twelve inequality attitude measures in the tables that follow. Logistic regression analyses for these two dependent variables yield similar patterns (results not shown here).

¹⁸ In earlier analyses of the 2004 survey data, age-squared was also included in regression models in order to check for curvilinear age effects. However, in the present analysis when we included age-squared as well as age, we found almost no sign of such curvilinear age patterns, so for the sake of simplicity we report here only linear age effects.

Table 2

Perceptions of current inequalities. Source: China National Survey of Inequality and Distributive Justice (2004, 2009).

	Excessive inequality		Harmful inequality		Unfair inequality		Merit-based inequality	
	2004	2009	2004	2009	2004	2009	2004	2009
Rural (Reference)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Migrants	.127***	.018	.037*	.059**	.035*	.032	–.013	–.050**
Urban	.145***	.066**	.122***	.047	.088***	.032	.018	–.025
Age	.021	–.029	.067**	.054*	.043*	–.012	–.018	.018
Female	–.022	–.036	.006	–.047*	.028	–.017	.002	–.004
Married	.009	.059*	.021	.031	–.018	–.013	.010	.011
Education	.123***	.169***	.129***	.056	.121***	.024	.059*	.022
Household income ^a	–.007	–.019	–.023	.026	.033	–.021	–.019	–.035
Han ethnicity	.114***	.013	.013	.013	.011	.023	.040	.030
Party membership	.036*	.003	–.072***	.012	–.043	–.014	.006	–.024
Distance to city	.033	–.019	–.159***	.008	–.107***	–.149***	–.049*	.037
Subjective status	–.111***	–.045*	–.040	–.050*	–.051*	–.049*	.061**	.021
Mobility experience	.015	.007	–.080***	–.009	–.073***	.008	.105***	.110***
Bad experiences	.045*	.093***	.084***	.099***	.106***	.025	.009	–.070***
Observations	2870	2687	2862	2681	2859	2650	2870	2662
R-squared	.075	.056	.109	.027	.083	.034	.031	.028

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.*** $p < .001$.^a Natural logarithm of total household income.**Table 3**

Optimism vs. pessimism about upward mobility and social justice. Source: China National Survey of Inequality and Distributive Justice (2004, 2009).

	Individual opportunity		Societal opportunity		Rich vs. poor trend		Feelings of injustice	
	2004	2009	2004	2009	2004	2009	2004	2009
Rural (Reference)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Migrants	–.038*	–.032	–.024	–.053*	–.004	.002	.074***	.000
Urban	–.080***	–.064**	–.180***	–.121***	–.111***	–.157***	.125***	–.062*
Age	–.205***	–.180***	–.018	.068**	–.057**	.007	.033	.002
Female	–.014	–.007	–.021	–.012	–.043*	.023	–.033	–.047*
Married	–.009	.034	.052*	.005	.015	.010	.057**	.016
Education	.001	.061*	–.094***	.005	–.067**	.030	–.004	–.030
Household income ^a	.062**	.045*	–.031	.029	–.007	.041	–.112***	–.005
Han ethnicity	.025	–.022	.039*	–.043*	–.000	–.028	–.007	–.008
Party membership	.014	.012	.010	–.011	.040*	.038*	–.072***	–.043*
Distance to city	–.000	.010	–.025	.188***	–.043	.107***	–.160***	–.011
Subjective status	.165***	.148***	.133***	.054*	.045*	.001	–.012	–.056*
Mobility experience	.321***	.353***	.073***	.023	.206***	.108***	–.064**	–.043**
Bad experiences	–.064***	–.078***	–.013	–.024	–.016	–.017	.140***	.074***
Observations	2879	2687	2869	2667	2881	2684	2874	2677
R-squared	.275	.268	.084	.080	.078	.056	.097	.030

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.*** $p < .001$.^a Natural logarithm of total household income.

4.1. Social contours of variations in perceptions of current inequalities

We discuss here the results of analyses of social background variations in attitudes toward current inequalities in sequence for the three inequality attitude domains. In Table 2 regression results for the four measures of Perceptions of Current Inequalities are presented, in each case with 2004 and 2009 results displayed side by side.

Examining the location/*hukou* status predictors first, in 2004 Chinese rural residents were significantly less likely than urban citizens to view current inequalities as excessive, harmful, and unfair. In 2004 the three groups did not differ significantly in viewing being rich vs. poor as based upon merit (talent, hard work, education). In 2009 rural residents still show a tendency to be less likely to view current inequalities as excessive, harmful, and unfair, but now only one of the coefficients (for Excessive Inequality) is statistically significant. Detailed examination of the underlying patterns (results not shown here) reveals that in regard to whether current inequalities are excessive, harmful, and unfair, rural attitudes in 2009 were similar to 2004, but urban attitudes had become less critical, resulting in urbanites converging toward the more favorable views

Table 4

Preferences for equality and government redistribution. Source: China National Survey of Inequality and Distributive Justice (2004, 2009).

	Prefer equality		Government leveling		Welfare responsibility		vs. Rich transmission	
	2004	2009	2004	2009	2004	2009	2004	2009
Rural (Reference)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Migrants	.008	–.040*	.057**	.047 [†]	.012	.059**	–.015	.007
Urban	–.051 [†]	–.114***	.114***	.069**	.184***	.091***	.010	–.005
Age	–.015	.030	.022	.041	.095***	.052 [†]	.034	.004
Female	–.017	.058**	–.040 [†]	–.040 [†]	–.005	–.036	.016	–.011
Married	–.004	.019	.036	.046	–.020	.025	–.051**	–.030
Education	–.166***	–.030	.160***	.104***	.144***	.002	.027	–.005
Household income ^a	–.037	–.080***	.021	.041	–.015	–.026	–.012	–.013
Han ethnicity	–.003	–.071***	.113***	–.002	.016	.045 [†]	–.067***	.029
Party membership	–.036	–.033	.032	.027	–.035 [†]	–.007	.001	–.030
Distance to city	–.045 [†]	.025	–.073***	.066**	–.123***	.016	.064**	–.072**
Subjective status	.008	.001	–.104***	–.062**	–.025	–.030	–.074***	–.030
Mobility experience	–.027	–.020	.032	.024	–.056 [†]	–.047 [†]	–.007	–.068***
Bad experiences	.037	–.007	.094***	.071***	.082 [†]	–.046**	–.047 [†]	–.006
Observations	2878	2684	2874	2681	2868	2682	2852	2672
R-squared	.054	.060	.112	.035	.129	.020	.020	.015

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.^a Natural logarithm of total household income.

already held by rural residents (yielding smaller regression coefficients). Migrants in 2004 were also significantly more likely than villagers to view current inequalities as excessive, harmful, and unfair, and again the same pattern is visible in 2009, but with only one coefficient statistically significant (in this case, with Harmful Inequality). Unlike in 2004, in 2009 rural residents were more likely than either urbanites or migrants to attribute the difference between wealth and poverty to merit factors, although only the contrast with migrants was statistically significant. In sum, the general pattern of rural residents having unexpectedly positive perceptions of current inequalities is still visible in 2009, although in somewhat muted form. And the modest weakening of the pattern is mainly attributable to less critical urban perceptions in 2009 than in 2004 rather than to any increasingly critical perceptions among rural residents. Indeed, in regard to Merit-based Inequality, rural attitudes have shifted toward relatively more positive views.

In regard to other objective predictors of Perceptions of Current Inequalities (the middle portion of Table 2) several patterns stand out. Most of these predictors fail to show consistent coefficients or even have the same signs across all four perceptions measures and both survey years. For example, Party members in 2004 were significantly more likely than non-members to view current inequalities as excessive, but were significantly less likely to view current inequalities as harmful; in 2009 neither association was statistically significant, and the sign for harmful inequality had reversed. Our household income measure did not make a significant net difference for any of these four perceptions measures in either survey year. However, a few patterns among other objective predictors deserve note. First, older respondents were more likely to view current inequalities as harmful in both survey years, although they did not show consistent or significant patterns on the other three measures. In 2004 the well-educated tended to hold more critical perceptions on Excessive Inequality, Harmful Inequality, and Unfair Inequality, although on Merit-based Inequality they held significantly more positive views. In 2009 the same pattern was visible but was much weaker, with only the coefficient for Excessive Inequality statistically significant. In both 2004 and 2009 respondents who lived far away from any city were (somewhat unexpectedly) significantly less likely than other respondents to view current inequalities as unfair, but the associations with the other three measures were not strong or consistent across survey years.

The bottom panel in Table 2 shows the regression coefficients for the three subjective predictors of inequality attitudes. In 2004 these predictors showed associations with the four perceptions measures that were generally more consistent and stronger than was the case for most objective status predictors, and that was also the case in 2009. Those respondents who felt they enjoyed relatively high social status were less likely to view current inequalities as excessive, harmful, or unfair in both survey years, and more likely to view them as based upon merit, although not all the coefficients are statistically significant. In 2004 those who reported that their family incomes had improved were similarly less likely to perceive current inequalities as harmful or unfair, and significantly more likely to view the gap between rich and poor as based upon merit. In 2009 those who reported improved family income were still significantly more likely to view the rich-poor gap as based upon merit, but the other associations were no longer statistically significant, with the Unfair Inequality coefficient actually reversing sign. Finally, those who reported that they or members of their family had suffered any of a series of bad experiences during the previous three years were more likely than others to view current inequalities as excessive, harmful, and unfair in both survey years (although again not all the coefficients are statistically significant), and in 2009 they were also significantly less likely than others to attribute the difference between wealth and poverty to merit.

In general the contrasts between the 2004 and 2009 survey results regarding perceptions of current inequalities are relatively minor, with the same underlying patterns of unusually favorable perceptions of rural respondents and stronger associations with subjective predictors than with most objective traits visible still in 2009, although with some muting of the rural–urban contrasts. We defer further discussion until the remaining regression results have been presented and discussed.

4.2. Social contours of optimism vs. pessimism about mobility and social justice

In [Table 3](#) we display the results of OLS regression analyses of the four measures of optimism vs. pessimism about chances for upward mobility and social justice, using the same format as in [Table 2](#). Once again the standardized regression coefficients derived from the 2004 and 2009 surveys are displayed side by side for each of the four measures of optimism vs. pessimism.

Looking first at the upper panel in [Table 3](#), we see that rural respondents have significantly more positive scores on all three measures of upward mobility opportunities than their urban citizen counterparts, and for both survey years. Migrants on these measures fall in between, but are generally closer to the views of rural respondents. So even though objectively the opportunities available to Chinese urban citizens remain much better than is the case for either villagers or urban migrants, the latter groups, and particularly villagers, continue to view their chances of improving their livelihoods more optimistically. With regard to our measure of Feelings of Injustice, however, a change between 2004 and 2009 is apparent. In 2004 villagers were significantly less likely than migrants or urban citizens to have pessimistic views about obtaining fair treatment and social justice. In 2009, in contrast, villagers were significantly more likely than urban citizens to have pessimistic views about chances to obtain social justice (with migrant views similar to those of villagers). Detailed examination of the trends underling the figures for Feelings of Injustice (results not shown here) reveals that this reversal of the rural–urban contrast is due to a combination of a major decline in urban feelings of pessimism and a modest increase in rural pessimism. While we cannot be certain of the explanation, the societal trends discussed earlier, and in particular the phasing out of mass layoffs of urban workers and the increasing scale of contested confiscations of rural land for development in the years since 2004, are at least consistent with this one instance in which more favorable views of rural respondents in 2004 had been reversed in 2009.¹⁹

Looking next at the coefficients for other objective predictors (in the middle portion of [Table 3](#)), we see again for the most part fairly inconsistent and weak associations. Older respondents in both 2004 and 2009 were not surprisingly less likely to be optimistic about the chances for individuals to raise their living standards, but their responses to the other three measures were less consistent across surveys and weaker. In 2004 well educated respondents were significantly more likely to express critical views on two of these measures, while those with high family incomes expressed more positive views on two measures, but in 2009 the only clear difference was that the well-educated and those with high incomes were significantly more optimistic about individual opportunities. Party members were in both survey years significantly more likely than non-members to expect the ratio of rich people to poor people in China to increase in the next five years and significantly less likely to express pessimism about obtaining social justice. For the most part we see in [Table 3](#) the same tendency for other objective predictors (except for location/*hukou* status) to do a relatively poor job of explaining variations in these inequality attitude measures.

Finally, in the lower panel of [Table 3](#) we can see that the regression coefficients for the three subjective predictors are generally more strongly and consistently associated than the objective predictors with these measures of optimism vs. pessimism. Those who view themselves as having high social status are more likely than others to express optimism on all four measures in both survey years, although not all the coefficients are statistically significant. Those who report that their family income has improved compared with five years earlier also are generally more likely to express optimism on all four measures in both survey years, with all of the coefficients except the Societal Opportunity measure in 2009 statistically significant. Finally, those who report that they or members of their family have had bad experiences during the past three years are significantly more likely than others in both survey years to voice pessimism about chances for individual upward mobility and about obtaining social justice, although they don't differ significantly on the other two measures. These figures reinforce conclusions reached in analyses of the 2004 survey data alone. Subjective feelings about how respondents are doing in trying to make their way through life and struggling to improve their situation are more predictive of their attitudes toward current inequalities than are their objective status characteristics.

4.3. Social contours of preferences for equality and redistribution

Our third domain of inequality attitudes concerns Preferences for Equality and Government Redistribution. The standardized regression coefficients for our four preference measures, and for both survey years, are displayed in [Table 4](#), following the same format as in [Tables 2 and 3](#).

¹⁹ Note that in the first half of this paper we observed that the combination of a large drop in urban Feelings of Injustice with a more modest increase in such feelings among villagers contributed to an overall situation in which in 2009 respondents had lower Feelings of Injustice than in 2004, but not lower enough to be statistically significant.

Examining the upper panel in Table 4 first, there is a seemingly paradoxical pattern for both survey years. Rural respondents express a stronger preference than urbanites for equality as a general principle of distribution, but they are also significantly less likely to favor government actions to limit the gap between the rich and the poor or the government taking on more responsibility than individuals and families for the provision and financing of housing, education, employment, health care, and old age support. Urbanites, in contrast, appear to have grown accustomed to relying on the government for economic security and welfare services, but without presuming that all will be treated equally (see Walder, 1984, on the Mao-era legacy of urban dependence upon markedly different levels of wages and benefits). Migrants are once again in the middle on these issues, although in this case they are generally closer to urban than to rural response patterns. In neither survey year do these three groups differ significantly on the unacceptability of rich families using their resources to obtain better housing, health care, and schooling for their children.

In regard to other objective predictors of Preferences for Equality and Government Redistribution (see the middle portion of Table 4), once again it is difficult to find clear and consistent patterns. Older respondents are, perhaps not surprisingly, more likely than younger ones in both surveys to favor the government playing the major role in providing basic social services, while women are (more surprisingly) significantly less likely than men to favor government efforts to reduce the gap between rich and poor. The net effect of education in 2004 is similar to urban citizenship, with weaker support for equal distribution combined with stronger support for government leveling and for government provision of social welfare. However, in 2009 only the tendency for the well-educated to voice stronger support for Government Leveling remains statistically significant. Our household income measure shows only one statistically significant coefficient (with low support for equality in 2009), while the net effect of CCP membership (weak already in 2004) is not visible in 2009. Our measure of distance from any large city shows several statistically significant coefficients, but with signs reversing and associations weakening between survey years, making interpretation difficult. As in Tables 2 and 3, it is hard to see underlying patterns and logic in the net effect of these other objective independent predictors of preferences for equality and for government redistribution.

Finally, the lower panel of Table 4 displays the standardized regression coefficients for the three subjective measures. Compared to the previous tables, these subjective predictor coefficients are somewhat less consistent. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who rate themselves as high in social status are in both surveys significantly more likely than others to oppose government leveling efforts, and they are also less likely to be critical of rich families buying better lives for themselves, although in the latter case only the coefficient for 2004 is statistically significant. Those who report that their family's standard of living has improved compared with five years earlier are significantly more likely than others to favor individual rather than government responsibility for social welfare, and they are also less likely to be critical of rich families buying better lives for themselves, although in this case only the coefficient for 2009 is statistically significant. The coefficients for our bad experience predictor display signs of change between surveys. In both survey years those who report having bad experiences during the previous three years are more likely than others to favor government efforts to reduce the gap between rich and poor. However, while in 2004 those reporting bad experiences were also more likely to favor government responsibility for providing social welfare, in 2009 having had bad experiences was associated with significantly *less* support for government responsibility for providing social welfare.²⁰ As with rural respondents, these figures may indicate a tendency for those whose lives have not been going well to be more wary of relying on the government for welfare assistance.

4.4. The overall picture—social contours of attitudes toward current inequalities

In general there have been few dramatic changes between 2004 and 2009 in the patterns of association of social background factors and a variety of measures of attitudes toward current inequalities. As we found earlier in analyzing the 2004 survey data (see Whyte 2010, Chapters 5–9), in 2009 there was no particular social group or type of respondent that was consistently more critical across these various measures (or for that matter no group or type that was consistently less critical). The two features that stood out in that earlier analysis still are visible in the 2009 results reviewed here:

- (1) Most objective social background characteristics are weak and inconsistent predictors of inequality attitudes in a regression framework, although subjective measures do a somewhat better job. It should not be a surprise that we find that those who report that their families have gotten better off in the previous five years are more likely than others to expect that improvement to continue, nor that those whose families have suffered bad experiences and setbacks in recent years are somewhat more pessimistic and critical than others.
- (2) The reversal of the expected “self-serving attribution bias” pattern that marked the 2004 survey results, in which rural residents expressed less critical attitudes toward current inequalities than their urban counterparts, is also still visible in the 2009 results, although it is somewhat more muted. In terms of a simple count across our twelve inequality attitude measures, in 2004 rural respondents expressed significantly less critical views than urban citizens on nine measures, did not differ significantly on two measures, and were only significantly more critical on one measure (Preference for Equality). In 2009 rural respondents were significantly less critical than urbanites on six measures,

²⁰ Those who have had bad experiences are unexpectedly less likely than others to oppose rich families passing on their advantages, although only the coefficient for 2004 is statistically significant.

did not differ significantly on four others, and were more critical on two measures (Preference for Equality and Feelings of Injustice). So the pattern of more acceptance of current inequalities by Chinese villagers was not as pronounced in 2009 as in 2004, but there was only one instance of a clear reversal. As noted earlier, the more critical scores of villagers than urbanites on the Feelings of Injustice scale in 2009 can be attributed to a combination of reduced urban pessimism about social justice and increased rural pessimism. In both survey years, urban migrants expressed attitudes toward current inequalities that were generally midway between villagers and urbanites, closer to their rural-origin colleagues on some measures and closer to urban citizens on others.

5. Conclusions

How have Chinese reacted to the rising inequality of recent years? Through analyses of data from two nationally representative Chinese surveys, in 2004 and 2009, we are able to conclude that the main story is continuity rather than any substantial change. In two of the three inequality attitude domains we consider here (Perceptions of Current Inequalities and Optimism vs. Pessimism about Opportunities and Social Justice), the fairly high levels of acceptance and optimism found in the 2004 survey data increased further in 2009. Only in the third inequality attitude domain (Preferences for Equality and for Government Redistribution) were shifts toward somewhat more critical attitudes visible. Those shifts can be seen as indicating a growing popular desire for the government to live up to its pledges to improve the lives and opportunities of China's most disadvantaged citizens, rather than the rising anger suggested by the social volcano scenario. In other words, in answer to the title of this paper, as of 2009 and we presume still today, there are no signs that a social volcano of anger against distributive injustices is about to erupt.²¹

In our analyses of possible shifts in the social contours of variations in inequality attitudes between surveys, the main story is again continuity, rather than dramatic change. In both survey years, most objective background traits of respondents are only weakly and inconsistently associated with responses to our questions about current inequalities and opportunities,²² and not particularly in the expected, self-interest pattern found in many surveys in other societies. One continuity between surveys runs contrary to the usual pattern, with rural respondents less critical and more optimistic than their urban counterparts. This unexpected pattern is generally weaker in the 2009 data than in 2004, and on one of the twelve attitude measures (Feelings of Injustice), it has been reversed, with rural responses now significantly more critical than urbanite responses. However, the main explanation for both the muting of the pattern of greater rural acceptance of current inequalities and for this reversal regarding Feelings of Injustice is the shift in urban attitudes in a positive direction, rather than any overall shift toward more critical views among rural respondents.

How can we explain the substantial continuities as well as the specific changes in these attitude patterns between 2004 and 2009, especially in the face of such intervening trends as the continuing widening of the income gap between China's rich and poor, the threats posed by the global financial crisis, and growing mass protests? In regard to our first research question, we think that the main reason the distributive justice social volcano remains dormant is that the majority of Chinese continued to enjoy fairly steady and impressive improvements in their lives and standards of living during the five years in question, as the data reported in [Table 1](#) indicate. The sense that many relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances are newly prosperous also inspires hope even among many who still feel left behind.²³ When the rising tide is lifting all or virtually all boats, even if at very different speeds, even lavish displays of corruptly obtained wealth are not resented as much as they might be if average citizens were much more pessimistic about their personal prospects. Of course, there is no guarantee that such robust economic gains and the optimism they generate will continue, but in 2009 and even at the time of writing, the Chinese growth engine had only slowed slightly, not stalled or collapsed.²⁴

The modest changes that have occurred in Chinese attitudes toward current inequalities in general, and in the social background predictors of variations in those attitudes, also seem congruent with the trends between 2004 and 2009 reviewed earlier in this paper. We think the general shift to heightened preferences for equality and for government

²¹ The continued or even increasingly upbeat attitudes of Chinese citizens regarding distributive justice issues cannot be attributed to China's authoritarian government controlling the mass media and other propaganda channels. All evidence suggests that over time government control over communications is becoming less effective and persuasive, rather than more. In addition, a scale we constructed to measure access to information and means of communications outside the official media was in 2004 often associated with more *positive* rather than more critical views about current inequalities (see [Whyte, 2010](#), Chapter 10). Unfortunately the 2009 questionnaire used different questions about access to information, making an exact comparison between surveys impossible on this issue.

²² For example, in [Tables 2–4](#) household income has a statistically significant association with only four out of the twenty-four inequality attitude measures (twelve measures \times 2 survey years), barely more than would be expected to occur by chance alone.

²³ In 2009 we added a new question to our survey, inquiring about what had happened to the living standards of "the families who live around you" compared to five years earlier, and an astounding 82.3% answered that their neighbors were either somewhat better or much better off. Albert Hirschman (see [Hirschman and Rothschild, 1973](#)) used the analogy of the "tunnel effect" to describe popular responses of the poor to rising inequality in the course of economic development. The analogy is with two lanes of cars stuck in a tunnel. If one lane starts moving while the other remains stuck, argued Hirschman and colleagues, at least initially the effect on those who haven't moved yet is hope rather than anger. We are suggesting that as of 2009, at least, this tunnel effect was still operating in China.

²⁴ As of 2013, the Chinese government claimed that growth was continuing at 7–8% a year, down from the close to 10% record maintained since market reforms were launched in 1978. Some economists suspect that official claims are inflated, and that the true growth rate in 2013 was only in the 5–6% range. Obviously this is still a rate of growth most countries can only dream of, and there is no magic growth target number which, if not met, will lead the distributive injustice volcano to erupt.

redistribution is a product of that same robust improvement in living standards as well as a response to the government's own messages that it is taking on a greater responsibility to provide benefits to the poor and disadvantaged. We have also suggested that the weakening of the pattern of rural respondents being less critical of current inequalities than urban citizens in 2009 compared to 2004 is mainly explained by the elimination of a major threat to urban livelihoods during this period—the phasing out of the mass down-sizing of state enterprises that was carried out between 1998 and about 2003, which in that period generated large scale unemployment. The fact that urban family incomes increased more rapidly than rural incomes after 2004 may have contributed to less critical urban attitudes as well.

The reasons for the unexpectedly accepting and optimistic attitudes of rural respondents in 2004 have been discussed at length in earlier reports (see Han, 2009; Whyte, 2010). Primarily we contend that for rural residents the contrast between a form of “socialist serfdom” under Mao, with those born in rural areas consigned for life to cultivating grain in people's communes, vs. the opening up of multiple options from a basis of restored family farming—to engage in growing commercial crops, to emphasize handicrafts and other sidelines, and to leave farming entirely for rural factory jobs, life as a trader, construction work, and migrant labor in urban areas—explains this greater rural acceptance even many years later. Even though the opportunities for rural residents (and urban migrants) remain substantially more limited than for urban citizens, from the perspective of past history and relative expectations, rural optimism continues to outweigh pessimism. Perhaps the substantial progress in redressing rural poverty, as in the rapid increase in rural medical insurance coverage noted earlier, also has contributed to continued villager acceptance of current inequalities.

However, one of our twelve inequality measures, Feelings of Injustice, now shows stronger rural pessimism than urban, the reverse of the 2004 finding. Although this shift is mainly driven by reduced urban feelings of injustice, this one indicator of growing critical views among rural respondents may also be related to a specific post-2004 trend—the growing wave of confiscations of rural land for urban development mentioned earlier, transactions that have generated large scale if still mostly local popular protests from villagers who feel that local leaders are making these deals without providing proper consultation and compensation.²⁵ Still, the dominant picture in 2009 is not that different from 2004—there remains no sign of growing or widespread anger about the increasingly unequal society that China has become.

A final caveat is a reminder that our surveys focus only on one particular domain of social justice—distributive justice. We did not and could not explore in our surveys other social justice domains, and in particular issues of procedural injustices, abuses of power, and lack of redress for such abuses. We are well aware that in recent years China has been racked by a growing tide of social protest activities. As noted earlier, the great majority of such mass protests are the product of anger about such procedural justice abuses, rather than arising from feelings of distributive injustice and anger against the rich. The fact that China's distributive justice volcano remained dormant in 2009 does not necessarily mean the absence of serious threats to political stability and continued CCP rule. In most instances the government has the administrative and financial capacity to address distributive injustices, but addressing procedural injustices would require not just new policies and funding, but basic political reforms which the CCP has so far adamantly resisted. Despite the generally upbeat tone of our analysis, if China's leaders cannot solve the riddle of how to give their citizens greater confidence in procedural justice without thereby undermining CCP rule, China may yet face a different and potentially much more volatile social volcano.

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²⁵ For a very detailed documentary film about one highly publicized rural land confiscation conflict, which erupted in the village of Wukan in Guangdong Province in 2011, see Al Jazeera (2013).

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