St Comp Int Dev (2014) 49:300–320
DOI 10.1007/s12116-014-9160-4

Does Changing Economic Well-Being Shape Resentment About Inequality in China?

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Published online: 21 June 2014

Abstract The political consequences of income inequality in China have attracted increasing attention among researchers, and conventional wisdom states that economic development can mitigate negative views on inequality. I investigate the effects of subjective and objective changes in economic well-being on public opinion concerning income inequality based on a 2004 Chinese national survey. On the one hand, I find weak evidence of a negative correlation between perceived better economic well-being and negative opinion about inequality in China. On the other hand, I identify consistent evidence of a negative correlation between objective intergenerational upward mobility and negative views about inequality. It is worth noting that while the effect of intergenerational upward mobility is large, it is unable to completely reverse negative views about inequality among Chinese citizens. Hence, I suggest that economic development plays only a limited role in mitigating anger about inequality in China.

Keywords China · Inequality · Public opinion · Economic development

Introduction

One important determinant of attitudes toward inequality hinges on economic conditions. Although rapid economic growth in developing countries often generates rising inequality, can overall economic development mitigate citizens' negative views on inequality? The conventional wisdom is that a rising tide lifts all boats, but this answer does not distinguish between the effects of perceived better economic well-being and objective improvement in economic well-being. One may argue that subjective and objective changes in economic well-being are correlated, but the degree of correlation varies under different social, economic, and political conditions. Furthermore, existing arguments and their supporting evidence are largely based on the consideration of individual well-being. Those who hold this individualist view overlook the fact that

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household or even community welfare is sometimes valued by individuals in some societies.

Confounding the effects of different aspects of changing economic well-being, therefore, results in difficulties with linking inequality to various political behaviors of interest, such as democratization. Income inequality has been an important factor explaining redistributive policies and regime transitions (e.g., Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). Nonetheless, recent studies have raised questions about this dominant view on the causal link between income inequality and regime changes (Ansell and Samuel 2010; Haggard and Kaufman 2012). A growing number of studies have suggested that people differ greatly in their tolerance of inequality and thus their demand for redistribution (e.g., Alesina et al. 2001; Kaufman 2009; Osberg and Smeeding 2006). Consequently, understanding the determinants of attitudes toward income inequality is critical in order to better explain its economic and political consequences.

Furthermore, making these distinctions is not only of interest in comparative studies of inequality, but it is also relevant to scholars and policymakers interested in the political and economic consequences of income inequality in China. The recent estimates of the Gini coefficient range from 0.53 to 0.55 in China,[1] which are considerably higher than the period prior to the economic reforms. Researchers have yet to form a consensus on the consequences of income inequality for China's political development. Some suggest that inequality is creating a greater cleavage among the "haves" and "have nots," and that such a cleavage undermines regime stability and social order in Chinese society (Chung et al. 2006; He 2003), but others argue that inequality is an inevitable result of rapid economic development, and that income inequality is not currently the main source of mass discontent directed at the government in China (Whyte 2010a).

To help clarify the consequences of income inequality, I use a 2004 Chinese national representative survey designated to evaluate the formation of individual attitudes toward income inequality as a result of economic development, thus contributing to a growing literature about attitudes toward inequality in developing countries and non-democratic regimes (Graham and Sukhtankar 2004; Kaufman 2009; Gallagher and Hanson 2009; Cramer and Kaufman 2011). Specifically, I distinguish between two important consequences of economic development—subjective and objective changes in individual economic well-being—and estimate their effects on individuals' attitudes toward inequality. The subjective measure is based on individuals' perception of changes in their economic welfare. Although actual changes in an individual's well-being influence this perception, a number of sources, such as witnessing others' economic success or failures as well as media influence, may also shape the perception. The objective measure is based on intergenerational mobility in occupation, because climbing up the social ladder is considered a fundamental shift in an individual's economic well-being, which has a profound impact on his or her view on inequality. In addition, I evaluate these two aspects of economic

[1] The Gini estimate depends on the data source and definitions. See Xie and Zhou (2014) for an overview of recent estimated Gini coefficients from different sources.

development by using both the individual and the household as a reference point, which affects the degree of changes in economic well-being.

The main findings in this paper are threefold. First, I do not find any evidence that perception of *individual* well-being is correlated with attitudes toward inequality. I find only weak evidence that perceived better *household* well-being is negatively correlated with unfavorable view about inequality. Second, I find consistent evidence that both individual and household objective improvement in economic well-being, as measured by intergenerational mobility, is negatively correlated with unfavorable views about inequality among Chinese citizens. The marginal effects of intergenerational upward mobility are statistically and substantively large, because they significantly shift the distribution of public opinion about inequality in a more favorable direction. Finally, I demonstrate that enhancing economic well-being through intergenerational mobility alone is effective but insufficient to completely mitigate negative views about inequality among most Chinese citizens. Simulations show that the individuals who achieve the greatest possible intergenerational mobility still have a negative view on inequality 68 % of the time. Consequently, improving economic well-being has a limited role in mitigating negative view on income inequality in China.

The next section contains a brief discussion about relevant literature on the effect of changes in economic well-being, especially social mobility, on attitudes about inequality and redistribution. I then extend the discussion to the context of China with a 2004 Chinese national survey on income inequality. I detail the empirical properties of the models and discuss the evidence. To evaluate the main findings, I subject the empirical model to various robustness checks, and show that these results are robust to various alternative measures of dependent and independent variables, as well as different model specifications. I conclude the paper by summarizing the results and discussing future research directions.

Attitudes Toward Inequality During Economic Development

Rapid economic growth often results in significant changes in individual economic well-being, such as social mobility, for many citizens in a society. Social mobility, in turn, has been a salient factor in explaining an individual's political attitudes. This argument dates back at least to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and social scientists have revisited it since the 1950s (e.g., Lipset and Bendix 1959; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1985, 1992). Although climbing up the social ladder during rapid economic development may change one's view on inequality, the mechanism used to explain this process requires further evaluation.

Conventional wisdom holds that improved economic well-being reduces negative opinion about inequality as well as demand for redistribution. Benabou and Ok (2001) construct a formal model showing that the prospect of upward mobility discourages the median voter from demanding greater redistribution. The empirical evidence for a negative correlation between upward mobility and demand for redistribution has been found in Russia (Ravallion and Lokshin 2000), OECD countries (Corneo and Gruner 2002), and the USA (Alesina and La Ferrara 2005). To some extent, these studies suggest that upward mobility reduces redistributive demands and stabilizes the social order. The analogy of "upward mobility as a safety-valve" provides a vivid picture of

the dynamics operating between economic mobility and political order (Parkin 1971). However, existing empirical studies have not made the distinction between the effects of subjective and objective changes of economic well-being on public opinion, with the exception of Alesina and La Ferrara (2005). As discussed below, individuals' perceived improvement in economic well-being may not always align with the objective changes in economic well-being. Furthermore, most of these studies focus on developed countries, where social structure is relatively more stable than some developing countries undergoing rapid economic development. It remains an empirical question whether the evidence found in these studies can be generalized in developing countries. Specifically, a closer look reveals that the views on inequality held by winners and losers during rapid economic development may not always align with conventional wisdom.

First, when the realization of economic gains fails to meet aspirations, economic winners may be less tolerant of income inequality. Huntington contends that "modernization involves a fundamental shift in value, attitudes, and expectation" (1996 [1968]: 32). As a consequence, he argues that an increasing gap between individuals' aspirations and their actual achievements may lead to mass frustration. Political instability will ensue if this frustration is allowed to fester. This gap between aspiration and realization is also an important mechanism in the study of conflict and violence (Gurr 1970).

Hence, individuals' perceived improvement in economic well-being may differ from the objective changes in economic well-being, which could have different impact on their opinions of income inequality and demand for redistribution. For instance, although scholars have not reached a consensus about the difference in objective intergenerational mobility between citizens of European countries and those of the USA (Clark 2014; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1985, 1992; Friedman 2012; Lipset and Bendix 1959; Long and Ferrie 2013), survey results consistently show that US respondents believe that a higher level of social mobility exists in their society than most Europeans do with respect to their societies (e.g., Alesina et al. 2001; Piketty 1995). This discrepancy may be due to costly learning through individuals' personal experience (Piketty 1995). In addition, others have suggested that individual beliefs about the role of luck and effort in success explain this inconsistency (Alesina and Angeletos 2005). As a result, noting the difference between perceived and objective changes in economic well-being allows us to understand which aspect of economic development is more effective in shaping views on inequality.

Second, losers during economic development may not always resent income inequality. The *tunnel effect*, a term coined by Hirschman and Rothschild (1973), captures this dynamic. Essentially, tunnel effect theory suggests that individuals may feel better if people surrounding them have experienced upward mobility, even if they have not done so themselves, in large part because witnessing others' upward mobility offers them some hope about the prospects of their own mobility. Following this logic, individuals may demand less redistribution because of their aspiration and hope for future upward mobility once they observe the upward mobility of others. Because the most observable reference group comprises an individual's immediate household members, the economic well-being of the household is as important as that of the individual in shaping views on inequality. For example, the economic well-being of an individual may suffer during economic reform, but as long as immediate household

members obtain economic gains, his or her view could be different from that of another individual who has suffered in both personal and household well-being.

To summarize, existing scholarship has suggested that development resulting in changes in economic well-being, such as through social mobility, tends to reduce negative views on inequality. This claim could be further corroborated by distinguishing the effects of subjective and objective changes in economic well-being. Furthermore, taking household well-being into account allows us to go beyond the individualistic view on the relationship between economic welfare and attitude toward inequality. The next two sections contain an evaluation of these claims by investigating a 2004 national public opinion survey in China.

Public Opinion on Income Inequality and Economic Well-Being in China

Chinese society has undergone extensive transformation in the last two decades. Unprecedented economic growth has been accompanied by dramatically rising income inequality, as the Gini coefficient rose from 0.21[2] in 1978 to 0.53~0.55[3] in 2010. Hence, China offers an ideal testing ground to investigate the effects of economic development on attitudes toward inequality.

A 2004 Chinese national survey suggests that nearly 75 % of the respondents think that the current level of inequality is high or too high in the country (see Fig. 1). Although Fig. 1 shows negative views about inequality among Chinese citizens, another question in the same survey suggests that Chinese respondents were divided in their views on the degree of conflict between the rich and the poor. Specifically, nearly 49 % of the respondents perceive "no conflict" or "not much conflict" between the rich and the poor, and 41 % of the respondents consider "some conflict" or "great conflict." Furthermore, Whyte (2010a) suggests that Chinese respondents are not particularly angry about the current level of inequality.

One potential explanation of this phenomenon is that rapid economic growth mitigates Chinese citizens' negative views on income inequality. This observation is highly plausible, because China's economic transformation has raised many people on the social ladder. More importantly, economic reforms have enabled rural residents to seek employment in urban areas. Thus, many Chinese citizens, especially rural residents, have obtained considerable economic opportunities for upward mobility as a result of the economic development. Although it is still difficult for rural migrants to settle permanently in the cities because of the legacy of the household registration system (*Hukou*) in China, rural migrants can earn higher wages in urban areas than their rural counterparts can (Li et al. 2008). Given the level of economic development in China, many Chinese are optimistic about their economic prospects. Figure 2 shows that approximately 55 % of respondents believe that they can improve their lives in the future.

Nonetheless, it is inappropriate to conclude that Chinese citizens' tolerance of inequality is the result of their positive experience with economic well-being based on these descriptive statistics. Despite the importance of this debate, very little empirical evidence exists to systematically evaluate the effects of economic development on

[2] This Gini index is obtained from the UNU-WIDER World Income Inequality Database (WIID).

[3] This Gini coefficient was reported in Xie and Zhou (2014). Using 2007 data, Li and Luo (2011), suggest that the Gini coefficient in China ranged from 0.47 to 0.54.

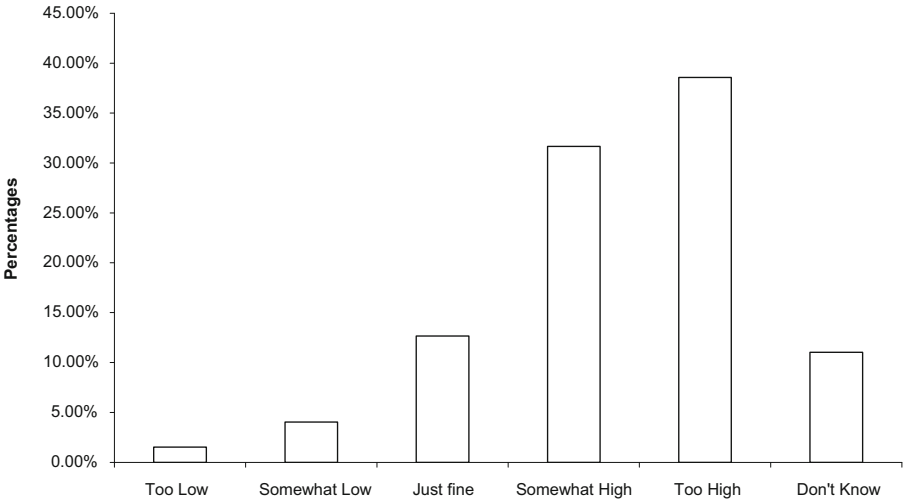

Fig. 1 What do you think of the current income difference among people in our country? Source: The 2004 Chinese Attitudes toward Inequality and Distributive Injustice Survey (Whyte 2010b)

attitudes toward inequality in China, perhaps because of the lack of appropriate data. In the following section, I will investigate this question and shed some light on this debate.

Empirical Strategy

The empirical investigation is based on a 2004 Chinese national representative survey using spatial sampling. In the analyses, I distinguish between two aspects of changing economic well-being: (1) subjective measures, which are based on perceived changes in economic prospects; and (2) objective measures, which are based on

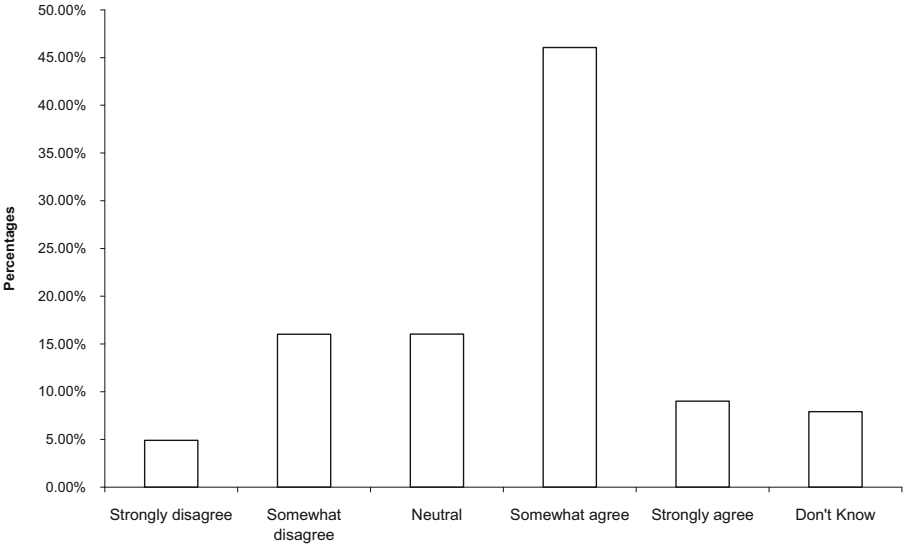

Fig. 2 Do you think it is very likely for people like you to improve their lives in the future? Source: The 2004 Chinese Attitudes toward Inequality and Distributive Injustice Survey (Whyte 2010b)

intergenerational mobility. In addition, I consider both individuals and households as the reference group of economic well-being and evaluate their effects on attitudes toward inequality, respectively.

Data

The data is from the 2004 survey on "Chinese Attitudes toward Inequality and Distributive Injustice." The principal investigators designed this 2004 Chinese survey by closely following the 1991 International Social Justice Project questionnaire.[4] The survey contains 3,267 respondents and covers over 52 counties or city districts across 23 provinces. This is one of few contemporary public opinion surveys that directly investigates Chinese citizens' opinions on inequality and social justice with a representative national sample. Whyte (2010b) has provided a detailed discussion of the design and the main results of this survey.

Although the 2004 survey appears to be somewhat dated given that China has continued to experience significant economic transformation in the last decade, using this survey has several advantages for the inquiry in this paper. First, the main hypotheses in this paper concern various aspects of changes in economic well-being and their effects on attitudes toward inequality. The survey contains an extensive battery of questions that allow me to separate the effects of subjective and objective changes in economic well-being for both the individual and his or her household. Second, this survey not only probes individuals' opinions on issues such as income inequality and economic well-being, but it also contains rich data on individuals' personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, income, education, occupation), their family background (e.g., parents' and spouses' education, occupation), and life experiences (e.g., migration history). Third, this survey is based on a spatial sampling technique that provides a more representative national sample, such as the inclusion of internal migrants, than many other surveys in China.[5]

Measuring Attitudes Toward Inequality

To measure an individual's attitude toward inequality, the main dependent variable is based on the responses to the following survey question:

> What do you think of the current income differences among people in our country?… Too high, somewhat high, just fine, somewhat low, and too low

The responses were coded on a scale of 1 to 5. When a respondent perceives that current income difference is "too high" or "somewhat high," his or her response was coded as 5 or 4. In a similar vein, 1 or 2 was coded for the response of "too low" or

[4] This project is under the leadership of Marty Whyte at Harvard University. The survey was designed by a team of scholars from academic institutions in both the USA and China. The survey was carried out by the Research Centre for Contemporary China (RCCC) at Beijing University.

[5] See Landry and Shen (2005) for more details of the advantage of spatial sampling in the context of China.

"somewhat low", respectively. When the respondent perceives current income difference as "just fine," the response was coded as 3.[6]

One may suspect that this question measures only individuals' perceptions about income inequality instead of their opinions about inequality; however, I argue that this question is likely to elicit opinions about inequality on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Theoretically, the middle response category available to the respondents is whether the level of inequality is "just fine," which is a normative evaluation. If the middle response category were "neither high nor low," then this question would prime respondents to think about the level of inequality in society. However, the "just fine" response anchors a normative reaction, because any deviation from the "just fine" response reflects an individual's positive or negative view on inequality. For example, if an individual has a more negative view on inequality, he or she will generally prefer a lower objective level of inequality in society. Given any level of objective inequality in society, this individual is more likely to consider the current level of inequality as too high, compared to an individual who has a less negative view on inequality.

Empirically, if this question measures perceptions of inequality instead of attitudes, we should observe the average response of "too high" and "somewhat high" is positively correlated with the level of objective inequality in the society. To evaluate this relationship, I investigate answers to the same question in the 1991 International Social Justice Project in 12 countries.[7] I found that the correlation between country average responses to this question and country Gini coefficient at the time of the survey was negative and not statistically significant. In other words, the lack of positive correlation between the country average response and Gini index suggests the question elicits an individual's opinion instead of perception of income inequality.

Although some may still have concerns about this measure, this is the best question in the 2004 China survey to elicit citizens' attitudes toward income inequality without conflating with their preferences for redistribution. In the next section, I conduct robustness checks by using alternative measures of attitudes toward inequality, and I find consistent evidence of the main results.

Measuring Subjective and Objective Changes in Economic Well-Being

The key argument in the theoretical discussion is the need to separate the effects of subjective and objective changes in economic well-being on attitudes toward inequality as well as those of individual and household well-being. In this paper, the subjective measure comes from a survey question asking respondents to rate changes in their future economic well-being. Similar to the coding of the dependent variable, the responses were based on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 indicates that the respondent strongly agreed with a statement that his or her future living conditions will very likely improve, and 1 indicates strong disagreement. This measure captures an individual's view on his or her economic prospect, which is a key determinant in the theoretical model proposed in Benabou and Ok (2001) to explain preference for redistribution. To

[6] Responses of "Don't Know" and "Refuse to Answer" were coded as missing.

[7] These 12 countries are: Bulgaria, Germany (West Germany and East Germany separately), Hungary, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Great Britain, the USA, Russia, Slovenia, Czechoslovakia, and Estonia. The correlation test use the Gini index of the survey year and county average response to this question, and the results are robust with or without including China.

measure the perception of changes in household well-being, I use a similar survey question except that the emphasis is on the economic prospects of household well-being.

As for the objective changes in economic well-being, I use intergenerational occupational mobility as the proxy. Ideally, the best objective measure to capture economic mobility would have been respondents' mobility in the national income distribution over time. Unfortunately, no questions in the survey allow me to measure the actual change of income or wealth relative to the income distribution over time in this survey. Hence, I use intergenerational mobility as the objective measure. Comparatively, sociologists and economists have used intergenerational mobility as an indicator of the fundamental change in a person's economic well-being (e.g., Björklund et al. 2012; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1985, 1992; Ganzeboom et al. 1991). Specific to China, the past 30 years of economic development have significantly changed an individual's occupational options and opportunities (Bian 2002; Davis 1992; Wu and Treiman 2007). Prior to economic reforms, for example, peasants' children were most likely to remain peasants, largely as a result of the household registration system that prohibited free internal migration. Meanwhile, urban residents did not have many occupation choices mostly because of the nature of the planned economy in China. However, China's economic reforms have gradually created a more fluid labor market, and peasants' children can now seek jobs in urban areas and urban residents have more occupational choices in both the public and private sectors in different geographical locations. Thus, the intergenerational mobility in occupation captures a direct consequence of economic development in China.

To accurately construct the intergenerational mobility indicator, I focus on two factors: (1) the occupational prestige ranking and (2) the reference group to which an individual compares himself or herself. For the occupational prestige ranking, currently researchers use three common frameworks: prestige scales, socioeconomic indices (SEI), and social class typologies, as summarized in Breen and Jonsson (2005). I choose the prestige scales approach as a first-pass conceptualization, and the ranking is based on a research report from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Lu 2004). The ranking in this research report takes into account both material and non-material resources that an individual obtains in his or her occupation. The occupational prestige ranking consists of 10 occupations, with 10 being the most prestigious, 1 being the least prestigious and 0 assigned to unemployed or not working. By using this ranking, I assume that de facto power in the social hierarchy cannot be explained by respondents' household incomes alone; furthermore, this measure may capture hidden income and benefits in some occupations, such as being a government cadre. In the sensitivity tests, I will consider an alternative ranking based on the average household income of each occupation reported in the survey.[8]

In terms of the reference group, I first use the occupation of the respondent's father, and calculate an *individual's* intergenerational mobility by subtracting the occupational

[8] See Table 4 for two different rankings of occupational prestige in China.

prestige of a respondent's father from his or her occupational prestige (i.e., Occupational Prestige$_i$−Father's Occupational Prestige$_i$). A positive number indicates the achievement of upward intergenerational mobility. This variable ranges from −10 to 10. Alternatively, I consider a different reference group for the intergenerational mobility measure in order to capture *household* intergenerational mobility. Instead of using an individual's father as the reference for comparison, I consider the household as the unit of comparison. This measure is motivated by the observation that individuals in China sometimes emphasize family welfare over individual welfare. The household mobility measure is a numeric value generated by subtracting the highest occupational prestige of an individual's parents from the highest occupational prestige of his or her household.

In addition to occupation, some researchers have argued that educational mobility is another important indicator of economic well-being (Ishida et al. 1995; Breen 2010) because education attainment is highly correlated with earning ability. I obtain the objective educational mobility measure by subtracting the highest level of education obtained by a respondent's father from his or her level of education as an auxiliary measure of intergenerational mobility.

Estimating the Effect of Changes in Individual and Household Well-Being

To analyze the effect of changes in economic well-being on attitudes toward inequality, I estimate the following model:

$$Y^*_{ic} = \alpha_c + \gamma M_{ic} + \beta X_{ic} + \varepsilon_{ic} \quad (1)$$

In this model, Y_{ic}^* is a latent variable indicating an individual's attitude, and this individual i is living in county or city c. M_{ic} measures one aspect of an individual's changes in economic well-being. To separate the effects of subjective and objective measures, I include only one of these measures at a time in different regression models. X_{ic} is a vector of individual level control variables, which are similar to existing models in the literature. These control variables include residential registration status (*Hukou*), gender, age, education, marital status, communist party membership, household income,[9] and dummy variables for a respondent's occupational prestige. α_c is a vector of county dummy variables that capture unobserved county fixed effects. Note that the county fixed effects dummy variables are excluded in some model specifications. α_c, γ, and β are parameters to be estimated, and ε_{ic} is a mean-zero error term that is associated with individual attitudes. I hypothesize improving economic well-being reduces negative views on inequality. Thus, I expect the coefficient estimate γ to be negative. Because we do not observe Y_{ic}^*, but Y_{ic}, which are the survey responses discussed above, I estimate the parameters in Eq. (1) through an ordered probit model, assuming ε_{ic} in Model (1) is normally

[9] A large number of respondents in this survey are from rural areas, and the conception of income in rural China is mostly at the unit of household not at the unit of individual. Thus, using household income is more accurate than using individual income to measure the income effect. In addition, this is also the reason I use occupation prestige instead of income as the indicator for objective intergenerational mobility, because it is hard to separate the effects of individual and household for rural respondents who view income at the household level.

distributed. Moreover, the ordered probit model accommodates the non-linear effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable.[10] In all the empirical analysis below, I conduct the analyses while addressing missing data problems[11] and survey design effects.[12]

Table 1 reports the estimation results for both subjective and objective measures of changes in individual economic well-being, with and without county fixed effects.[13] Results in Model 1.1 suggest no evidence that perceived changes in economic well-being are correlated with attitudes toward inequality among Chinese citizens. If we take into account the county fixed effects, which control for the unobserved county environment that shapes an individual's attitude toward inequality, the marginal effect of perceived changes in economic prospect is even weaker, as suggested in Model 1.2. Meanwhile, objective changes in economic well-being as measured by intergenerational occupation mobility (Model 1.3 and 1.4) have a negative effect on opinion toward inequality and the estimates are statistically significant at the 0.05 level with or without county fixed effects. Substantively, the results suggest that when an individual obtains a more prestigious job than his or her father had, that person feels less negatively about inequality.

Meanwhile, educational mobility has a positive but statistically insignificant effect on negative opinion about inequality (Model 1.5 and 1.6). The lack of statistical significance in the estimates of educational mobility is not too surprising because increasing education attainment in the general population allows many people to obtain more education than their parents did in the last 30 years. Note that another education attainment indicator, years of schooling, suggests that the more educated an individual is, the more likely he or she has a negative view on inequality in some models. One possible explanation is that individuals are more aware of inequality through more education. Another potential explanation is that more educated individuals find that their investments in human capital are not rewarded well enough in China.

[10] I also ran the analysis using OLS regressions, and the results are consistent with the Ordered Probit regressions.

[11] Missing data problems are very common in surveys conducted in developing countries. Failing to address the missing data problem leads to inefficient results at best, and biased results at worst (King et al. 2001). I use multiple-imputed datasets to remedy the missing data problem. All the results below are based on 10 imputed datasets. The 10 imputed datasets were generated by using Amelia II developed by King et al. (2001). In all the analyses in this paper, I first generated 10 imputed datasets, and then separately analyzed each imputed dataset according to the model specifications. I then combined the parameter estimates and variances based on these imputed datasets to produce a single set of estimates and variances. This final step takes into account the systematic variance within and across imputed datasets.

[12] To account for the design effect, I follow the approach in Winship and Radbill (1994) and use weighted data in the analysis, because this estimation approach yields consistent and unbiased point estimates as well as correct standard errors.

[13] It is worth noting that the results reported in Table 1 are different from the regression results that do not address missing data problems and survey design effects. Specifically, the magnitudes of many mobility estimates increase as much as 100 % when missing data problems are not addressed. Meanwhile, the standard errors of these estimates increase to a lesser degree. Thus, all the estimates of mobility measures, including perceptions, are statistically significant without addressing both missing data problems and survey design effects. Taken together, analyses based on listwise deletion inflate nearly all the estimates, thus likely resulting in a Type-I error.

Table 1 Changes in individual well-being and attitudes toward inequality

Independent variable	Model 1.1	Model 1.2	Model 1.3	Model 1.4	Model 1.5	Model 1.6
Household registration status (rural=1)	−0.101	−0.062	−0.062	−0.020	−0.111	−0.071
	(0.137)	(0.117)	(0.140)	(0.110)	(0.141)	(0.116)
Male	0.066	0.128**	0.072	0.133**	0.063	0.126*
	(0.063)	(0.068)	(0.062)	(0.068)	(0.062)	(0.068)
Years of schooling	0.018	0.020*	0.016	0.018	0.014	0.017
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.017)	(0.016)
Age	−0.002	−0.002	−0.001	−0.001	−0.002	−0.002
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Married	0.149	0.210**	0.145	0.208**	0.141	0.203**
	(0.098)	(0.093)	(0.098)	(0.092)	(0.102)	(0.095)
Logged household income	−0.086**	−0.040	−0.096**	−0.045	−0.091**	−0.041
	(0.044)	(0.051)	(0.043)	(0.052)	(0.042)	(0.051)
Party member	0.093	0.084	0.084	0.080	0.083	0.077
	(0.094)	(0.110)	(0.092)	(0.109)	(0.097)	(0.109)
Perception of better individual economic well-being	−0.033	−0.012				
	(0.050)	(0.038)				
Intergenerational individual occupational mobility v1			−0.036**	−0.032**		
			(0.017)	(0.016)		
Educational mobility					0.019	0.018
					(0.049)	(0.039)
Observations	3,267	3,267	3,267	3,267	3,267	3,267
Occupational prestige dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County fixed effect	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

These are the ordered probit results. The dependent variable is individual's opinion of current level of inequality in the society in a scale from 1 to 5, and 5 as "too high," 4 as "somewhat high," 3 as "just fine", 2 as "somewhat low", and 1 as "too low." The analyses are based on 10 multiple-imputed datasets, and are weighted by the survey design effects. Fixed effects are at county dummies, whose definition is slightly different from the PSU definition in survey sampling. The estimates of dummies variables for occupational prestige and county fixed effects are omitted in this table

*$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$

Individual characteristics show some interesting correlations with attitudes toward inequality. For example, rural residential status, all else being equal, has no effect on attitudes toward inequality. One may argue that the null effect results from the correlation between household registration status and county fixed effects, which attenuates the estimates, because a certain level of homogeneity exists in household registration status within a county or city in the dataset. The spatial sampling includes migrants who did not have urban household registration in the sample, which should reduce the degree of homogeneity in household registration status within the sampling unit; moreover, this account could not explain the lack of statistical significance in models without county fixed effects. Meanwhile, female respondents did not have less tolerance for inequality than male respondents. Finally, the estimates of household

income have negative signs, and they are statistically significant at the 0.05 level in models without county fixed effects.[14]

The results above are somewhat surprising, because no evidence exists that perceived changes in individual economic prospects mitigate negative views on inequality in China. As argued above, an individual's attitudes are not only shaped by his or her own well-being, but also by their household's well-being. To evaluate this claim, I re-analyze the data using perceived and objective household well-being as the explanatory variables.

As shown in Table 2, all household measures have the expected signs, but their magnitudes differ from the individual measures. The effects of perceived changes in household prospective well-being are stronger than those of perceived changes in individual prospective well-being. The estimate is negative and statistically significant at the 0.1 level. This result indicates that Chinese citizens are likely to value household welfare more than individual welfare. Meanwhile, the estimates of intergenerational household mobility are still negative and statistically significant at the 0.05 level in the model without county fixed effects and at the 0.1 level in the model with county fixed effects. In other words, we find consistent evidence that achieving intergenerational household mobility has a negative correlation with negative views on inequality.

Taking together the results reported in Tables 1 and 2, I draw three important conclusions. First, perceived changes in economic well-being are not a very reliable predictor of attitudes toward inequality. Across all statistical models, I find only weak evidence in the case of perceived household well-being without county fixed effects, and no evidence of perceived individual well-being. However, in the county fixed effect model where I control for unobserved local conditions that could shape individual attitudes, the estimate of perceived changes in household economic prospects is no longer statistically significant at the 0.1 level.

Why do we fail to find consistent evidence of a negative correlation between perceiving better economic prospects and attitudes toward inequality? This is in part because the perception of economic well-being could be driven by many factors, some of which are unobserved but correlated with attitudes toward inequality. When using perception of change in economic well-being as an explanatory variable, the estimate is likely biased without control for these unobserved factors. This finding offers some important lessons in comparative studies of inequality in which perception of change in economic well-being is often used as an explanatory variable for attitudes toward inequality and demand for redistribution (Cramer and Kaufman 2011; Linos and West 2003). The precise causal effect of perceived economic well-being on these important preferences remains to be established.

The second conclusion is that objective changes in economic well-being are a much more reliable predictor of attitude toward inequality. Across various model specifications, the effects of intergenerational mobility are always statistically significant. One may ask the extent to which upward intergenerational mobility reduces the probability of having a negative view on inequality for individuals in China. To answer this

[14] The reason that the household income estimates are not statistically significant in models with county fixed effects is probably because of income homogeneity in the block in sampled PSU. Put differently, the spatial sampling requires the interviewers to survey all the households in the selected spatial block, and the variation of household incomes in these households within the selected blocks is very likely to be small, thus providing little leverage on the variation of attitudes toward inequality.

Table 2 Changes in household well-being and attitudes toward inequality

Independent variable	Model 2.1	Model 2.2	Model 2.3	Model 2.4
Household registration status (rural=1)	−0.093	−0.061	−0.080	−0.039
	(0.137)	(0.122)	(0.137)	(0.109)
Male	0.064	0.129*	0.066	0.127*
	(0.062)	(0.068)	(0.062)	(0.068)
Years of schooling	0.018	0.020	0.016	0.019
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.013)
Age	−0.002	−0.002	−0.001	−0.001
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Married	0.141	0.209**	0.164	0.225**
	(0.101)	(0.095)	(0.101)	(0.096)
Logged household income	−0.079**	−0.032	−0.091**	−0.041
	(0.042)	(0.051)	(0.042)	(0.052)
Party member	0.106	0.094	0.097	0.090
	(0.096)	(0.109)	(0.094)	(0.110)
Perception of better household economic well-being	−0.082*	−0.067		
	(0.052)	(0.043)		
Intergenerational household occupational mobility v1			−0.025**	−0.023*
			(0.013)	(0.013)
Observations	3,267	3,267	3,267	3,267
Occupational prestige dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County fixed effect	No	Yes	No	Yes

These are the ordered probit results. Model specifications are the same as those in Model 1.1–1.4, except for the mobility measures, which are at the household level. The results of control variables are omitted in the table. The analyses are based on 10 multiple-imputed datasets, and are weighted by the survey design effects. Fixed effects are county dummies, whose definition is slightly different from the PSU definition in survey sampling. The estimates of dummy variables for occupational prestige and county fixed effects are omitted in this table

*p<0.10; **p<0.05

question, I simulate marginal effects of objective upward mobility on the probabilities of an average Chinese citizen having a negative view toward inequality. These simulations take into account both estimation uncertainty as well as fundamental uncertainty in the results.[15]

[15] The simulation procedure is similar to the method described in King et al. (2000). For each imputed dataset, I first estimate the model, and then draw 1,000 simulated sets of parameters from a multinomial normal distribution, with means and variances equal to the regression estimates and the variance-covariance matrix of these estimates. For each set of simulated parameters, I then calculate the first difference of the probability that a "typical" Chinese respondent (a male non-party member with median year of schooling, age, and median rural or urban household income) has a negative view on inequality after achieving the largest possible upward mobility. The first difference could be interpreted as the marginal effect of the greatest possible upward mobility. Specifically, the first difference was obtained by calculating the change of the probability of having a negative view on inequality, had this "typical" Chinese individual achieved the largest possible social mobility from "median" social mobility, holding everything else constant except for the household income that rises along with occupation.

The simulation results in Table 3 provide a revealing substantive interpretation. The marginal effects of having achieved the largest possible upward mobility vary from −0.100 to −0.118 for rural and urban residents, respectively, and −0.106 to −0.125 for rural and urban families, respectively. Substantively, for example, a rural individual experiencing upward mobility from "farmer" to "government cadre" has a 10 percentage point decrease in the probability of having a negative view on inequality. Meanwhile, an urban individual experiencing an upward mobility from "manual worker" to "government cadre" has a 12 percentage point decrease in the probability of having a negative view on inequality. These marginal effects are quite substantial because they significantly shift the distribution of an individual's view on inequality in a more favorable direction. Notably, that intergenerational household mobility always has a slightly larger marginal effect than individual mobility. For both rural and urban residents, the marginal effect is about 6 % larger for intergenerational household mobility.

There are several reasons why objective intergenerational mobility in occupation is more robust than perceived change in economic well-being when explaining attitudes toward inequality. First, persistent inequality occurs in part because of the intergenerational transmission of family resources (see Piketty 2000 for a review). Intergenerational upward mobility breaks the barrier of an individual's economic prospects and suggests a fundamental shift of his or her relative position in the income distribution and the social hierarchy. As a result, individuals who achieve upward mobility may attribute their success to effort instead of luck, and beliefs about luck or effort are strongly associated with tolerance of inequality and demand for redistribution (Piketty 1995; Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Benabou and Tirole 2006). China is not an exception in this case. The barriers resulting from the household registration system

Table 3 Simulated marginal probability of having a negative view on inequality

	Predicted probability of having a negative view on inequality	Marginal probability after having achieved mobility from median to maximum
Median rural individual	0.779	−0.100
	(0.033)	(0.076)
	[0.713, 0.845]	[−0.252, 0.052]
Median rural household	0.781	−0.106
	(0.033)	(0.079)
	[0.715, 0.847]	[−0.264, 0.052]
Median urban individual	0.816	−0.118
	(0.053)	(0.072)
	[0.710, 0.922]	[0.262, 0.026]
Median urban household	0.823	−0.125
	(0.051)	(0.074)
	[0.721, 0.925]	[−0.273, 0.023]

The simulation uses the estimates from Model 1.3 and 2.3. The mean effect is reported first, followed by the standard error of this estimate in parenthesis, and the 90 % confidence interval in brackets. The simulations are based on 10 multiple-imputed datasets, and the results are weighted by the survey design effects

(*Hukou*) and family background largely limited Chinese citizens' economic mobility prior to the reform era. Many individuals who have overcome these barriers and achieved upward mobility believe that efforts and talent play an important role. In fact, 89 % of the respondents endorse the view that rich people become rich because of talent and effort in this 2004 survey. Second, social mobility engenders a movement to different strata of the society. Studies have shown that attitudes toward inequality are often group-specific and socially constructed (Luttmer 2001; Schmitt et al. 2003). Because these individuals acquire a new group (class) identity, the new group identities influence their views on inequality.

Finally, the simulation results in Table 3 yield a third important conclusion. Although the effect of intergenerational mobility is very robust, its effect is still not substantial enough to reverse completely the negative view on inequality among Chinese citizens. For example, even with the largest possible intergenerational mobility (i.e., a change from farmer to government employee), the predicted probability of having a negative view on inequality still exceeds at least 0.68 for the rural individual, summing the values in columns 1 and 2 in Table 3. A person who achieves a lesser degree of intergenerational mobility, such as going from farmer to state owned enterprise employee, is highly likely to maintain a negative view on inequality. The predicted probability of an urban individual as well as an urban household having a negative view after achieving the largest possible mobility ranges from 0.68 to 0.70.

One interpretation of this result is that although a rising tide lifts all boats, economic development does not completely mitigate negative view on inequality in China. Concerns about the fairness and justice of income distribution could be another source determining attitudes toward inequality and demand for redistribution (Piketty 1995; Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Benabou and Tirole 2006; Osberg and Smeeding 2006; Lü 2013). To provide a glimpse of this concern about fairness and justice among Chinese citizens, I include a variable in which respondents are asked whether they think equality of opportunity for success exists in the society. The results show that perceiving inequality of opportunity is highly correlated with negative view on income inequality among Chinese respondents. The results also suggest that estimates of objective mobility measures are very robust across different model specifications with or without county fixed effects after including the variable of perceiving unequal opportunity.

Robustness Checks and Further Discussion

In this section, I develop several strategies to investigate the robustness of the main results reported above as well as other considerations of attitudes toward inequality. Specifically, I consider different measures for both key independent variables and the dependent variable. In addition, I explore different model specifications to investigate problems resulting from potential omitted variable. By and large, the main results are fairly robust in these tests.

Alternative Measures of Intergenerational Mobility and Attitude Toward Inequality

First, the empirical evidence of objective intergenerational mobility hinges on the ranking of various occupations. The original ranking of occupational prestige in the analyses

above (Measure v1) is based on a research report from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. To check for robustness, I construct a different ranking (Measure v2) based on the average household income of each occupation category reported in the survey. This new ranking indicates intergenerational mobility across income classes. I use this different occupational prestige ranking, and re-analyze the data with the same specifications as those in the last section. Table 4 details the difference between these two rankings.

The biggest difference in these two rankings is the occupational prestige of "government cadre," which drops from the most prestigious occupation in the original ranking to the fourth most prestigious one in this alternative ranking. The drop of the "government cadre" under the average occupational income measure could be the result of government cadres having hidden income and benefits not revealed in survey responses. Note that the Spearman Rank Correlation coefficients between these two rankings range from 0.84 to 0.86 in these 10 imputed datasets, and they are all statistically significant at the 0.001 level.

Using this alternative occupational prestige ranking, the estimation results are largely consistent with the results reported in Table 1. The coefficient estimates for intergenerational mobility are similar in magnitude and statistically significant for all models. In other words, intergenerational mobility remains as a strong predictor of attitude toward inequality. This result is hardly surprising but nonetheless provides additional evidence that objective mobility is a reliable predictor of attitudes toward inequality. Furthermore, the robustness of intergenerational mobility emphasizes the importance of using objective measures of economic well-being instead of subjective ones in future survey design.

Next, I consider a different measure for the dependent variable. Previously, I used individuals' attitudes toward inequality at the national level as the dependent variable. Some may question whether this measure captures perception of inequality instead of attitudes. Moreover, what about their attitudes toward inequality at the local level? One may argue that attitudes toward local inequality are a better indicator of feelings about income inequality. Existing social and economic studies have pointed out that local inequality has important effects on crime (Blau and Blau 1982; Demombynes and Özler 2005) and work effort (Card et al. 2012). To answer this question, I used the survey

Table 4 Ranking of occupational prestige in China

Occupation prestige	Measure v1	Measure v2
10	Government cadre	Manager
9	Manager	Private enterprise owner
8	Private enterprise owner	High skill specialist
7	High skill specialist	Government cadre
6	Low level white collar worker	Small business owner
5	Police and army member	Police and army member
4	Small business owner	Services worker
3	Services worker	Low level white collar worker
2	Manual worker	Manual worker
1	Farmer	Farmer
0	Unemployed/not working	Unemployed/not working

responses of perception of income inequality among respondents' neighbors. Note that while the responses to this question provide a local measure, they may suffer from selection bias; that is, individuals with same social and economic characteristics may choose to live in the same neighborhood. If the previous national measure overstates people's negative view on inequality, this local measure probably understates it.

Despite the imperfection of this measure, I re-analyze Models 1.3–1.6, and Models 2.3 and 2.4. The results are still consistent with the original results that the estimates of individual intergenerational mobility are negative and statistically significant, but not those of subjective well-being or educational mobility. Note that I simply use the opinions about inequality among neighbors as the dependent variable without considering a Heckman selection model of residence choice during the replication. The purpose of this exercise is to test whether significant measurement errors in the dependent variable exist in the original models.

Addressing Potential Omitted Variable Biases

Economic well-being is only one of several determinants of attitudes toward inequality. To evaluate potential omitted variable bias problems, I include several potentially relevant variables in the original models. First, I include both subjective and objective measures of economic well-being in the same model; both could affect an individual's attitude at the same time. Re-running the models, I find all the estimates of objective measures are consistent with the original results. In particular, the estimates of individual intergenerational mobility are statistically significant at the 0.05 level with or without county effects. The estimates of household intergenerational mobility all have the expected signs and they are statistically significant at the 0.1 level. Meanwhile, the estimates of subjective measures are also close to the results reported previously; that is, individual perception of change in economic well-being has little effect, and the perception of household mobility has an effect that is statistically significant.

Second, I investigate potential bias resulting from omitting migration experience. Internal migration has increased tremendously in China (Chan 2012; Solinger 1999), and it is a double-edged sword on views about inequality. On the one hand, the pattern of China's income inequality could be largely summed up by regional differences as well as by the urban–rural divide. People who travel from rural areas to urban areas to seek work will be most likely improve their intergenerational mobility, and have a more encouraging prospect for upward mobility, because their parents are mostly peasants. On the other hand, witnessing the well-being of urban lives gives migrants a more vivid, if not shocking, sense of income inequality, especially when many migrants come from very poor rural areas. Meanwhile, those urban residents who have lived in other cities or rural areas in the past will also be capable of making a more realistic assessment of income inequality in China. Thus, I construct a dummy variable to account for the effect of rural–urban migration experience,[16] and include it in the models to see whether any potential omitted variable bias exists as a result of migration

[16] I coded this variable as 1 if any of the following four scenarios applies to a respondent: (1) if a rural Hukou holder lives in an urban area, (2) if an urban Hukou holder lives in a rural area, (3) if a rural Hukou holder has lived in a city in the past, and (4) if an urban Hukou holder has lived in rural areas in the past. Otherwise, I coded this variable as 0.

experience, which may correlate with both dependent and key independent variables in the model. The results show that the estimates of various individual and household mobility measures are consistent with the original results in Table 1.

Conclusion

Rising inequality in China has attracted increasing attention from social scientists and policymakers, and many have attempted to understand its political consequences; yet, the current debate has little empirical grounding with regard to whether changes in Chinese citizens' economic well-being during economic development can mitigate negative views about income inequality. I investigate the effects of changes in economic well-being on attitudes toward inequality by using a 2004 Chinese national public opinion survey. The main finding offers mixed evidence of the conventional wisdom that economic development mitigates negative views on inequality. Specifically, I find no evidence that perceived change in individual economic well-being are negatively correlated with unfavorable views of income inequality, and perceived changes in household well-being have only a weak correlation. Meanwhile, conventional wisdom receives the strongest support in the case of intergenerational mobility in occupation. I find consistent evidence that achieving upward intergenerational mobility is negatively correlated with unfavorable views of inequality in different model specifications. Simulations have shown substantively large marginal effects of upward mobility for both rural and urban residents; that is, achieving the largest possible upward mobility significantly shifts the distribution of the probabilities of having a negative view on inequality.

Is economic development the silver bullet to eliminate or at least to alleviate mass discontent about income inequality in China? This paper suggests that such optimism is likely skating on thin ice, despite the evidence regarding intergenerational mobility. Simulations based on the main empirical model in this paper show that even the largest possible upward intergenerational mobility is very unlikely to reduce the probability of most Chinese citizens' negative views about inequality below 0.5. Specifically, my result suggests that although upward intergenerational mobility reduces negative views on inequality, a majority of Chinese citizens will still have a negative view on inequality at least 68 % of the time. Hence, increasing economic mobility in general is an effective, but not a sufficient, measure to eliminate the backlash against income inequality in China. Consequently, the Chinese government's strategy of using various policies to stimulate the economy without considering redistribution may have little effect on appeasing rising dissatisfaction about income inequality in China.

Future research should focus on how ideas about the fairness behind income inequality, especially inequality of opportunity, affect an individual's attitude toward inequality (Lü 2013). Since 2005, the Chinese Central Government has increased financial resources for primary and secondary education in order to address the problem of unequal educational resources across China, which is a major form of inequality of opportunity in the Chinese society. The long-term economic and political consequences of these government programs remain to be seen, and they warrant additional research in the future.

Acknowledgement I greatly appreciate Ken Scheve, Pierre Landry, Dan Butler, Frances Rosenbluth, Martin Whyte, Lianjiang Li, Karina Cendon Boveda, Yang Bonny Lin, Brian Fried, Valerie Frey, and participants at the Social Science Workshop on Contemporary China at Yale, the 2009 MPSA meeting, and Comparative Political Economy Workshop at Duke University for helpful comments and suggestions at various stages of this paper. Marty Whyte and Pierre Landry generously shared the survey data for the analysis, to which I am deeply grateful. All errors and mistakes remain my own.

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