February 25, 2011
Martin K. Whyte
Professor of Sociology, Harvard University
"Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Committee"
"China's Internal Dilemmas"

Chinese society in the last three decades has been characterized not only by robust and sustained economic growth, but also by a rising tide of social protest activity. Especially in view of recent events in Tunisia and Egypt, it makes sense to ask whether China might face a similar challenge to the dictatorial rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In these prepared remarks I focus mainly on one potential threat to China's political stability: anger about inequality issues. Do Chinese citizens feel that the rising inequalities produced by post-1978 market reforms have made their society so unfair that CCP rule should no longer be tolerated? Based upon more than a decade of research on Chinese opinions on these issues, including three rounds of surveys I directed (in Beijing in 2000, and with national samples in 2004 and again in 2009), my answer to this question is a resounding "no!" Whatever other popular grievances Chinese citizens have--and they are considerable--most accept the more unequal post-socialist order in which they now live as more fair than unfair, and as providing ample chances for the industrious and ambitious to raise their living standards and improve the lot of their families, as Chinese families have done for centuries. I contend that for the most part current patterns of inequality constitute more a source of stability rather than instability for the regime.

Myth and Reality of Chinese Popular Attitudes Regarding Current Inequalities

My recent book reporting results of the 2004 China national survey, *Myth of the Social Volcano,*[1] challenges the widespread belief, within China and among many foreign analysts, that citizen anger over rising inequality increasingly threatens CCP rule. What are the basic elements of the social volcano scenario? They start with the accurate observation that income and many other inequalities have increased markedly since China's reforms were launched in 1978. In terms of the Gini coefficient conventionally used to measure income inequality, China went from an estimated Gini of .28 or less as the reforms were launched to .47 in 2007—in other words, inequality of incomes across China has almost doubled in the post-Mao era.[2] This trend, it is argued, is resented by most Chinese, who perceive that the powerful and already rich and connected are monopolizing most of the new opportunities and wealth created by market reforms. In other words, it is assumed that Chinese citizens view current inequalities in terms of rampant distributive injustice. It is also assumed that many Chinese harbor nostalgia for the greater equality that they perceive existed in the socialist era. Another element of the social volcano scenario is an assumption that anger about distributive injustice is most common among groups, and in locales, that have been left behind by China's rising prosperity—for example, among farmers, migrants, the urban unemployed, and residents

[1] Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010.
[2] See chart at the end of this document of Gini trends for China and selected comparison countries. A Gini of 0 indicates everyone has equal incomes; a Gini of 1 (multiplied by 100 in the chart) means total inequality, with one person or family monopolizing all of the income.

of interior provinces. Rising anger about distributive injustice issues is seen as a primary cause of the rising social turbulence and protest activity that have characterized China in recent years.

Except for the initial observation that income gaps have increased in the reform era, all elements of this social volcano scenario are at best oversimplifications, and at worst dead wrong. Let me illustrate my contrarian conclusion through selected findings from our 2004 national survey (the detailed evidence behind the findings cited here can be found in *Myth of the Social Volcano*), with briefer mention of the results of our five year follow-up survey in 2009. The 2004 survey resulted in interviews with a nationally representative sample of 3267 Chinese adults residing in 23 of China's 31 provincial units, respondents who were selected through a procedure called spatial probability sampling[3] (with a response rate of approximately 75%). The 2009 survey followed the same design and sampling frame and resulted in 2967 completed interviews, a response rate of 69%.[4] The availability of prior surveys in other countries on these issues makes it possible to place the views of Chinese citizens in comparative perspective.

How do Chinese citizens perceive the heightened inequalities within which they now live? A substantial majority (72%) of 2004 survey respondents said that national income gaps are excessive (75% in 2009). While this is modestly higher than the percentage of Americans who voiced this view in a 1991 survey (65%), it is about the same as the percentage of West Germans, British, and Japanese who felt income gaps were excessive in that same 1991 survey project, and much lower than the share of residents of most other post-socialist societies who think income gaps in their societies are excessive (85-96%, in surveys conducted in Bulgaria, Russia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and the former East Germany between 1995 and 2006). Furthermore, when asked whether the income gaps within their work organization and within their neighborhood are excessive, only about 1/3 said yes, with the most common response being that such local inequalities are about right. Perceptions that national income gaps are too large are common around the world, and Chinese citizens do not stand out as especially angry about such gaps, despite the sharp increase in income inequality in the PRC. And most Chinese do not view the inequalities in their immediate environments as unreasonable.

Perhaps the most striking pattern of responses in our 2004 survey concerns questions about why some people are rich while others are poor, questions developed in the International Social Justice Project (ISJP) surveys carried out in Eastern Europe and selected advanced capitalist countries between 1991 and 2006 which we replicated in our Chinese surveys. These questions present respondents with a list of possible explanations

[3] Spatial probability sampling involves using maps and population density estimates to randomly select sampling sites with probability proportional to population size, and then to interview one randomly selected adult within each household located within a designated perimeter around each sampled physical point.

[4] Both surveys were conducted by an international team of social scientists which included Albert Park, Pierre Landry, Wang Feng, Jieming Chen, Chen Juan, and Chunping Han, with the surveys administered by our PRC colleagues, Shen Mingming, Yang Ming, Yan Jie, and the staff of the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University. Primary funding for the 2004 survey was provided by the Smith Richardson Foundation and for the 2009 survey by the Harvard China Fund and the Smith Richardson Foundation. The funders of the surveys are not responsible for the views offered here.

for why some people are poor and a similar list of reasons why some people are rich and ask them to say, for each listed reason, how relatively important or unimportant it is. The two lists mix together explanations stressing individual merit (e.g. talent and hard work, or their absence) and reasons stressing societal unfairness (e.g. unequal opportunities, dishonesty, unfairness in the economic system). In response to this set of questions, Chinese respondents rate talent, hard work, and education as much more important in explaining poverty versus wealth than various kinds of societal unfairness, and their pattern of responses is strikingly different and more "meritocractic" than found in any ISJP country, whether East European or advanced capitalist. For example, over 61% of Chinese respondents felt lack of ability was an important or very important reason why some people are poor, with the comparable figures from other ISJP countries ranging from 26% in Japan (1991) to 37% in the former West Germany (2006). On the other side of the coin, only 17% of Chinese respondents felt that dishonesty was an important or very important reason why some people are rich, with the comparable figure for other ISJP countries ranging from 28% in Japan to 82% in Bulgaria (1996).

It is apparent that most Chinese we interviewed do not view the current patterns of inequality as stacked against them and preventing them from getting ahead, a view reinforced by how they responded when asked to assess the (dubious) statement, "hard work is always rewarded." Overall, more than 61% of 2004 China respondents (66% in 2009) said they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, whereas the comparable figures from the ISJP surveys ranged from only 3% (Bulgaria again, 1996) to 47% in the former West Germany. How can such relatively favorable and optimistic appraisals be squared with our knowledge that cases of official corruption in China elicit widespread popular condemnation in informal conversations as well as on the Internet?

China's record of sustained economic growth, job creation, and poverty reduction for more than three decades likely discourages Chinese citizens from seeing pursuit of individual and family prosperity as a zero-sum game, in which corrupt officials and business owners profit at the expense of everyone else. Chinese are not unaware of or unconcerned about the unfair routes that have propelled some new Chinese millionaires and billionaires to their current affluence. However, as they look around them in their daily lives and immediate communities, they see ample opportunities and many examples of ordinary people without special connections who have risen from poverty to enjoy much more comfortable and prosperous lives. Indeed, substantial majorities of respondents in both the 2004 (64%) and 2009 surveys (75%) said their families were better off than they had been five years earlier, and these experiences reinforce optimism about the future. Close to 62% of our interviewees in 2004 said they expected their family's standard of living to improve over the coming five years, and in the 2009 survey even more respondents (73%) voiced this expectation. Furthermore, in the 2009 survey more than 82% of our respondents said that on average their neighbors were better off than five years earlier. Even if they are not prospering, most Chinese see others in their immediate environment who are doing so.

In other words, Chinese popular acceptance of current and enlarged inequalities is fostered by widespread perceptions by the people we interviewed that they and many of

their neighbors are better off today than a few years ago and that they can expect things to continue to improve--despite obvious imperfections and unfairness in China's current political economy. One can thus readily understand the obsessive concern China's leaders have with keeping the growth engine going, since by doing so they hope to avoid widespread popular anger about distributive injustice issues. Is there some magical growth target, such as the widely quoted 8%, that must be maintained in order to keep China's distributive injustice social volcano dormant? It is hard to be sure, since China has relatively effectively and rapidly dealt with threats to its growth engine (after the Tiananmen massacre and foreign sanctions in 1989, the Asian financial crisis in 1997, and the global financial crisis in 2008-2010), so the reform era has yet to witness a sustained period of lower or negative economic growth.[5]

Views on distributive justice versus injustice involve not simply perceptions of current patterns of inequality, but preferences for a more fair social order. Do many Chinese citizens harbor nostalgia for the perceived greater equality of the Mao era, and do they think the government should be playing a more active role in fostering equality and redistributing from the rich to the poor? Our surveys contain detailed questions to tap views on preferences for equality and on government efforts to foster a more egalitarian society. In regard to these issues, the dominant attitude of Chinese survey respondents is more a liberal welfare state orientation than a preference for radical redistribution, much less a return to socialism. Only about 1/3 or less of our 2004 survey respondents favored equality as a general principle of distribution, systematic redistribution from the rich to the poor, or placing limits on maximum incomes. However, substantial majorities of Chinese respondents, ranging from 62% to 81%, expressed support for providing extra help to the disadvantaged and for the government providing minimum income guarantees and jobs for the jobless. In these regards Chinese citizens voice views that are broadly in the middle of the pack compared to citizens in ISJP surveys in other countries. For example, on the question of whether there should be a maximum income limit imposed by the government, the proportion in favor in China (34%) is similar to Japan (33%) and slightly lower than the proportion in England (38%) and Russia (40%). It is much higher than the figure in the United States (17%) while being much lower than in Hungary (61%) and the former East Germany (59%). There is no evidence in these findings for an especially pronounced desire, much less nostalgia, for greater social equality.[6]

In sum, rather than Chinese society being a social volcano about to explode in anger about distributive injustice issues, it appears from our survey results that most Chinese citizens view current inequalities as relatively fair and as providing ample opportunities for ordinary individuals and families to get ahead. Chinese on most counts view the current system as more fair than do their counterparts in other post-socialist countries in

[5] When in 2008 we planned and applied for funding to conduct our follow-up survey in 2009, we expected China to suffer a sustained dip in economic growth as a result of the global financial crisis due to the importance to China of export-oriented manufacturing. However, the impact on China was less severe and prolonged than we anticipated.

[6] For more evidence on this specific point, see my paper, "Do Chinese citizens want the government to do more to promote equality?" available at http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/soc/faculty/whyte/Publications/Whyte_Do_Chinese_Citizens_Want_the_Govt_to_do_More.pdf

Eastern Europe. Compared to their counterparts in advanced capitalist countries, they express views that are similar or at times even more favorable. Thus our survey data lead to an ironic conclusion. In China lifelong communist bureaucrats are doing a better job legitimating the ideas, incentives, and differentials of their increasingly capitalistic society than the leaders of more democratic and even well established and wealthy capitalist societies. Although these conclusions are based mainly on results of our 2004 survey, and we are only in the preliminary stages of analyzing the follow-up survey we carried out in 2009, in general there is no sign of any rising anger about distributive injustice issues over this five year time interval. In general terms the 2009 survey respondents gave responses about distributive justice issues that were at least as favorable, and sometimes more so, than their 2004 predecessors. Five years later, the idea that China faces a distributive injustice social volcano remains a myth.

An Exception That Proves the Rule

Do our survey respondents approve of current patterns of inequality in all respects? No, they do not. There are a variety of features of current inequality patterns that respondents disliked. For example, about 56 % disapproved (and only 21% approved) of the practice of individuals in official positions receiving special treatment, while more disapproved than approved of state enterprises laying off employees in the effort to become more efficient. However, the most systematic disapproval of current patterns of inequality concerned China's institutionalized discrimination against its rural citizens and rural migrants. We had to design our own questions about this particular axis of inequality, since countries included in the ISJP surveys lack any counterpart to China's system of discrimination based upon the household registration (*hukou*) of the place where you were born. In response to our questions on this issue, from 58-77% of respondents in our 2004 survey disapproved of denying migrants urban household registrations, access to certain urban jobs, access to urban social benefits, and access to urban public schools for their children. In fact, urbanites were as likely as those with agricultural *hukou* or even more so to express disapproval of these persisting discriminatory practices.[7]

So China's entrenched structures of rural-urban inequality, and institutionalized discrimination based not on merit but on where you were born through the *hukou* system, are widely condemned by our survey respondents. However, it is important to note that this is not an inequality that market reforms have introduced. Instead it is a legacy of Mao's system of socialism, which effectively made Chinese villagers into "socialist serfs," bound to the soil. One could argue that this is one current inequality that has not been widened by market reforms, since Mao-era controls prevented villagers from becoming migrants and joining the "floating population" in pursuit of better opportunities outside their places of birth. However nasty the discrimination suffered by China's 130 million + migrants today, they have at least escaped the confines of their village and a life of agricultural toil in their quest for better opportunities elsewhere, as Chinese villagers had done for centuries before Mao's socialism closed the doors to rural-urban migration. Chinese analysts and even Chinese leaders have increasingly recognized that

[7] In almost all cases rural migrants living and working even for extended periods in cities retain their status as holders of agricultural and outsider *hukou*.

discrimination based upon the *hukou* system is an anachronistic and unjust legacy of the socialist era, but they have not yet found a way to dismantle this system without courting the social instability that they fear.[8]

Even if Chinese accept most other features of current inequality patterns, does this condemnation of institutionalized rural-urban inequality and the social injustice it generates constitute a threat to China's political stability? Will China's villagers and urban migrants rise up to collectively challenge a system that permits such unfairness to persist? On this question again my response is negative. Everything we know about inequality and feelings of injustice in societies around the world indicates that feelings of unfairness are not generated automatically by objective inequalities, but are the product of subjective evaluations of fairness and unfairness. And those subjective evaluations involve relative expectations and comparative reference groups. In America as much as in China, if individuals feel that they are being deprived of opportunities and benefits that are being unfairly enjoyed by less deserving members of their reference groups, they are likely to be incensed. I may covet the nicer office down the hall of a colleague, but I don't get very angry about the outrageous wealth being accumulated by Bill Gates, Bruce Springsteen, or Tom Brady. China's urban migrants, who bear the brunt of rampant discrimination rooted in the *hukou* system, for the most part compare themselves with other migrants and with relatives and neighbors back in the village, and not with holders of urban *hukou*. And in our surveys it is striking that migrants, and even farmers, report more improvements in their families' standards of living compared to five years earlier than urban residents, and similarly greater optimism about continued income gains in the future. So in spite of the pervasive discrimination that they experience, China's urban migrants and villagers remain fairly optimistic about their lives and future prospects, sentiments not likely to foster major challenges to the regime.

Social Contours of Distributive Injustice Feelings

Even if most Chinese are not particularly angry about current and rising inequalities, are there some pockets of concentrated anger about these issues? The social volcano scenario summarized earlier assumes that relative "losers" in the reform era are most likely to have strong feelings of distributive injustice. However, our survey results indicate that this assumption is also incorrect. Several patterns emerge when we look for variations in distributive injustice feelings.[9] There is no social group or geographic locale in which we find systematically more negative feelings regarding distributive justice issues across the board. However, there are nonetheless some tendencies for the attitudes of particular groups to differ from others across several inequality domains. These patterns do not coincide with the expectation that "losers" are angry while "winners" accept the status quo. The most consistent pattern in our 2004 survey results is the most unexpected. Across several measures, Chinese farmers (who remain at the

[8] For further analysis of this issue, see the conference volume I edited, *One Country, Two Societies: Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.
[9] See also my article (with Chunping Han), "Social Contours of Distributive Injustice Feelings in Contemporary China," in D. Davis and F. Wang, eds., *Creating Wealth and Poverty in Post-Socialist China*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

bottom of any plausible occupational status hierarchy) tend to have more favorable attitudes, and less desire for the government to intervene to promote greater equality, than any urban social group. Within urban areas it is particularly the well-educated (seen by most as reform-era "winners" rather than "losers") who have somewhat more critical attitudes toward current inequalities and greater desires for government redistribution than their less-educated peers. There is also some tendency for the middle-aged, in contrast with both youths and the elderly, to have more critical attitudes on these issues. Most other objective background characteristics, such as family income, ethnicity, and CCP membership, are not good predictors of respondent attitudes on inequality issues. We do find, however, that subjective measures are better predictors. Respondents who say that their families are doing better than they were five years earlier and better than their neighbors tend to have favorable opinions about current inequalities, while those who have been experiencing financial difficulty or mistreatment by local officials tend to have more critical opinions.

I do not have time here to try to explain these complex findings, but in general they point to several clear conclusions. First, it is dangerous and misleading to try to guess people's attitudes from their objective status characteristics, since in China (unlike the patterns found in most other societies), some low status groups are more satisfied with current inequalities than the groups that have derived more benefit from market reforms. Second, our findings suggest that the patterns of inequality in the prior socialist era are not viewed with nostalgia by most Chinese, and for some groups (particularly China's villagers, still the majority of the population) market reforms with their associated increased inequalities may be seen as tantamount to "liberation" from the distributive injustices of Mao-era socialism. A third and more general point is that our results remind us that the terms "inequality" and "inequity" are not synonymous. What matters in terms of popular feelings of distributive justice or injustice are perceptions of inequity, not objective inequality. If income gaps widen but most people feel that the widened gaps are fair (as appears to be the case in our surveys), then feelings of inequity and injustice will not be generated. Contrary to some public statements in China, there is no Gini coefficient "danger line" above which further widening of income gaps inevitably produces political turbulence.

Distributive Injustice and Procedural Injustice?

Do our findings suggest that most Chinese citizens feel the social order in which they now live is fair in all respects? If they are so satisfied with the status quo, how can we explain the rising tide of social protests that have erupted in recent years? My answer to these questions turns on the fact that our survey work in China has been focused narrowly on distributive injustice issues, and not on social justice and injustice in other realms. Justice theorists tell us that there are distinct domains that can affect citizen attitudes, and this literature makes a basic distinction between distributive justice and procedural justice concerns. Procedural justice refers to things such as how much control people feel they have over their own lives and over the decision-makers who affect them, whether they feel vulnerable to arbitrary abuses of power, and whether they perceive that they have effective recourse when their rights have been violated by individuals in authority. In the

growing body of research on social protest activity in China in recent years, it seems to me that almost always the sparks that set off popular anger and public protests are abuses of power and other procedural injustice issues, rather than distributive injustice complaints. Of course, drawing a clear line between these two types of social injustice can be difficult, since usually protestors are not only less powerful but also poorer than the targets of their anger. However, by my reading protest targets tend to be local officials, employers, and other powerful figures, rather than individuals who are simply very rich. The fact that our survey indicates that most individuals accept current patterns of inequality does not tell us whether they feel that they are being treated fairly by the powers that be. But when we asked 2004 respondents whether they or any member of their family had received unfair treatment by local officials in the previous three years, a striking 27% responded affirmatively. Although we lack comparable figures from surveys in other societies, this finding suggests that such official mistreatment is a surprisingly common occurrence. We may hazard a generalization that many Chinese feel they now live in a society characterized by distributive justice but fairly widespread procedural injustice.

Using surveys to systematically explore procedural justice issues, especially for a foreign researcher, is much more difficult and sensitive than inquiring about distributive injustice issues.[10] Since we don't have systematic data on procedural justice attitudes, experiences, and grievances, it is hard to know how serious these issues are and whether they are growing over time. However, if China's political stability faces threats in coming years due to popular anger about injustice incidents, the anger thus generated is likely to focus mainly on the arbitrary and arrogant behavior of those in power and not on those who have risen to previously unimaginable wealth.

Conclusion: Some Breathing Space and Some Reality to "Social Harmony"?

If many Chinese citizens feel that they are living in a society with inequality patterns that are relatively fair, but at the same time in a society that is rife with abuses of power and unfair treatment by authority figures, does that mean that my chosen topic for today, Chinese popular attitudes toward distributive justice issues, is irrelevant to whether China might become politically unstable? In this instance my response is "not necessarily," and I say that for two main reasons.

First, even if our survey-based assessment that most Chinese approve of current inequalities does not directly tell us anything about how those same citizens feel about other social justice issues, our findings do suggest they may have sufficient tolerance of continued CCP rule to offset and temper anger stemming from procedural injustices (or for that matter from other hot-button issues, such as rising inflation or international

[10] When we began our research on popular attitudes about rising inequality, we were often told that distributive justice issues were too politically sensitive to the authorities in China to make systematic survey research possible on the topic, and indeed no such systematic surveys had been carried out in China prior to ours. Our 2000 survey in Beijing was a pilot effort designed in large part in order to test this claim and to convince potential funders of a China national survey that a distributive justice survey was feasible under Chinese political constraints.

threats to China's national pride). In other words, the relative gratitude and optimism that average Chinese citizens display about their ability to get ahead and improve the lives of their families are likely lead to a degree of satisfaction with the status quo and a reluctance to mount challenges to the system that will continue to provide the CCP with some "breathing room," making a "social volcano" less likely. CCP leaders have also proved very adept at taking credit for wise guidance of the economy and the improved living standards of ordinary Chinese citizens, while being perhaps even more obsessed with deflecting blame for procedural abuses onto local officials and bosses rather than on the system itself (and its top leaders). As a result, China displays a "trust differential" that is common in many authoritarian regimes (although not in Tunisia and Egypt recently). Many citizens get angry at arbitrary and unfair actions of local authorities while having more faith in the central leadership, to whom they direct complaints and appeals in the hope that "grandpa" Wen Jiaobao or other top leaders will intervene and set things right. Whatever the indignities and abuses they experience in their daily lives, the acceptance and optimism associated in the popular imagination with the current combination of robust growth and market-based inequalities likely reduce the likelihood that Chinese citizens in large numbers will view the current system overall as unfair and corrupt and its top leaders as indifferent or inept.

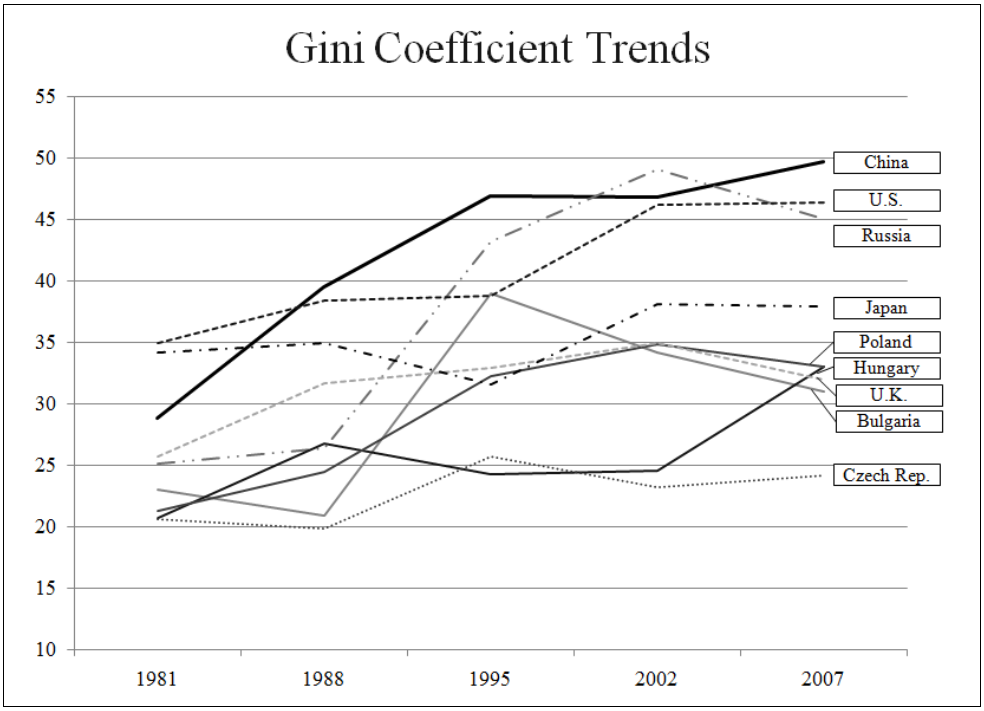
A second factor that makes anger about procedural justice issues unlikely to produce fundamental challenges to CCP rule is that the current social order is not static, and that many Chinese see recent changes that seem designed to make CCP leader Hu Jintao's "harmonious society" more than simply a public relations slogan. However much Chinese may joke about this slogan (with references to "river crabs," a homophone in Chinese for "harmonious"—*hexie*), some fairly dramatic changes have been taking place at the grass roots over the past decade. It may well be the case that CCP leaders have taken these measures only out of an exaggerated fear that growing inequalities may provoke mass protest incidents that could threaten their rule. Whatever the case, our surveys contain indicators of new efforts to alleviate poverty and give better lives to the poor, especially in rural areas, reforms of the sort that our survey questions indicate most Chinese would welcome. For example, in the 1990s, many localities in rural China experienced protest activities and conflicts with local leaders over the rising burden of the extra local taxes and fees they had to pay.[11] In response to this turbulence, the national leadership implemented tough new regulations and financial reforms designed to limit such excess local payments. In our 2004 survey we asked respondents what had happened to the local taxes and fees that they paid, and fully 70% told us that such fees had gone down compared to three years earlier, a marked and presumably appreciated change. In more recent times, central authorities have implemented other measures with the same intent, such as eliminating the grain tax paid by farmers and tuition fees for compulsory schooling (grades 1-9).

Perhaps the most dramatic change our surveys document is the effort to rebuild China's medical insurance safety net. In the late Mao era something like 90% of the population was covered by at least rudimentary medical insurance plans, but in the market reform

[11] See Thomas Bernstein and Xiaobo Lu, *Taxation without Representation in Contemporary Rural China*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

era most medical care shifted to a pay-as-you-go basis, with about 90% of the population having no such coverage in the 1990s. In the first decade of the new millennium vigorous efforts were launched to revive and expand medical insurance coverage, particularly through a new network of village cooperative medical insurance plans. The second chart appended to this statement shows the dramatic change that occurred in insurance coverage in the five years between our two national surveys. In 2004 still only about 29% of our respondents overall had public medical insurance coverage, and these were overwhelmingly urban residents. By 2009 about 82% of all respondents had such insurance coverage overall, and villagers were actually more likely than urban residents (90% compared to 75%) to be covered (although, to be sure, the extent of coverage for medical costs is generally lower in rural than in urban plans). Moves are also underway in other realms, such as extending a system of minimum livelihood payments for the very poor (the *dibao* system) from urban to rural areas and to provide modest payments to elderly villagers who do not have a grown child (usually a son) to support them. While the sums involved in these eliminated fees and new welfare benefits may be modest, they reinforce a message that CCP leaders are only too anxious to convey—that the order of the day is no longer economic growth at top speed without regard for the human costs and the people left behind. Rather, the CCP wants their citizens to be persuaded that their leaders care about the welfare of the poor and are taking important new steps to spread the wealth and promote more equitable growth. Even though control over communications and the media is much looser today that it was in the Mao era, the CCP still has much more ability than the leaders in most societies to forcefully convey their message that official benevolence is constantly expanding opportunities for ordinary Chinese to improve their lives. The positive sentiments fostered by these recent changes (and the prominence given to them in the official media) likely augment the "breathing room" the CCP constantly seeks.

To conclude, our survey data indicate that most Chinese are not particularly angry about current patterns of inequality, don't bear extreme resentment toward the very rich, and don't want to return to the supposedly more equal social order of Mao's socialism. Instead most feel that current patterns are more fair than unfair, and some of China's most disadvantaged citizens (particularly farmers) voice such acceptance more than others. Whatever their complaints on other fronts, particularly regarding the procedural injustices that remain all too common, the substantial acceptance and optimism generated by China's continued economic growth, rising but more unequal incomes, and recent anti-poverty measures promote stability rather than instability in China's political system.



Sources: China: 1981, World Bank; other years, China Household Income Project
Other countries: Available sources (contact author)

- Public health insurance coverage (%)

	2004	2009
Rural	15.4	89.6
Urban	50.8	75.2
Rural Migrants	9.2	56.1
Total	29.0	82.4
N	3250	2878