Critical Issues Confronting China:
Revisiting China’s Social Volcano:
Attitudes toward Inequality and Political Trust
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Rising economic inequality has become a global issue, as grassroots discontent manifests itself in protests across the globe, from the 2011 “Occupy Wall Street” movement to the 2018 “Yellow Jacket” demonstrations in France. The 2013 best-selling book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* by French economist Thomas Piketty is a focal point that brought unprecedented attention to the issue of widening wealth and income inequality.

China is no exception to this global trend. Utilizing three sets of surveys carried out in 2004, 2009, and 2014 respectively, as well as her own extensive field work, Ya-Wen Lei, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Harvard University, explained Chinese people’s attitudes toward inequality, analyzed attitudinal changes over time, and examined the relationship between such attitudes and political trust.

China’s GINI index, a standard measure of income inequality, indicates that China is more unequal than many other developing and developed countries. A more disaggregated study of income distribution and wealth distribution by three segments of the population—top 10 percent, middle 40 percent, and bottom 50 percent—reveals that China’s inequality is much higher than France’s and is fast approaching the level of the U.S.

Objective measures are one thing; people’s perceptions may be another. How do the Chinese people feel about this rising inequality? Lei deployed Martin K. Whyte’s 2010 book, entitled *Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China*, as a take-off point to establish her own conclusions. Whyte’s judgment as of 2010 was that a social volcano smoldering underneath China’s rising inequality was merely a myth. Sociological literature explains Chinese people’s acceptance of inequality based on two reasons. First, China had not only a long-established cultural norm of meritocracy, but also an effective selection system—from its ancient imperial examination system to its contemporary *gaokao* (college entrance exam) system—that reinforced people’s belief in meritocracy-based social mobility. Second, as a result of the general and consistent improvement in people’s standards of living since China’s economic reforms took effect in the early 1980s, the Chinese had become more optimistic about the future and saw more opportunities for upward social mobility rather than deprivation and injustice.
However, the data since 2009 signal a shift in Chinese attitudes toward inequality, hence Lei’s revisiting the issue of “social volcano” in China. Lei’s analysis shows that in the last decade the Chinese increasingly perceive economic success more due to “structural reasons.” These structural reasons refer to factors outside of the individual’s control, such as, residence location—rural vs. urban area—and parents’ education levels and jobs. Institutions and procedures are more likely viewed as barriers for them to overcome in their effort to move up the social ladder. Hukou, one’s residence by birth, is one such institutionalized barrier which significantly shapes the distribution of resources across geographic areas in China.

Thus, where you were born and who your parents are matter a great deal as to where you will end up on the social ladder. While a large swath of the population is disadvantaged by a variety of social and institutional barriers, the political and economic elites enjoy their privileged lives. Therefore, many Chinese no longer view their future as promising as before since it is determined more by these circumstantial factors than by their individual efforts.

Over the last decade, sky-rocketing house prices in major cities and the overall inflation level have reduced millions of migrant workers’ lives to penury. This privation gave rise to a workers’ rights movement and the emergence of new leftist intellectuals, even a revival of Marxists. More and more people question the inconsistency of the rapidly rising inequality with the country’s socialist principles. A list of words censored in the ever-expanding Chinese social media includes “social mobility,” among many other topics involving social justice, as a highly sensitive and contentious issue.

Social discontent with inequality is markedly rising not only for millions of migrant workers, but also across the board in all social strata. About 75 percent of people surveyed think that the current economic inequality is “large” or “too large.” Why have so many middle-class Chinese become concerned with inequality? Lei attributed this joining of hands across the income spectrum to the Chinese visceral concern care for the wellbeing of their children and grandchildren, whose equal rights to education matter to them much more than their own grievances against economic exploitation.

Recognizing that this change of perception and attitude toward inequality from a decade ago and the Chinese belief in meritocracy are not mutually exclusive, Lei inferred that the Chinese deep-seeded social norm of pursuing meritocracy could have led to an underestimation of inequality and an over-estimation of people’s tolerance of inequality. Now, more than 41 percent of the Chinese believe that such considerable inequality has violated China’s socialist principles and diverged from its socialist roots.

This, according to Lei, leads to a direct questioning of the legitimacy of the government and intensifies people’s distrust of the government, not only at the local county level, but also at the provincial and central levels, as demonstrated by the data. Diminishing social mobility also implies a more stratified and ossified society as a result. During the question and answer session, Lei clarified that she was not predicting that a social volcano was bound to happen. She recognized that the Chinese government has been taking steps to rectify some of the unfairness
inherent in the system, such as, a significant expansion of the healthcare system and other social safety measures to cover rural areas and laid-off workers. However, Lei thinks some of the state’s policies might counteract its efforts to address inequality, such as, the state’s efforts to upgrade China’s economy.