

Martin King Whyte: *Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China*

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China's gap between the rich and the poor is increasing. Between the 1980s and the early 2000s China went from modest to roughly medium levels of income inequality (Whyte 2010, p. 2). In Political Science, unequal distribution of wealth within a society has been found to be closely linked to the stability of authoritarian regimes, though researchers disagree with respect to the specific nature of this relationship (Boix 2003, Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). With medium levels of income inequality, Chinese leaders are wise to worry about social stability. Or so Political Scientists may argue.

In "Myth of the Social Volcano," Martin Whyte shows that rising income inequality per se may not lead to outrage or popular resentment among the population. On the basis of a national survey conducted in 2004 using random spatial probability sampling (Landry and Shen 2005), he carefully examines how Chinese citizens have adapted to the fundamental changes of moving from a socialist to a market economy and how they view the new social order that has evolved as part of this transformation. The first part of the book focuses on people's evaluations of patterns of inequalities in their society; the second half of the book explores differences among geographical regions and social groups, including migrants, SOE workers, and farmers, to name just a few examples.

Surprisingly, Whyte detects a fair amount of acceptance, rather than anger, about inequalities. Respondents believed that overall patterns of inequality in Chinese society were fair enough to enable individuals to advance based on hard work, talent, and education rather than, for example, personal connections (47). Although most people agreed that the gap between the rich and the poor was larger than it should be (43), there was little support for socialist redistributive policies, such as systematic redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor (51). Instead, most people supported

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affirmative action measures to reduce inequality, such as guaranteeing jobs and minimum income levels to the poor (51).

These results contradict common notions that most Chinese, and particularly the losers of the reforms, are angry about inequality patterns, view the current social order as unjust, and prefer the distribution principles and practices of the Mao era over those associated with the market. By contrast, most people believed that they could advance within society; only a minority was upset about certain features of current inequalities, such as discrimination against urban migrants (55–59). These minority beliefs were not concentrated amongst certain social groups or the disadvantaged.

The image of an ideal Chinese society that emerges from the rich empirical data is one in which equal opportunities are guaranteed to allow everyone to compete within the market. When reality is not perceived to sufficiently conform to this ideal, such as when “the rules of the inequality game” are stacked against certain societal groups or if benefits are mostly monopolized by the rich and powerful, popular resentment is likely to arise, according to Whyte (183).

This argument provides a new take on the relationship between socio-economic inequality and regime stability. Whyte makes a convincing case that inequality of opportunity may be more destabilizing for China (and possibly other authoritarian regimes) than rising income gaps. It is not surprising then that the original post on *boxun.com* that gave rise to the 2011 silent “Jasmine rallies” in several Chinese cities demanded fairness, among other things.

One broader question arising from this book is how to explain the contradictory assessments of China’s regime stability depending on whether regime stability is studied exploring aggregate levels of political attitudes among randomly drawn samples or qualitative studies of protest activities. Whyte’s findings reflect a more general tendency of public opinion surveys to reveal high levels of political support in China, while the rising number of protests in recent years and qualitative studies of these protests often lead to the opposite conclusion.

These differences may be explained once we acknowledge that protesters turn to political action in part because they care deeply and feel intensely about an issue, such as social injustice (Fiorina 2002, Kinder 2006). Even if only a minority of citizens belongs to such “issue publics” (Converse 1964), their attitudes may still have implications for regime stability. Future research could distinguish more clearly between issue publics, political activists, and the general population to help explain implications of political attitudes for regime stability.

Based on representative and high quality survey data, this study is a great example of how research on China can contribute to our understanding of the country and also the broader discipline. Readers interested in political economy, regime stability, and state-society relations may particularly enjoy reading this book.

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