

The current situation of social inequality in China*

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on studying and analyzing the issue of inequality in China across various dimensions, including society, education, income, employment, access to public health services, technology, economy, and politics. It highlights the causes of inequality, such as the unbalanced economic development between urban and rural areas, disparities in education and income, and challenges arising from policies like the One-Child Policy and the household registration system (Hukou). The article also discusses the Chinese government's efforts to reduce inequality through economic and social policy reforms, particularly the 14th Five-Year Plan and the "Common Prosperity" policy, which emphasize income redistribution, infrastructure development, and improving the quality of life for rural populations. The analysis reveals that despite China's tremendous economic success over the past decades, inequality remains a significant issue that impacts the stability and sustainability of Chinese society in the long term. The author suggests that a development approach focusing on quality over quantity, along with establishing balanced support systems between urban and rural areas, could help reduce inequality and foster social stability in the future.

Keywords: Inequality; China's 14th Five-Year Plan; Common Prosperity; Urban Area

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Introduction

In the Conference Proceedings of the Royal Institute of Public Administration 2018, inequality is characterized as disparities and injustices among individuals, societies, or nations, encompassing economic, social, and political dimensions. This concept also includes inequitable access to fundamental resources such as education, healthcare, nutrition, and opportunities for political participation. The Global Inequality Report 2021 (Piketty, 2022) highlights that the wealthiest 10% of individuals collectively earn over 52% of global income, while the poorest 2.5 billion people account for only 8.5%. These disparities extend beyond income to include disparities in asset ownership, gender inequality, and vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. Contributing factors include race, age, gender, societal structures, and unequal access to opportunities, all of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, even in highly developed nations.

China, despite its significant advancements in science and its position as the world's second-largest economy, has not been immune to the rising trend of inequality. The transition towards a market-oriented economy has contributed to a widening wealth gap, as detailed in the Global Wealth Report 2021 (Credit Suisse, 2022). This growing disparity is driven by various factors, including pronounced income inequalities between urban and rural areas, disparities in educational access and quality, economic stagnation, and the challenges posed by an aging population. These factors have intensified the depth and complexity of inequality in China, highlighting the multifaceted challenges inherent in addressing such disparities within a rapidly modernizing and evolving economy.

Inequality situation in China

China, once regarded as an impoverished nation, has long prioritized poverty alleviation as a central policy objective. However, significant progress remained elusive during the early communist era. It was under Deng Xiaoping's leadership that China shifted towards a market-oriented economy, implementing economic reforms and free trade policies designed to attract foreign investment and drive technological advancements. This approach, grounded in the "Trickle-Down Effect," sought to stimulate economic growth by empowering entrepreneurs and fostering wealth creation. While this strategy resulted in substantial economic

progress in eastern cities such as Shanghai and Canton, smaller cities like Xian and Kunming experienced comparatively limited development. Consequently, the wealth gap widened, with capitalists amassing significant wealth, while laborers faced increasing workloads and declining real incomes.

Despite continuous efforts to reform the economic structure, adjust financial systems, and address domestic inequality, income disparities between urban and rural populations persist. By 2020, urban residents earned approximately 2.5 times more than their rural counterparts. Furthermore, according to the Global Wealth Report 2021 by the Credit Suisse Research Institute, the wealthiest segment of China's population increased its share of the nation's wealth from 20.9% in 2000 to 30.6% in 2020, underscoring the persistent and growing economic inequality within the country.

To provide an overview of the overall inequality situation in China, it can be categorized into 4 distinct sections, as outlined below:

1. Population

China, once recognized as the world's most populous nation, has experienced a significant decline in its population. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2022), the population decreased by 850,000 in 2022, leaving a total of 1.41175 billion individuals. This decline represents the most substantial population reduction in recent decades. Concurrently, the birth rate in 2022 fell to 6.77 per 1,000 people, down from 7.52 per 1,000 in 2021, a rate already considered notably low. The death rate, however, increased from 7.18 per 1,000 in 2021 to 7.37 per 1,000 in 2022. In addition to these demographic changes, China is experiencing a rapid aging of its population. In 2020, 17.8% of the population was classified as elderly, and this figure is projected to rise to 26.2% by 2030, significantly reducing the proportion of the working-age population. By 2022, individuals aged 15-59 accounted for 63.35% of the total population, a decline of 6.79% from 2010.

The declining birth rate can be attributed to several interconnected factors, including shifts in societal structures, the long-term effects of the one-child policy, a gender imbalance favoring men, and a slowing economy. The one-child policy, implemented historically to curb population growth, placed considerable pressure on working-age individuals to care for elderly parents, resulting in a reduced inclination among citizens to marry or have children. Although the policy

has since been relaxed to allow families to have up to three children, this change has not led to a significant increase in birth rates.

Economic and social inequalities, particularly between urban and rural areas, have further exacerbated the population challenges. Rural residents, especially women, often migrate to urban centers in search of employment and better living conditions, leaving a surplus of single men in rural regions. This imbalance has become a societal concern, prompting initiatives such as the “Operation Bed Warming” campaign in Xiangtan District, Hunan Province, to address the difficulty rural men face in finding marriage partners (Phoebe Zhang, 2021). Conversely, urban men frequently prefer marrying women already residing in urban areas, a preference influenced by the Hukou (户口) system, a household registration policy. This system categorizes individuals as either agricultural or non-agricultural residents based on their place of origin and restricts access to public welfare and services outside the area of registration. Consequently, the Hukou system imposes significant barriers to internal migration, further limiting opportunities for rural residents to relocate to urban centers and contributing to the broader challenges of population dynamics in China.

2. Education

China’s system of compulsory education encompasses two levels—Primary School and Lower Secondary School—spanning a total of nine years, with the government fully subsidizing tuition fees. However, high school education falls outside the scope of compulsory education. The Chinese government has prioritized equitable access to quality education as a fundamental objective of its systemic reforms. Despite these concerted efforts, educational inequality remains deeply entrenched. As noted by Chen and Xiang (Zhang et al., 2022), addressing educational inequality presents significant and enduring challenges that are unlikely to be fully mitigated. This inequality manifests across various dimensions, including urban-rural divides, regional disparities, institutional inefficiencies, teacher qualifications, family economic conditions, and unequal access to educational resources. Urban students, for instance, enjoy greater opportunities for higher-quality education and are more likely to pursue tertiary education compared to their rural counterparts, underscoring the pronounced urban-rural divide. Additionally, regional inequalities persist, with central and western regions significantly underperforming

relative to the more developed eastern areas in terms of educational quality and accessibility.

Gender disparities further compound these challenges, particularly in rural areas where women encounter greater obstacles in accessing secondary education compared to men. These gender-based inequalities not only persist but appear to be worsening over time. Socio-economic status also exerts a profound influence, as students from lower-income or minority backgrounds face systemic disadvantages in accessing quality education. Economic and social factors critically shape educational progression, particularly at the foundational level, thereby reinforcing disparities across socio-economic groups.

Furthermore, the socio-economic standing of families plays a pivotal role in shaping educational opportunities. Financial and social conditions directly affect the quality and accessibility of education available to students, significantly influencing their long-term career prospects and social mobility. Students from disadvantaged families, particularly those in labor-intensive or low-income sectors, are disproportionately affected by these systemic inequities, which become increasingly pronounced as they progress through higher levels of education. These multifaceted challenges underscore the complexity of addressing educational inequality in China. They highlight the urgent need for sustained, targeted interventions aimed at dismantling deeply rooted systemic disparities and fostering a more equitable educational framework that aligns with the nation's broader developmental objectives.

3. Incomes

Before 1978, China was regarded as one of the world's poorest nations. However, the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping that year marked a transformative period, catalyzing sustained economic growth. In 1978, China's GDP stood at 17.64 billion Yuan, but by 2022, this figure had increased to 114.4 trillion Yuan (Bangkok Bank, 2020), reflecting an 8.1% growth from 2020. With one of the highest global growth rates, China is now ranked as the world's second-largest economy. Per capita income has also improved significantly, rising from 963 Yuan in 1978 to 62,130 Yuan in 2022—a 65-fold increase. This remarkable economic expansion has lifted a substantial portion of the population out of poverty, elevating many into the middle class. However, despite impressive GDP growth,

income inequality remains a critical issue. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2021), the average income of Chinese citizens in 2020 was 8,561 Yuan, compared to a cost of living of 5,082 Yuan. This disparity is even more pronounced between urban and rural residents; urban citizens earn 2.5 times more than their rural counterparts, with annual averages of 43,834 Yuan and 17,131 Yuan, respectively. Projections from HSBC Holdings Plc. (Knight Frank, 2021) indicate a doubling in the number of Chinese millionaires and a 50% increase in the middle-class population by 2025. The number of high-net-worth individuals—those possessing assets exceeding 10 million Yuan—is expected to rise from 2 million to 5 million, while the middle-class population is projected to expand from 340 million to 500 million, a 45% increase. Nevertheless, over 600 million Chinese citizens, comprising nearly half of the population and primarily residing in rural areas, earn approximately 1,000 Yuan per month. These individuals continue to face significant challenges related to income inequality, particularly when compared to the wealthier segments of society. This economic dichotomy underscores the complexity of China's development narrative, highlighting the persistent disparities between urban and rural populations and the ongoing challenge of addressing income inequality in the context of rapid economic growth.

4. Occupation

In major urban centers across China, the diversity of occupational opportunities is considerable, and compensation levels are relatively high. Common professions in these cities include engineers, interpreters, account auditors, and customs specialists, among others. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2021), urban residents earn an average annual income of 43,834 Yuan. This figure contrasts sharply with the limited employment opportunities available to rural residents, many of whom are engaged in agricultural activities with monthly earnings often as low as 1,500 Yuan. This significant income disparity has been a key driver of labor migration, with a 2022 survey reporting that 29.562 million rural workers had relocated to major urban centers, earning an average monthly income of approximately 4,615 Yuan.

Despite these migration trends, rural residents and individuals from smaller cities face significant challenges in competing with urban locals for employment opportunities. A major barrier arises from the Hukou system, China's household

registration policy, which restricts access to certain public benefits, such as affordable housing, to individuals registered within specific localities. Originally designed to discourage migration away from agriculture and rural areas, this policy continues to hinder rural residents from fully integrating into urban labor markets. Many private and government entities require local Hukou registration for job applicants, further exacerbating disparities in access to employment. The Hukou system, while less restrictive than in the past, remains a considerable obstacle for rural residents seeking to relocate to urban areas with more diverse job opportunities and greater economic prospects. Additionally, the high cost of living in urban centers presents a formidable challenge. Housing costs, in particular, are prohibitively expensive, with the average appraisal price in Beijing reaching 65,000 Yuan per square meter. Prospective homeowners face stringent financial requirements, including the need to contribute to social security funds or pay income taxes consistently for five years before becoming eligible to purchase property. Those without local Hukou registration must provide a substantial down payment of 30% of the property price. These disparities in housing affordability, coupled with restrictive labor market policies, significantly influence job opportunities, income levels, and overall quality of life for rural migrants. Although the government has initiated efforts to relax certain policies and reduce social inequality, the systemic barriers imposed by the Hukou system and high urban living costs continue to pose challenges for equitable access to opportunities and resources.

5. Access to public health service

Public healthcare services in China encompass medical facilities and health insurance provisions offered by both private and governmental sectors. Approximately 95% of the population is covered by basic health insurance. However, this insurance typically reimburses only about 50% of general medical expenses, with even lower coverage rates for severe or chronic illnesses. To address these limitations and improve the accessibility and affordability of healthcare, the Chinese government launched the Healthy China 2020 initiative (Kun Zhao, 2012). This campaign seeks to enhance the quality and affordability of public health services, with a policy mandate requiring that basic health insurance cover at least 70% of total medical expenses. A significant disparity exists between urban and rural healthcare services. In major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and

Shenzhen, specialized hospitals, advanced medical facilities, and highly trained professionals are readily available. Nevertheless, health insurance in urban areas often does not fully cover medical costs, necessitating out-of-pocket expenses or the purchase of supplemental insurance. This financial burden is particularly pronounced in these urban centers, where medical expenses are substantially higher than the national average. In rural regions, healthcare services are typically limited to clinics providing basic or “rudimentary care.” These facilities often lack the advanced medical equipment, infrastructure, and qualified medical personnel available in urban areas. Recognizing these disparities, the government has implemented measures to alleviate the financial burden on rural residents by ensuring that health insurance in these areas covers at least 70% of medical expenses. These efforts aim to reduce the cost of living and improve healthcare accessibility for rural populations, addressing a critical aspect of socio-economic inequality in China’s healthcare system.

6. Technology

Technology has become an essential aspect of daily life in China, underpinned by consistent government investment and developmental initiatives that have established the nation as a global leader in innovation. These advancements have been pivotal in driving economic growth, even amidst challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, trade tensions, and a global economic slowdown. In the industrial sector, the integration of robotics and automation has significantly enhanced efficiency, reduced production costs, and bolstered international competitiveness, although it has simultaneously displaced unskilled labor, contributing to widening socio-economic disparities. In the business sphere, technological advancements have streamlined operations by enhancing communication and enabling data-driven decision-making, thus increasing efficiency and profitability. However, automation has disproportionately impacted unskilled workers, exacerbating urban-rural inequalities. Studies highlight that investments in automation have replaced substantial numbers of workers with robotic technologies, necessitating the migration of rural laborers to urban centers in search of employment opportunities. Disparities in technological access between urban and rural areas further intensify inequalities, affecting economic opportunities, education, and healthcare accessibility. In response, the Chinese government has focused on

applying technological advancements in rural regions, particularly within the agricultural sector, to improve productivity, raise incomes, and mitigate socio-economic disparities. These efforts reflect a broader commitment to fostering inclusive growth and addressing inequality through strategic technological development.

7. Economic

China's economic framework is administratively divided into 23 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, 4 centrally administered municipalities, and 2 Special Administrative Regions, alongside numerous districts and cities. While economic governance nominally resides under central authority, local administrations operate with a degree of autonomy within established policy parameters, a decentralized system referred to as "Chinese Federalism."

In 2021, China's GDP reached 114.9 trillion Yuan, increasing to 120 trillion Yuan in 2022. Canton has maintained its position as the nation's leading economic region for 34 consecutive years, recording a GDP of 12.91 trillion Yuan in 2021. Its sustained economic prominence can be attributed to factors such as a diversified industrial base, strategic trade initiatives within the Greater Bay Area, and Shenzhen's emergence as a leading technological hub. Conversely, Guizhou, with a GDP of 1.96 trillion Yuan in 2021, represents the region with the lowest economic output. Nevertheless, targeted government policies and private-sector collaboration have contributed to substantial poverty alleviation and economic development in the region.

Despite these advancements, pronounced economic disparities persist. In 2021, urban residents earned an average annual income of 43,834 Yuan, significantly higher than the 5,398 Yuan earned by rural residents. Additionally, coastal regions, such as Shanghai and Zhejiang, exhibit markedly higher per capita incomes compared to inner regions, where incomes amount to only 60% of those in coastal areas. The Gini coefficient, a statistical measure of inequality, approaches 0.5, underscoring the persistent regional and urban-rural income disparities within the country.

8. Laws and politics

China operates under a "people's democratic dictatorship" (Niyom Ratamrit, 2022), a system grounded in popular sovereignty but centralized under the Communist

Party of China (CPC). This governance model, termed “Centralized Democracy,” emphasizes the majority’s welfare and differs from Western democratic systems. While multiple parties may collaborate, the CPC dominates political processes. Elections involve both direct voting for local representatives and indirect selection of higher-level officials, but candidacy is restricted to nominees approved by government-sanctioned organizations, consolidating political control under the CPC. The centralized system offers efficiency in protecting public interests and implementing policies but faces criticisms, including limited political diversity, suppression of dissent, and risks of corruption. Despite expanded rights compared to the past, citizens’ political participation remains restricted, with significant government control over decision-making. During crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the CPC demonstrated its ability to enforce policies swiftly, exemplified by the “ZERO COVID” strategy. Strict lockdowns and testing measures disrupted daily life, leading to food shortages, limited healthcare access, labor protests, and rising costs. These events underscore the limited political freedoms of Chinese citizens, highlighting the trade-off between governance efficiency and restricted public engagement in political matters.

Current solution to China’s inequality problem

Since 1953, China has implemented a series of Five-Year Development Plans as a strategic framework to guide its policies for economic, social, and overall national development, reflecting the structured nature of its governance system. These plans have played a pivotal role in shaping the country’s rapid growth trajectory. To date, China has successfully completed 13 such plans, with the 14th Five-Year Plan marking a new phase in the nation’s progress. This current plan focuses on transitioning China into a modern socialist nation and achieving the objectives outlined for the second centennial goal. Key components of the 14th Five-Year Plan include: (Ministry of Higher Education, Science Research and Innovation, Science and Technology Department, 2021).

1. Society

The 14th Five-Year Plan for China emphasizes societal development through key initiatives in citizen support, urban development, education, and public health. The plan prioritizes enhancing care for the elderly and newborns, aiming

to increase the proportion of newborns from 1.8 to 4.5 per 1,000 people and considering the removal of restrictions on family size. For the elderly, it seeks to establish coordinated care networks in 500 districts, improve living conditions, and extend basic welfare coverage to 95% of the elderly population. Urban development focuses on reforms to the Civil Registration System, relaxed relocation policies, and housing projects in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai. It also aims to integrate key metropolitan areas, strengthen underdeveloped regions, and expand smaller urban zones while addressing high housing costs through discounts and property tax adjustments. Rural development targets increased agricultural productivity, fostering rural ecosystems, and integrating industries to elevate lower-income populations to the middle class for sustainable growth. In education, the government seeks to raise the average schooling years for working-age individuals to 11.3 years by 2025 and increase higher education enrollment to 60%. Lifelong learning and professional skills development are also promoted to meet modern industry demands. Public health initiatives include increasing the number of doctors to 3.2 per 1,000 people annually, raising life expectancy from 77.3 to 78.3 years, and improving rural healthcare to address regional disparities. These measures aim to reduce inequalities and ensure sustainable societal development.

2. Economy

China's government is transitioning its economic strategy from a focus on rapid GDP growth to prioritizing sustainable and high-quality development. The planned growth rate of 4-6% reflects this shift, with an emphasis on dual circulation to strengthen the domestic economy. This approach aims to enhance purchasing power, improve income levels, and promote equitable income distribution, particularly in smaller counties and rural areas, thereby addressing regional disparities. Significant investments in infrastructure are planned to support the digital economy and reduce reliance on foreign production. Additionally, China aims to foster a circular economy by attracting foreign investment, further advancing its economic sustainability. Zhong Liang, Head of the Research Department at the Bank of China, has stated that China anticipates achieving sustainable and high-quality economic growth over the next five years, noting that the pace of growth will be moderated compared to previous decades. This strategy underscores a deliberate

move toward balanced and inclusive economic development.

3. Technology

China is placing a strategic emphasis on fundamental research to drive continuous advancements in technology, leveraging these developments to enhance the quality of life for its citizens and ensure widespread benefits across the nation. Priority will be given to fostering innovation in critical sectors, such as semiconductor technology, which is vital for the country's long-term technological independence and competitiveness. In addition to technological advancements, the government aims to strengthen the sustainability of domestic energy sources to reduce dependence on petroleum imports. Efforts will also focus on achieving food security, particularly for staple products like pork, which holds significant cultural and economic importance. This strategy seeks to mitigate potential vulnerabilities during trade disputes with major agricultural producers, ensuring stability in essential supply chains and reinforcing national resilience.

4. Laws and politics

The Chinese government is undertaking legal reforms to enhance the efficiency of law enforcement while ensuring alignment with the governance framework of the Communist Party. In addition to the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), which addresses societal inequality, the government has introduced the “Common Prosperity” policy as a strategic initiative to mitigate economic and social disparities. Announced in 2021, this policy designates Zhejiang Province as a demonstration area to promote high-quality development and social advancement, thereby laying the foundation for sustainable and quality-focused economic growth. The “Common Prosperity” initiative encompasses six core missions and 20 measures designed to advance economic, social, cultural, and environmental objectives. These measures emphasize enhancing the quality and efficiency of economic development through innovation, reduced reliance on imported goods, and increased market efficiency. Income distribution reforms aim to expand earning opportunities for both urban and rural populations, elevate rural workers' incomes, and establish reward mechanisms for societal contributions, with the ultimate goal of growing the middle class and reducing wealth disparities. Addressing urban-rural inequalities is a central focus, with efforts to ensure equitable access to high-quality public services, improve living conditions, and develop an interconnected and

sustainable social security system. Cultural and environmental development are also prioritized. The policy seeks to elevate social and cultural norms, diversify cultural lifestyles, and preserve traditional Chinese culture within a contemporary framework. Environmental initiatives aim to promote eco-friendly production practices, enhance resource efficiency, and improve environmental integrity, fostering a sustainable and livable ecosystem. Furthermore, the policy emphasizes creating a socially cohesive environment through digital governance reforms, the establishment of comprehensive legal and regulatory frameworks, and enhanced mechanisms for government oversight. President Xi Jinping has underscored the significance of wealth redistribution as part of the “Common Prosperity” policy, advocating for greater contributions from affluent businesses and high-income individuals to society. Policies are being implemented to increase the middle class, improve the incomes of economically disadvantaged groups, address income inequalities, and eliminate illegal earnings. The “Third Distribution” concept, which encourages voluntary contributions through charitable donations and societal investment alongside state intervention, forms a critical component of this strategy. Collectively, these initiatives aim to foster a more equitable, sustainable, and harmonious society, reflecting the Chinese government’s commitment to balanced development.

Summary of inequality situation in China

China’s strategy for addressing inequality illustrates the intricate challenges of balancing rapid economic growth with equitable societal development. Historical policies, such as the “Trickle-Down Effect,” the one-child policy, and the Hukou system, while instrumental in facilitating modernization and economic progress, have significantly entrenched disparities across regions, social classes, and genders. These policies, combined with regional imbalances, income inequality, and unequal access to essential services, have perpetuated systemic challenges despite the nation’s impressive economic achievements.

In response, the Chinese government has undertaken reforms through the 14th Five-Year Plan and the “Common Prosperity” policy, marking a strategic pivot towards sustainable, inclusive, and quality-driven development. These initiatives aim to reduce income disparities, enhance public services

in rural areas, reform educational systems, and address regional inequalities. The overarching objective is to uplift marginalized communities and establish enduring social stability. Additionally, the government emphasizes wealth redistribution through measures such as tax reforms, charitable contributions, and state interventions, striving to expand the middle class and create opportunities for disadvantaged populations to improve their socioeconomic standing.

Nevertheless, the implementation of these policies presents considerable challenges. Bridging the urban-rural divide, reforming deeply entrenched systems such as the Hukou policy, and mitigating economic inequalities demand collective efforts and innovative solutions. The success of these reforms hinges on the capacity of policymakers to translate strategic visions into actionable programs that deliver measurable benefits across all societal strata. Furthermore, addressing systemic inequality requires fostering a cultural shift that embeds justice, equity, and shared prosperity as foundational societal values. China's efforts to align rapid economic development with social equity offer a compelling model for other nations grappling with similar issues. As a global leader in economic expansion and technological innovation, China's approach to mitigating inequality holds significant implications for global development paradigms. If successful, these initiatives will not only improve the quality of life for millions within China but also establish a global benchmark for fostering equitable and sustainable development. Ultimately, the extent to which these policies succeed will determine whether China can create a future in which all citizens, irrespective of their background or region, can prosper and contribute to a cohesive and just society. Although formidable challenges remain, these efforts possess the potential to redefine China's development trajectory and set a precedent for inclusive growth in the 21st century.

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