UNEQUAL CHINA

The political economy and cultural politics of inequality

Edited by Wanning Sun and Yingjie Guo

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Introduction

Wanning Sun and Yingjie Guo

Economic development and dramatic improvement of living standards in many parts of the People's Republic of China (PRC) during the past three decades of economic reforms have been hailed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and many commentators in the international arena as the most spectacular achievements in the history of humanity. These self-congratulatory voices have been the 'main melody' in the official Chinese media, according to which myriad evidence of the impacts and consequences of reforms are assembled, assessed and interpreted. What belies this narrative of miracle is the often inconvenient fact that three decades of economic reforms have also transformed China from one of the world's most egalitarian societies into one of the most unequal in Asia and the world (Harvey 2005; Lin 2006; Anagnost 2008; Zang 2008; Davis and Wang 2009; Lee and Selden 2009; Whyte 2010).

China's extreme social inequality has resulted in a sizable – and still growing – body of scholarship.[1] As the bulk of it is the work of sociologists, economists and political economists rather than cultural studies specialists or political scientists, it is not surprising that this literature is predominantly concerned with inequalities in welfare and living standards (Nee 1989, 1991, 1996; Rona-Tas 1994; Davis 1995; Bian and Logan 1996; Gerber and Hout 1998; X. Wu 2002; X. Zhou 2004; Gustafsson *et al.* 2008). Nor is it surprising that particular emphasis has been placed on the causes of economic inequality, especially income inequality and the types of individual characteristics that have been rewarded more during China's transition to a market economy than under the socialist redistributive regime (Davis and Wang 2009: 15, 18). For instance, an issue of *China Quarterly* (195, 2008) that devoted a special section to inequality in China contained papers focusing, respectively, on income inequality at the village level, land distribution in rural households and differentiation of earnings of urban workers in various work units.

Another strand of analyses approaches inequality at the spatial–material level, addressing a range of regional dichotomies including most obviously the rural–urban, coastal–inland and east–west polarities (e.g. D. T. Yang 2002; Wan *et al.* 2006; Goh *et al.* 2009). This strand focuses on disparities in regional economic development and regional differences in income

and consumption as a result of uneven development. Similarly, the literature that deals with inequality in relation to China's long-standing *hukou* (household registration) system touches on political causes and political forms of inequality, and has much to say about the denial of fundamental citizenship rights to rural residents. Nevertheless, inequality is in the main embodied in the systematic practices of social inclusion and exclusion, most notably with regard to access to principal public goods such as housing, employment, healthcare, education and social welfare.

For the same reason that the causes of increasing inequality are complex, its manifestations and consequences are also diverse, calling for variegated approaches of understanding. Martin Whyte (2010), for instance, examines the public perceptions, popular reactions and responses to China's rising inequality. Drawing on his and other existing works on inequality, this volume extends the scope and depth of inequality scholarship by focusing on the hitherto two understudied and much more hidden causes of inequality: the role of the state power and the importance of culture. Furthermore, it seeks to uncover a crucial yet largely unexamined connection between the two causes. In other words, we want to argue that systematic practices of inclusion and exclusion can be found in political and cultural as well as economic and other domains, that even economic inequalities are often determined by political and cultural factors. Or to put it in more specific terms, economic and political inequalities and state power which causes inequality cannot be legitimated without systematic and sustained efforts to naturalize inequality.

But in what sense is China an unequal society? This seemingly foolhardy question actually concerns the content and form of inequality; it is one of the most fundamental questions in that one cannot even begin analysing inequality without first answering the question, 'Equality of what?' To a large extent, answers to this substantive question dictate the choice of methodologies for analysing various forms, causes and consequences of inequality. What is more, inequality, like many other issues, is not something that analysts can easily approach with a cool head or an even hand. Quite often, ideologies interweave beliefs about social equality and preferences about it and on that basis hold out goals and ways to reach them (Kriesberg 1979: 11). Such ideologies, beliefs and preferences are likely to affect decisions on which forms of inequality to focus on, where to place the primary focus and which methodologies to employ. It is also commonplace for commentators, governments and citizens to have different ideas about the extent of inequality in society, the consequences of varying degrees of inequality, and explanations for the way it is and for how it might be altered.

To practitioners of cultural and critical media studies, inequality is not only an objectively measurable, quantifiable set of imbalances and unequal distributions of income; equally importantly, it is also a set of imbalances and unequal distributions of political voice. While the former interests economists and sociologists alike, who look for evidence of income

disparity, differential consumption power and unequal access to a wide range of material goods and services, the latter is concerned with the unequal and inequitable distribution of symbolic resources in the production and use of narratives. In other words, inequality in material terms between various social groups – be it housing, education, health care, employment or social security – results from and is further entrenched by social policies that discriminate or prioritize the interests, needs, wants and desires of certain social groups over others. But such policies cannot gain legitimacy unless assumptions that give them justification and ethical rationale have taken the appearance of unquestionable, common-sense knowledge. And to bring to light this legitimacy-producing process, questions need to be asked not only about the unequal distribution of materials goods and services across the social spectrum, but also about the uneven distribution of discursive rights, narrative power and unequal access to the political lingua franca. More importantly, answers must be sought about how and why the unequal distribution of cultural resources is both a result of, and constitutive of, unequal distribution of economic resources. To varying extents, chapters in this volume represent the attempt to address inequality in this sense.

It is almost inevitable for analysts of economic inequality or unequal living standards to place the primary emphasis on such areas as employment, income, housing, social welfare, education and access to other public goods. In addition, due to academic specialization, inequality is ordinarily examined in one or a small number of areas of social activity. It is thus unnecessary and impossible to consider all dimensions of inequality systematically or identify common factors underlying all structures of inequality. As a result, political, cultural and other manifestations, causes and consequences of inequality are neglected or elided, leaving the perspective on the subject remarkably tilted. Despite welcome research efforts in the last few years to move beyond the narrow concern with social welfare and living standards, other dimensions of inequality remain under-examined.

To be sure, economic inequality in the PRC deserves particular attention not just because it is probably the most noticeable, but also because of the speed and extent of the unprecedented polarization of material rewards as a result of over three decades of economic reforms. Still, social inequality does not consist of unequal income or economic inequality alone; there are other varieties that are more directly tied to political, cultural, spatial and other factors – such as inequalities in status, power, civil and political rights, gender, ethnicity, religion and locality. Access to social resources and opportunities as well as material and symbolic rewards differentiated along those and other lines constitute multiple forms of social inequality. A systematic account of social inequality in postsocialist China can only emerge from analyses of a wide range of different forms of inequality.

The methodological questions that analysts of inequality grapple with are related, although they are even more complex than the latter. Where to

via a unique pathway, which argues for the analytical purchase of political economy and cultural politics as innovative methodologies and approaches. Taking various approaches, these chapters present both quantitative and qualitative evidence of inequality, as well as exploring a wide range of social, political, economic and cultural practices that result from, as well as further entrench, inequality. For instance, chapters by Cartier, Sargeson, Smith, Hood and Kelly approach inequality as policy and public discourses; chapters by Solinger, Hawes, Tang and Tomba, Rofel, Hood and Smith consider inequality as media and personal narratives; and Tang and Tomba, Kipnis and Rofel regard inequality as embodied and mediatized practices and speech acts. In various ways and to varying extents, they ask how inequality is explained and justified, what kind of moral and ideological positions are invoked, legitimated and made to look unquestionable in these explanations and justifications, and how various elements – imperial and socialist legacies, contemporary economic liberalism – interact to shape the contours of inequality.

Read in conjunction with one another, these chapters capture the elusive nature of social inequality. Rather than focusing exclusively on facts, figures and statistics, these chapters also deal with the less material, yet nevertheless equally powerful factors, such as values, beliefs, assumptions and 'common sense'. An important conviction driving this book is that analysis – textual, institutional and ethnographic – of how these intangible but powerful factors are formed, perpetuated and take on the appearance of accepted wisdom constitutes data which is just as 'original' and empirically valid as what some social scientists would normally be happy to grant. Similarly, to varying degrees, these chapters offer a timely correction to a somewhat superficial – though quite popular – understanding of what cultural politics is and does. Rather than limit the objects of analysis to media products and popular cultural expressions, authors in the volume – though some more so than others – seek to unravel the discursive positions, narrative forms and strategies, as well as the power relations which underline them. And they do so by looking for evidence in the actions and statements made by government officials, policies, influences on business activities, academic literature, individuals' everyday lives and other less documentable aspects of social life.

The chapters

Driven partly by dissatisfaction with a predominantly economic-centred perspective on social inequality in the literature, Yingjie Guo proposes an alternative framework for understanding and analysing social inequality in postsocialist China. This approach encompasses three key dimensions, namely power, class and status inequalities. For this framework to work effectively, Guo argues that political, economic and cultural domains are better considered as imbricated rather than separated, and that both class

and status be subject to the analysis of power. Guo's chapter demonstrates the centrality of the state in determining power inequality in China, as well as the impact this power inequality has on the formation of class and status.

If Guo stresses the role of state power in shaping inequality, Wanning Sun wants to put culture into inequality studies. Equally interested in identifying the causes and consequences of inequality, Sun puts forward the cultural politics of power as a way of understanding inequality. While she situates her argument in the empirical context of discrimination against rural migrant workers in urban China, the alternative methodologies and analytical approaches to understanding social inequality outlined in her chapter are nevertheless not limited to the rural migrant worker. She shows that the unequal distribution of cultural resources is a result of, as well as being further constitutive of, unequal distribution of economic resources. She argues that in order to unravel these processes, analytical tools must be put in place to uncover the unequal and inequitable distribution of symbolic resources in the production and use of narratives, discourses and language.

Drawing from their respective disciplines and utilizing different methodologies, chapters in the volume embody, to varying extents, the analytical approaches outlined in Guo's and Sun's chapters. David Kelly draws attention to the contrasting and competing interpretations of the issue of social inequality in the Chinese media and intellectual debates in recent years. In particular, he analyses the social justice and social order frameworks, where state power – especially symbolic power – is obviously involved and cultural politics is also at play. These frames of reference may not suffice to encompass ongoing discourses of inequality in China, as Kelly acknowledges, but they form a major part of the emerging meaning systems that purport to explain and justify some forms of inequality in society instead of others, and in so doing they hold out goals and ways to achieve them.

Noting that many of the inequality studies in the Chinese context are space-based, Dorothy Solinger takes a temporal tack in her exploration of the drastic disparities between the socio-economic elites nationwide and the urban poor in Wuhan, Hubei Province, in central China. Through the prism of contrasts between two groups in a wide range of everyday consumption activities including eating, housing, shopping, travelling, education and health care, Solinger offers a searing critique of the linear, celebratory discourse of modernity that limits the future to progress, prosperity and economic growth, and the past to backwardness, poverty and irrelevance. The rhetoric of modernization, argues Solinger, is reductive and simplistic in logic but, more worryingly, it holds real implications for the ways material inequalities in urban China are explained, justified and further shaped.

In contrast, Carolyn Cartier looks at the material conditions of the economy from a spatial perspective. Cartier demonstrates how the problematic

of turning time into space also manifests in the modern/advanced–backward dichotomy that Solinger critiques. In the case of China, she argues that spatial processes produce uneven geographical development with the advance of state capitalism. On the one hand, state representations and social constructions of development legitimize and promote development plans, while leading to or facilitating economies of unevenness through efforts to remediate 'backwardness' on the other.

Tang and Tomba examine the institutional factors contributing to inequality. Rather than reinforce the prevailing view that inequality in China is predominantly caused by the marketization of social relations and means of production in the era of market reform, their chapter asks about differential capacity to withhold the turbulences of economic reform and its consequences between those who are within the system and those who are outside of it. Focusing on the inequality mechanism that operates after one gets into the workplace, Tomba and Tang argue that while reform has brought a realignment of individual attributes, the structure of employment and institutional distinctions still play a crucial role in determining the nature of stratification. Those who stand to benefit from subsidized access to material resources also enjoy a stronger sense of belonging and selfhood. By implication, comparisons reveal a structure of feelings among the members of this privileged group as well as a privilege-generating mechanism that conditions this structure of feelings.

Due to its crucial role in producing social and cultural capital, education is widely seen to be the singular key factor in producing social inequality. Basing his fieldwork in three county schools in Shandong Province, Andrew Kipnis deals with the educational sector. But instead of going down the beaten track of explicating inequities and access, his chapter examines how school experience produces ideas, as well as the reality of (in)equality. Exploring how liminality and communitas are played out in the context of a Chinese school, Kipnis is able to show that, while having their distinct practices of producing inequality, the ways in which modern Chinese schools produce experiences and conceptions of equality are not dissimilar to their counterparts in the rest of the world.

Next to education, law is another key area in which some social groups are 'more equal than others', despite the widely spread mantra that 'everyone is equal before the law'. Colin Hawes argues that despite the much touted shift from the rule of political power to the rule of law, inequality persists in contemporary China in the areas of legal statutes and regulations, court judgments and enforcement of the law, and access to justice and adequate legal representation. This historical overview establishes continuity between the present and the imperial, Republican and pre-reform Communist periods. On the one hand, Hawes's argument – that legal inequality cannot be resolved without political reforms – echoes Yingjie Guo's view about the centrality of the state and its role in shaping class and status inequalities. On the other hand, his extensive analysis of the role of

media (especially the Internet) in effectively contesting, if not overcoming, systemic inequality in law points to some positive outcomes from engaging in the cultural politics of rights and social entitlements.

Like Hawes's chapter, Johanna Hood's analysis of the treatment of HIV/AIDS in China shows us that the media, and the cultural politics of (in)visibility they spawn, are crucial in both creating and sustaining this paradoxical situation. In her chapter Hood has pinpointed a paradoxical situation facing HIV/AIDS sufferers in China. On the one hand, there is the prioritization of HIV and AIDS over other diseases and syndromes for a range of reasons including international research and donation agendas and the CCP's anxiety about social instability and, by implication, its political legitimacy. On the other hand, HIV-positive patients continue to be subject to widespread social, moral and cultural stigmatization and marginalization. In other words, for a wide range of factors – cultural, moral, economic, political and practical – HIV/AIDS has become a disease that is simultaneously 'more and less equal' when compared with other illnesses in China.

Hood's chapter makes it clear that cultural, moral and social prejudices associate certain diseases with shame and stigmatization. Similarly, Lisa Rofel's discussion of the political exclusion of China's gay and lesbian community – notwithstanding their commercial presence – also shows that shame and stigmatization contribute to the experience of unequal life as much as economic factors do. Through an account of the grassroots activism of these groups and a close reading of a gay film text, Rofel outlines the challenges and opportunities around which lesbian and gay activists manoeuvre. She makes it abundantly clear that contestation for equality on the basis of sexual orientation must and does occur both on the practical front of making resources and services available to the disadvantaged, but also in the symbolic realm, in which dominant ways of representing gays and lesbians must be disrupted and interrogated. Reading Hood's and Rofel's chapters in conjunction, we see a difference in the situations facing two morally disenfranchised groups as well as in their respective strategies of activism. According to Rofel, since sexual minorities in China are barred from exercising their civil rights with regard to any viable political agenda, they are freed up for other creative political activities, thereby, by implication, performing in a different politics of visibility from HIV/AIDS groups.

Gender, sexual difference, ethnicity and place, as well as class and social status, all affect an individual's life chances. But these social markers can intersect to double or triple the disadvantage experienced in particular cases. Sally Sargeson's chapter examines the mechanisms through which unequal property relations between men and women are replicated in rural China. After an overview of empirical evidence showing a gender gap in property rights, she examines a host of narratives that provide explanations of this inequality, and finds them wanting. Drawing on Charles Tilly's concepts of 'durable inequality' and opportunity hoarding, Sargeson is able

to show that rural practices such as intra-household property entitlement and the division of labour combine with urban gender inequities in employment, welfare provision and civic engagement to produce 'endurable inequality'. Despite major improvements in women's social position, status and rights in both the socialist and reform eras, gender gaps persist, with rural women – disadvantaged in terms of both gender and place – bearing the brunt of the consequences of inequality.

Graeme Smith continues the theme of property ownership in rural areas, although his focus is on how notions of inequality are played out in processes of land reallocation. The question he raises is why land reallocation has been continuing regardless of government efforts to proscribe the practice over the last two decades; he also queries why this redistribution has not given farmers more secure land use rights. Drawing on fieldwork in Anhui Province from 2004 and 2008 as well as survey research in 2008 and 2009, Smith examines the perceptions and practices of village small group leaders, who are charged with facilitating land reassignments and also with preventing them from happening. His research suggests that a complex debate about 'equality in land' has emerged among farmers in Anhui.

In the final concluding chapter, David Goodman draws out the recurring themes and maps out the connections between various chapters. Also, looking ahead, he reiterates that the problems China faces are not just those of uneven distribution or economic inequality; they are also political and cultural. Given this, Goodman calls for a more fundamental approach to inequality, which requires change both in the domain of policy-making and effective implementation, in order to transform the ways of thinking about and dealing with issues of opportunity and distribution.

Chapters in the volume work polyphonically to reinforce two take-home messages that are often missing from existing studies of inequality. First, inequality is as much an object of intellectual and scholarly debate as it is a socio-economic reality and, as such, inequality as discourse must also be on the agenda as a matter of urgency. Second, the Party-state plays a critically important role in producing inequality, not only through its means of converting political power into class and status, but just as significantly through its resolve (and sometimes a matching capacity) to harness the political, economic and cultural wheels of inequality so that they come together and work in tandem.

An overriding question that concerns us all here is what is unique (and not unique) about the unequal distribution of material and symbolic rewards in Chinese society. Intimately related to unequal distribution is the ways in which it is explained and justified in the society's meaning systems. The uniqueness can be found in the preponderance of certain forms of inequality in public discourses, in the conceptions of inequality, in the dynamics of stratification, and in the attendant justifications or explanations – or the interaction between the two. It is also related to the contestation over, and

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understood without considering the context and basis for action that variations in these dimensions provide. However, it is misleading to insist, as does Kriesberg (1979: 26), that the three dimensions are best considered separately, within the economic domain, the cultural system and the political order. State power, in particular, is rarely confined within the political sphere but pervades others as well.

In China, political structures and processes bear on all dimensions of social inequality, for these create and sustain unequal rights, opportunities, rewards and privileges in all social domains. Furthermore, state power is often implicated in economic assets and social status, and it is even able to trump the latter by increasing or reducing differences in material privileges and prestige, or by rendering these differences significant or insignificant. It is therefore central to the generation of social inequality. This is not to imply that state power has no role to play in addressing inequality; on the contrary, government policies can reduce or eliminate some forms of inequality, and the Chinese government has been keen to deal with glaringly unequal welfare, particularly when it is concerned about the implications for social stability. Nor is this to ignore or discount other sources or forms of inequality. While acknowledging the existence of multiple causes and forms of inequality in the PRC, this chapter aims to draw attention to the critical role of state power in its generation – a subject that has not been addressed even schematically – by focusing on power, class and status inequalities.

Power as a source of economic inequality in the PRC

Power has figured prominently in analyses of inequality in postsocialist China, and some of these, such as studies of inequality in relation to the *hukou* (household registration) system, encompass political dimensions that determine people's access to public goods and create a vast gulf of inequality, including unequal citizenship rights. Excepting this body of literature, power is almost unanimously treated as a source of unequal welfare and living standards or a mechanism of socio-economic stratification, rather than as a form of inequality in its own right or a common factor that determines the nature and extent of all kinds of inequality. The main division among analysts centres on whether power has transferred from the state to the market or whether structures of power of the socialist era have persisted throughout 'reform and opening'.

Victor Nee is the most articulate proponent of the power transfer thesis. His general view is that China's redistributive economy before 1978 allowed the redistributors to maintain overall control over and benefit from the production and allocation of resources, but that they have lost much of that power as a result of economic and political reforms (Nee 1989). Consequently, market capacity, including capital, ownership of productive property, entrepreneurship and business skills, has become a crucial means

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of attaining status in the post-Mao-era market, as did political capital in the Maoist era.

It is indisputable that the shift from command to market economy has empowered those in a position to take advantage of market opportunities and made market capacity an important means of status attainment. The question is whether that constitutes a power transfer and whether market capacity has replaced the state's redistributive power as the most significant determinant of status attainment. Even if the answer is affirmative, more questions recommend themselves. Have other kinds of political power with no less or even more impact on inequality replaced redistributive power? Does upward mobility in the reform era derive from market capacity alone or a combination of such capacity and political capital? Is it possible that power has become a component or determinant of market capacity?

Nee's thesis is disputable on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Theoretically, it appears to be related to Szelényi's postulations of social inequality under state socialism and welfare capitalism. Szelényi (1978) suggests that inequality under welfare capitalism stems primarily from market relations and positions rather than state redistributive mechanisms, which are secondary to the market and typically designed to equalize material rewards to the members of society. By contrast, he observes, the redistributive system of economic integration in state socialist systems dominates economic activities and constitutes the major source of inequality, whereas market-like transactions counteract the inequality resulting from redistribution.

Szelényi's postulations are flawed not least because he draws too sharp a distinction between political systems. A question that remains subject to debate is whether the PRC is 'capitalist', or whether it retains 'socialist' or at least statist elements. Additionally, he precludes the possibility that both the market and the state generate and reduce inequality, or generate some forms of inequality while reducing others. Even more problematic is his radical dichotomization of state and market, which does not hold in the light of the massive state intervention in almost all industrialized countries during the recent financial crisis. When applied to China, his postulations run up against the hybrid nature of China's 'market economy with Chinese characteristics'. As long as it is impossible to establish pure market relations untouched by state power, inequality cannot be attributed to the former or the latter. If one follows Szelényi's logic, it is possible to conclude that the rising inequality in postsocialist China has ensued from increasing redistributive power in the hands of the state or decreasing market capacity on the part of Chinese citizens. Such a conclusion cannot be further from the truth. Rather, it seems either that inequality is not correlated with redistributive power and market capacity in the way Szelényi suggests, or that something else is also at work or has replaced redistributive power in generating inequality.

At any rate, there is ample evidence of continuing returns to political capital and of the persistence of political power in the economic arena in China (Walder 1995, 2002a, 2002b; Bian and Logan 1996; Parish and Michelson 1996; Song 1998; X. Zhou 2000, 2004; Bian *et al.* 2001; X. Lu 2002; C.-J. Chen 2004, 2006; Peng 2004; Davis *et al.* 2005; Walder and Zhao 2006; Goodman 2008b; Davis and Wang 2009; X. Liu 2009). There is also convincing evidence of alliance between state and capital (Lee and Selden 2005, 2007). The evidence cautions against generalizations about the transformative power of the market and points to the persistent involvement of political power of various kinds in market positions and relations. As X. Liu (2009: 86) has put it, the Chinese market is so embedded in the bureaucratic authority structure that the two are virtually inseparable. This argument finds strong support and further elaboration in F. Wang's (2008) book on urban inequality and in numerous other works on China's political economy.

It should be stressed, however, that power does not mean the same thing to these analysts, as X. Liu (2009: 86) notes. Like Nee, some equate power with the state's redistribution of economic resources and rewards. For others, power means the state's bargaining power for economic returns in the political market. Still others take power to be the ability of the political elites to reap economic returns. To X. Liu (2009: 86), power includes 'redistributive power, rent-seeking ability, and market capacity'. Of particular significance in Liu's explanation of social stratification are relationships between state power and property rights as well as contractual principal–agent relationships that allow Party-state officials to extract excessive rent.

These differences notwithstanding, the proponents of the power persistence thesis have demonstrated convincingly that in postsocialist China market capacity and state power are intimately intertwined and that various forms of state power continue to determine the nature and extent of inequality. Some even disagree with Nee about the shift of power from redistributors to producers. What these writers mean by 'inequality', however, is essentially economic inequality, whereas other forms of inequality are largely elided. State power is taken into account, but only as a source of economic inequality or a causal mechanism of social stratification.

An outstanding exception is Davis and Wang's recent book (2009), which encompasses the social, political and cultural contexts and the interactions of individual attributes within organizational settings that define patterns of social stratification. Nevertheless, economic factors continue to predominate in what they see as the core elements of China's new social order and institutional dynamics of stratification. They conclude that income is highest for those who have access to capital, that China has shifted from a status-ranked society towards one in which economic assets trump, and that China is converging towards a pattern of inequality found throughout other capitalist market economies. These conclusions will be disputable

if inequalities in non-economic contexts and non-economic dimensions of inequality are taken into account.

The economic focus in the literature is justified in so far as inequality is most noticeable in people's access to the essential material means of existence, while income is the most measurable variable. It appears even more justified in the eyes of those China watchers who believe that 'the underlying objective of studies of inequality is to understand differences in welfare or living standards' (Gustafsson *et al.* 2008: 13). This assumption resonates with a widespread view in the social sciences at large that 'the economic system and the class relations emerging from it form the crux of any analyses of social inequality' (Grabb 1984: 8). The view is translated into a customary practice among analysts of using economic class as the primary classification criterion for inequality (Dalton 1925; Kuznets 1961, 1966, 1973; Hobsbawm 1964; Lydall 1966; Atkinson 1972, 1975; Miliband 1977; G. A. Cohen 1978, 1988; Kolakowski 1978; Roemer 1982; Marglin 1984; Edwards *et al.* 1986; Dahrendorf 1988). This economic centrism is clearly too one-dimensional to convincingly account for the patterns of power and inequality that result in China; there is a clear need to add to this an understanding of political forms of inequality as well as the political shaping of inequality and the political consequences of inequality.

Power and inequality

Some redress can be found in Weber's conceptual framework, which ties the understanding of virtually all social hierarchies, including class, status and other social criteria, to the analysis of power. Weber's (1978: 53, 926) pluralist conception of power vis-à-vis inequality posits three major bases for power, or 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance', namely class, status and party. On these bases, different constellations of interests emerge and determine the nature and extent of inequality. Classes derive power from their economic clout; status groups from the social honour or prestige distributed within the status order; and parties from the collective pursuit of interests (Weber 1978: 284–5, 926–7). What is most crucial to the formation of inequalities between social actors is their differential success in the contest between competing or conflicting interests (Weber 1978: 53). The contest is the essence of what Weber means by *politics*, while power is the factor that determines its outcome and the nature and extent of inequality.

Though Weber's focus falls on the bases of inequality, his insight has been adapted to the analysis of various forms or dimensions of inequality. Particularly pertinent to this chapter is Kriesberg's (1979: 24) typology of *class*, *status* and *power* inequalities. The typology is obviously indebted to Weber's analytical framework, and so are Kriesberg's concepts of class, status and power. In his conception, class inequality means differences in

material privileges, especially money income and ownership or control of property; status inequality is defined as differences in prestige or honour accorded to persons or positions; and power inequality refers to differences in people's ability to impose their will on others.

If Weber's framework is combined with Kriesberg's typology, it is possible to construe power at the same time as a basis or primary cause of all kinds of inequality and as a form of inequality itself. It is also feasible to examine all forms of structural inequality by means of a single, unified scheme that treats power relations in economic and cultural as well as political contexts as the elemental inequality-generating factor. Such a conception of power can be usefully applied or adapted to the analyses of all kinds of power vis-à-vis inequality and particularly approximates the role of state power in the formation and perpetuation of inequality in postsocialist China.

However, the concept of power which Kriesberg shares with Weber is hard to work with, as it is too broad, encompassing impermanent and sporadic power relations that tell one little about the general, established and patterned systems of domination that provide most of the framework for inequality at the societal level (Grabb 1984: 58–9). Weber addressed the problem by introducing the idea of *domination* as a special kind of power relation in which regular patterns of inequality emerge, or which enable members of the dominant classes, status groups and party associations to impose their will on the rest of the population on a regular basis (Weber 1978: 941, 53).

Nevertheless, his definition of power or domination has not been widely applied. Those who find it hard to operationalize when analysing inequality redefine power completely or highlight particular aspects of it. Their alternative conceptions of power are by no means perfect, but some elements can be adapted fruitfully to the analysis of social inequality in the PRC. These include Dahrendorf's idea of authority relations;[2] Parkin's notions of social closure, exclusion and usurpation;[3] and Lenski's concepts of control over coercion and access to legally sanctioned rights,[4] or the ability to establish and enforce certain special rights relative to others.

Prominent features of state power in the PRC

It is readily admitted that many kinds of power affect social inequality. The analytical framework proposed here takes note of Weber's emphasis on patterned power relations in the idea of domination and focuses on the structures of the Party-state, which arguably play a more critical role in creating and sustaining inequality than anything else and generate power and status inequalities as well as (economic) class inequalities. For analytical purposes, state power in the PRC can be divided into (i) institutional power vested in, or claimed by, Party-state agencies; (ii) discretionary power at the disposal of Party-state officials; and (iii) access to state power by ordinary citizens on a regular basis or at critical moments in their employment,

these the economic assets of the rich may not guarantee them exemption from politically motivated censure or persecution, let alone upward social mobility. In that sense, economic assets do not trump, contrary to Davis and Wang's (2009) contention; they can trump only if their owners enjoy state protection or freedom from state interference. By comparison, differentiated political power is a more critical determinant of life chances, social status and class membership, as illustrated in the following paragraphs.

Power inequality in postsocialist China and its impact on class and status

Obviously, power inequality is built into China's political system; yet the obvious is often forgotten when analysing social inequality in the country. The urban–rural divide and unequal access to social welfare by urban and rural residents, for instance, are at least partly a result of the political control mechanism of ***hukou***. At a regional level, as Carolyn Cartier observes in this volume, the problems of inequality in the PRC, after three decades of rapid industrialization, 'reflect the geographical trajectory of the planned reform economy' due to the pivotal role of the state in guiding and allocating investment capital towards designated regions and particular projects in the name of national interest. Similarly, institutional factors and the distinction between those who are within the system and those who are outside it continue to play a role in perpetuating entrenched inequalities and creating new ones (see Tang and Tomba's chapter in this volume). Even gender categories remain a source of unequal citizenship, property and intra-household divisions of labour due in part to the Party-state's propagation of urban organizations of gender-differentiated models of employment, welfare provision and civics engagement (Sargeson's chapter in this volume).

Even more pertinent to this chapter is Dorothy Solinger's observation that state power has induced inequality, including class and status inequalities. A couple of points are particularly worth bearing in mind when it comes to class and status inequalities in the PRC. First, in so far as the PRC state is conceived in the Leninist image of an instrument for class domination, political power as well as material and symbolic rewards are not meant to be distributed equally across social classes, even though domination has often been downplayed in practice, especially since 1978. Second, though the shift from a command to a market economy has altered power relations, class positions and status in the reform era depend not only on market capacity but also on access to state power. In fact, market capacity, most notably capital, ownership of productive property and the ability to secure business deals, is often inseparable from state power.

In the socialist era, the proletariat was said to be the motor of history, and together with the peasants, constituted the regime's only or the most legitimate political actors (Solinger 2004: 54–5), or the 'masters of the country'.

On the other hand, the enemies of the people – most notably the capitalists, landlords and rich peasants – were formally excluded from the polity and deprived of power, rights, resources and opportunities. In the postsocialist era, though proletarian dictatorship is retained in the PRC constitution, those who have been encouraged to get rich first are included in the definition of 'the people' and were even strongly encouraged to join the Party in the Jiang Zemin era. They are able to accumulate massive wealth and enjoy political power and prestigious status as members of the CCP and delegates to national and local people's congresses. Yet, they continue to be treated with ambivalence (Y. Guo 2008), although less and less so. In contrast, large sections of the working class, particularly the tens of millions of laid-off workers and those who have lost benefits, are now part of a poor and powerless underclass. The working class as a whole, as Blecher (2002: 283) and Solinger (2004: 50) observe, has lost its world and shifted from master in name and privilege to mendicant.

By abandoning continuous revolution and the command economy in favour of wealth creation through partial marketization and privatization, the CCP has drastically transformed the political, economic and cultural landscape of the PRC. From the Party's perspective, it matters little whether the proletariat loses its domination and privileged status as the most progressive force of history; it is all the better that it does not constitute the mainstream of Chinese society. For the Party's new 'historic mission' of economic development, despite its self-image, requires efficient creators of wealth rather than a poor, revolutionary class ready to wage class struggle and destabilize society. The mission entails a fundamental shift from a primary concern with the working class to the principal creators of wealth, thus swaying opportunities and material and symbolic resources away from the working class and towards the major creators of wealth, although the capitalist class cannot be named. It is now the middle classes, as Dorothy Solinger notes in this volume, who stand in the forefront and who are the beneficiaries of the reforms and the vanguard of modernity.

The dramatic twist in the fortune of these social groups amply illustrates the role of state power in creating inequality and altering status orders at the macro level. It also demonstrates the extent to which access to state power affects these groups' material and symbolic rewards. All the same, social class should not be overstated as an essential criterion for granting or denying access to state power in postsocialist China; it is 'postsocialist' precisely because it has abandoned many of the programmes and priorities associated with China's state socialism, while access to state power is no longer predominantly differentiated along class lines. Still, pre-1978 power structures and patterns of status of attainment have a lasting impact on social inequality, and state power remains a critical determinant of class positions and social status.

The many ways in which state power affects class and status inequalities cannot be exhausted in this short chapter. A few examples will suffice to illustrate its capacity to trump commonly recognized determinants

of class and status, such as occupation, income, wealth and educational qualifications. So far as occupation is concerned, what matters most to class positions and status is the amount of income to be derived from the job and the prestige attached to the occupation. While qualifications may be a necessary condition for landing a job in a prestigious and well-paid occupation, it is not always a sufficient condition, as a qualified candidate may not be able to compete with an unqualified person with recourse to better connections. Though some occupations, such as business owners and entrepreneurs, may be open to all, many of the most successful are usually well connected with Party-state officials and have guaranteed access to state power. As a group of businesspeople stated in *Jingji cankao bao (The Economic Reference Daily)* in December 2006,

> These days, it's impossible to do business or invest without influence from Party-state officials. If you don't have their power to back you up, if you can't get policies from them, you get nowhere, or at least you can't consolidate and expand your business.
>
> (cited by X. Lu 2010: 191)

With regard to income, it is no secret that high-ranking cadres and their children are among the richest in the country. According to Lu (2010: 186), cadres' average income has risen faster than that of most other social groups and is the third highest among all groups. Apart from salaries, their income includes gifts and gift vouchers; commissions for securing tenders and contracts; fees for adjudicating at competitions, appearing at prize-awarding ceremonies and assessing public works or other construction projects; free travel; heavily discounted real estate; and so on. In other words, their wealth does not just derive from salaries but also from other 'grey income' generated through the power they possess, and their power brings them prestige as well as wealth. Their wealth further enhances their status through the purchase of status symbols and is exchangeable for promotion or access to broader state power. It is little wonder then that many young people in China wish to become cadres and 'public servants'.

Power and wealth have also elevated large numbers of Party-state officials and their children into China's upper class. According to Han Honggang (2009), who cites official sources, 91 per cent of China's billionaires, as of the end of March 2006, were children of high-ranking cadres. Other analysts believe that there is now a class of 'red capitalists' (Dickson 2004) and 'a cadre–capitalist class' who 'monopolise economic capital, political capital, and social/net capital in Chinese society' (So 2003: 478). The less rich and powerful cadres and their families have still managed to join China's prestigious middle class (X. Lu 2002: 44–7). It is doubtful if they have done so on the strength of their salaries alone.

It is not just the cadres and their families who have benefited from state power and obtained more wealth and higher social status than other

members of society. The public service, for example, has become a prestigious and sought-after profession in recent years because it provides job security, good opportunities, and attractive material and symbolic rewards, such as relatively high incomes, superannuation, subsidies for health care and housing, promising career paths and social prestige. Like the cadres, 'public servants' are also able to take advantage of their discretionary power in rent-seeking. On the grounds of their income, consumption and profession, public servants as a whole have made it into China's middle class (X. Lu 2002: 44–7). This has happened because the Party-state can afford enormous government spending thanks to its increasing extractive power in the reform era. From 1978 to 2007, the tax revenue of the central government rose by nearly 40 per cent in real terms (Zhonghua renmin 2007), making the Chinese government one of the richest in the world.

Similarly, those who are employed in the sectors under the state's '*xingzheng longduan*' (administrative monopoly) are much better paid than employees of other sectors, including those with the same or better educational qualifications. These sectors include finance, insurance, production and supply of electricity and gas, water supply, transportation, storage, post, telecommunications, irrigation and geological exploration. Between 2003 and 2007, the average salaries in the state-monopolized sectors of stock exchange, civil aviation, banking, cigarette manufacturing, radio and television broadcasting, and railway transportation respectively rose by 26.17 per cent, 21.85 per cent, 21.53 per cent, 19.57 per cent, 19.04 per cent and 16.44 per cent, and amounted to four times the salaries of employees in the non-monopolized sectors (Zhonghua renmin 2007).

Inequalities on such a massive scale must be justified if the Party-state policies responsible for them are to be accepted or tolerated by the general population. This is where the Party-state's symbolic power comes in. Through a sleight of hand, the Maoist emphasis on equality is negatively labelled '*pingjun zhuyi*' (egalitarianism) in the reform era, which, according to Deng (1993), made it impossible to raise people's living standards or motivate people to take the initiative and work hard; whereas income inequality is now considered a good thing, as it promises to benefit both individuals and the whole society. A top priority in the early days of 'reform

and opening' was therefore to de-legitimate egalitarianism and allow incomes to be differentiated 'according to work' and some individuals, groups and regions to get rich ahead of others.

The rationale for that priority incorporates a moral justification of economic inequality that has been commonplace since the advent of economic liberalism. That is, in a competitive market society, it is the best that get to the top and take the greater part of society's rewards. The justification is premised on three assumptions. First, unequal rewards provide a structure of incentives which ensure that talented and resourceful individuals will work hard and innovate, thus contributing to the improvement of material standards for themselves and the society as a whole. Second, a broad consensus

exists as to the legitimacy of their superior rewards, as such individuals are more important to economic development and the common good. And third, as the wealthy get rich everyone will benefit through a trickle-down effect.

In the Jiang Zemin era, this principle gave way to distribution according to contribution. In comparison with 'work', 'contribution' is not only broader but also more vague and abstract, allowing even more flexible interpretations. Thus, all kinds of economic and commercial activities, some of which were not commonly seen as 'work', can be called 'contribution'. In addition, this principle makes even less reference to structured social processes of production and exchange than does the principle of distribution according to work. All that matters is the outcome, even if unequal outcomes are attributable to structured unequal opportunities. Either way – whether material rewards are differentiated according to work or contribution – inequalities look fair and justified. Moreover, the responsibility for inequalities appears to lie with individuals, and the Party-state is thus insulated from blame.

Under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, the government has shifted its social policy from encouraging inequality as a way of promoting productive efficiency to addressing social justice. The Party-state has evidently done more with its regulative, extractive and distributive power than under Deng and Jiang to reduce income taxes for rural residents and low wage earners, lessen the burden of disadvantaged groups and improve social welfare, especially in the areas of health care, education and housing. But these measures have not altered – and cannot alter – the power relations and the dynamics of social stratification, which continue to shape the nature and extent of power, class and status inequalities.

Conclusion

Substantive and methodological questions about social inequality remain. The substantive question, of course, is inequality of what? Conceptual clarity starts from the recognition that there are multiple dimensions or forms of inequality and a clear answer to the substantive question. Additionally, it is imperative to put a particular form of inequality in perspective. Unequal income, wealth, other material rewards, consumption, welfare, living standards and access to public goods are all significant aspects of social inequality but must not be taken metonymically for the whole. By the same token, power is but one form of inequality. Overarching and systematic generalizations should not be made about the degree and nature of inequality at the societal level without careful examination of all its principal forms, and synthesis of the resulting insights.

The methodological question centres on the choice of focal variables by which inequality is measured. The choice not only depends on the substantive question just considered but also on the identification of the actual causes of inequality. While social inequality in the PRC is attributable to

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2 Inequality and culture

A new pathway to understanding social inequality

Wanning Sun

If, as Yingjie Guo argues in this volume, the existing body of work on social inequality in China has not paid sufficient attention to the critical role of state power in its generation, the same thing can be said about the role of *culture*. In other words, an explicit articulation of culture as a category for analysis is still largely missing from the existing scholarship on inequality in China, as are the conceptual and methodological implications of treating culture in this way in approaching inequality. But what is culture, and what has culture got to do with social inequality? And what is the point of analysing the cultural causes and consequences of social inequality? This chapter advocates a 'cultural turn' in inequality studies, and suggests that the investigation of the cultural politics of inequality offers a new and potentially innovative pathway to understanding social inequality in China. This cultural turn consists of, on the one hand, the *culture of inequality*, and on the other hand, the *inequality of culture*. The culture of inequality can be defined as a set of moral, social and political-economic values and assumptions that govern the ways in which inequality is rationalized, maintained, managed and negotiated in institutional and organizational settings. The culture of inequality also refers to the structure of feelings that emerge differentially from the daily experience of individuals on each side of the inequality. A cultural turn also enables us to better understand the inequality of culture, which refers to unequal access to an array of symbolic resources – the right to self-presentation, to have a political voice, to have one's stories and interpretation of social life heard and recognized as legitimate, as well as to the capacity to embody socially and politically appropriate sentiments and desires. The argument regarding culture and inequality rests on this premise: if social scientists have no trouble agreeing that inequality is arguably the overriding and most profound social problem in contemporary China, then current and future scholarship must be directed to analysis and critiques that offer an intellectual basis for strategic interventions in moral and political terms. And an account of the relationship between culture and inequality constitutes an integral

dimension of this intellectual project. This chapter demonstrates that the relationship between culture and social inequality is symbiotic and complex.

There are three arguments, to be pursued in three sections. The first section, drawing on ethnographic insights, advances an argument for approaching inequality as *cultural politics*. The second section, on the culture of inequality, traces the process by which certain social groups' political and economic values and moral sentiments are translated into common sense across the social spectrum in post-Mao cultural politics. The third section, on the inequality of culture, demonstrates that the construction and maintenance of this common sense is achieved through, and in turn relies on, structurally inequitable distribution of what Charles Tilly calls 'value-producing resource of limited availability' (Tilly 2003: 34), including both material and cultural resources. These three arguments advocate a fresh perspective that enables the symbiotic relationship between the cultural and the political-economic perspectives to emerge.

The cultural politics of inequality

A growing assemblage of ethnographies probes into the culture of inequality in reformed China, particularly in the contexts of rural migrants and the urban underclass.[1] For instance, while the phenomenal growth of Chinese cities would be unthinkable without the 'blood and sweat' of millions of rural migrant construction workers, ethnography finds little evidence of a sense of pride and ownership among this cohort of migrant workers for their contribution to China's urbanization and modernization processes. Instead, what unites the rural migrant construction workers across the board is the feeling of '*hen*' (hatred) – a structure of feelings including an intense hatred for: (i) the owners of capital, who employ them as their labour but treat them with injustice; (ii) the government, for turning its back on the socialist idea of the worker as the master of the nation; (iii) their own parents, for passing on their rural – instead of urban – *hukou* (household residential registration) heritage; and (iv) themselves, for not studying hard and so ending up having to sell their physical labour for money (Pun and Lu 2010a).

It may also be for this reason that the rural migrant construction workers I interviewed on the construction sites in Beijing[2] almost unanimously expressed their regret for dropping out of school too early and so not getting a good education. Workers' complaints were many and vociferous – about city folks' contempt for them, poor living conditions, long working hours and harsh work conditions, among others. They also said that all of these problems would be bearable if they could be given the assurance that by the end of the year they would be paid the wages owed to them. But it is precisely this well-founded fear of working for nothing, due to the widespread existence of the 'wage arrears' problem, that has generated what has come to be known as the 'culture of violence' among construction workers