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Article

# There is high, and there is low: a qualitative examination of framings of inequality that Chinese people apply

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## Abstract

Economic inequality in China has increased significantly over the past four decades, and I examined the cultural resources that Chinese people have deployed to frame this new inequality. Based on 75 interviews with Chinese people, I identified three framings of inequality: The meritocratic framing views inequality as the result of differences in effort, ability or contribution; the developmental framing emphasizes that because everyone is doing materially better than four decades ago, it does not matter that economic inequality has increased; and what I call the difference-order framing, which emphasizes that individuals are born into different families with different levels of resources; therefore, they cannot be equal, which is not unfair. As such, even though China was a much more economically equal society just a few decades ago, available cultural resources enable Chinese people to frame inequality in ways that justify, rather than problematize, the phenomenon.

**Key words:** China, culture, ideology, inequality, moral norms, stratification

**JEL classification:** A13 Relation of Economics to Social Values, D63 Equity, Justice, Inequality and Other Normative Criteria and Measurement, Z13 Economic Sociology; Economic Anthropology; Language; Social and Economic Stratification

## 1. Introduction

A growing research stream has been focusing on the question of how ordinary people frame economic inequality (e.g. [Sachweh, 2012](#); [Larsen, 2016](#); [Heuer et al., 2018](#)), but little attention has been paid to such framings in the context of China. How Chinese people frame economic inequality is an interesting question because China's current economic inequality is a rather recent phenomenon. Just a few decades ago, China was much more economically

equal (Xie and Zhou, 2014), eliciting the question: How do Chinese people frame this new phenomenon? In this article, I examine this question.

An important theoretical perspective on people's attitudes toward inequality is self-interest. According to this perspective, individuals form their attitudes toward inequality based on whether they would gain anything from redistribution (Meltzer and Richard, 1981; Schmidt-Catran, 2016; Kevins *et al.*, 2018). However, self-interest is not the sole driver of people's attitudes toward inequality. Ideas and beliefs also influence people's perspectives (Fong, 2001). Thus, much research also has focused on the importance of ideas and beliefs in people's attitudes toward inequality (Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Kelley and Evans, 1993; Fong, 2001; Wu, 2009; Xie and Wang, 2009; Whyte, 2010, 2016; Sachweh, 2012, 2017; Xie *et al.*, 2012; McCall, 2013; Bucca, 2016; Larsen, 2016; Koos and Sachweh, 2019; Xian and Reynolds, 2017; Heuer *et al.*, 2018; Irwin, 2018; García-Sánchez *et al.*, 2019; Hilmar, 2019; Mijs, 2021; Heuer *et al.*, 2020; Kuusela, 2022). These ideas and beliefs within a culture are important in shaping people's attitudes toward inequality because they enable people to justify or problematize the unequal distribution of material resources among societal members (Swidler, 1986, 2001; Lamont *et al.*, 2014).

In this article, I also focus on the importance of culturally shaped ideas and beliefs, i.e. how cultural repertoires and the cultural resources within them (Swidler, 1986, 2001) enable people to form attitudes toward economic inequality—in this case, within the Chinese context, which has not received much attention in previous research in terms of the connection between culture and attitudes toward inequality. In the past four decades, economic inequality has increased significantly in China, from a rather equal society before initiation of the nation's economic reform and opening-up strategy in 1978, to one of the most unequal countries in the world in the 2010s (Xie and Zhou, 2014). During this process, Chinese people have tried to make sense of this increasing economic inequality. In such a socioeconomic environment, which cultural resources have Chinese people deployed to frame economic inequality?

China is a particularly interesting case, one reason being that this new substantial economic inequality requires that Chinese people make sense of a significantly different social structure than the one they knew just a few decades ago. Second, China is also an interesting case because, within a relatively short time frame, Chinese people have been exposed to very different sets of ideas about how society should be organized, primarily traditional Confucian thought, with its emphasis on the family (Fei, [1947] 1992); Maoist thought, with its emphasis on class struggle (Meisner, 1977; Womack, 2001); and Deng Xiaoping thought, with its emphasis on economic growth (Chang, 1996; Moak and Lee, 2015). With such diverse ideational legacies, another question is whether Chinese people's cultural repertoires are similarly diverse. Third, Chinese cultural repertoires might enable Chinese people to frame economic inequality differently than what has been identified in other parts of the world. In traditional Chinese society, the notion of equality has been rather weak compared with Western societies, with inequality viewed as the natural state of society (Fei, [1947] 1992; Xie, 2016). I explain this further in Section 3.1.

For these reasons, it is interesting to examine how culture enables Chinese people to frame economic inequality. My Chinese student assistants and I conducted 75 interviews with Chinese people working in Beijing. I identified three dominant framings of inequality: the meritocratic framing; developmental framing; and the difference-order framing. All three were used to justify economic inequality. Therefore, even though Chinese society was

significantly more economically equal not that long ago, the cultural resources available to Chinese people today generally do not enable them to problematize this increased economic inequality.

In Section 2, I present the theoretical framework of my analysis, which is based on Swidler's (1986, 2001) theory on cultural repertoires. In Section 3, I examine the types of inequality that have characterized Chinese society in the past and present, and the ideas underlying them. In Section 4, I describe my methods, and in Section 5, I present the study's findings. I conclude the paper with a discussion.

## 2. Culture and attitudes toward inequality

As described in the introduction, a need exists to understand the ideas and beliefs within a culture to understand attitudes toward economic inequality. So, how can we comprehend this process, in which culture influences attitudes toward inequality?

Swidler (1986, 2001) suggested that culture provides individuals with repertoires comprising cultural resources, e.g. ideas and beliefs. However, culture does not determine attitudes directly, but rather provides individuals with cultural resources that enable individuals to interpret and make sense of the world. To form attitudes toward inequality, individuals must interpret and frame inequality in certain ways using available cultural resources. Accordingly, attitudes toward inequality are dependent on the cultural resources available in people's cultural repertoires.

However, culture's influence on attitudes can vary depending on the context. Swidler distinguished between unsettled and settled historical periods. By unsettled periods, she referred to periods of social transformation, during which culture, in the form of ideologies, significantly influences the organization of social life. Because people are learning how to act and organize their lives under unfamiliar circumstances, ideologies are particularly important in guiding people in this changing environment. Therefore, culture influences attitudes more directly during unsettled periods, but ideologies' influence during unsettled periods is not unlimited. First, in aspects of life that are not covered by ideology, older cultural resources will remain an important part of people's cultural repertoires. Second, other cultural frameworks—e.g. common sense, traditions and other ideas—can outstrip ideologies (Swidler, 2001, pp. 101–103). During settled periods, culture's influence is less obvious because the culture in settled contexts is more diverse, providing individuals with a repertoire of more varied cultural resources that they can use to form attitudes. However, the cultural repertoire remains limited, thereby constraining how individuals can form attitudes.

The analysis below revolves around what I call *framings of inequality*. Different terms have been applied to describe what I define as framings of inequality, e.g. inequality beliefs or narratives. I think of framings of inequality as how people describe, explain, justify or problematize economic inequality using certain cultural resources rather than others. By using the term *framing*, I wish to emphasize that people can use different cultural resources to frame inequality in different ways. Even though these framings of inequality represent different ways of thinking about economic inequality, they are not mutually exclusive. An individual can frame inequality in various ways, and framings of inequality also can be combined to some extent. I describe this further in Section 5, in which I present the framings of inequality that the study's interviewees applied.

### 3. China's history of inequality

Even though the current economic inequality is a new phenomenon in China, the nation has experienced other types of inequality in the past. In this section, I provide a short overview of the inequality types that have characterized Chinese society and the ideas underlying them. In the following subsections, I describe the inequality types that have characterized traditional China (before 1949), Maoist China (1949–1978) and reform China (after 1978) and the corresponding cultural frameworks (i.e. sets of ideas about how society should be organized) that have dominated each of these periods: Confucianism; Maoism; and Deng Xiaoping thought. This overview provides us with the contextual basis for understanding how Chinese people frame economic inequality today.

#### 3.1 Traditional China and Confucianism

Confucianism dominated China's political system and society throughout most of its imperial history. In Confucian thought, inequality is viewed as a natural state of the world. As Mencius, a Confucian philosopher, declared: 'That things are unequal is part of their nature. . . . If a roughly finished shoe sells at the same price as a finely finished one, who would make the latter' (Lau, 2004, p. 62). Inequality is viewed as a normal phenomenon by virtue of the fact that things and people are different. Better-quality work must be rewarded to incentivize the creation of better-quality things and people. This meritocratic idea is central to Confucian thought, and it also is what underlies the political inequality that has characterized traditional Chinese society (Xie, 2016).

Even though the Confucian meritocratic idea suggests that everyone potentially could advance within society, other important Confucian ideas imply that chances for social advancement should not be equal. Chinese sociologist Fei ([1947] 1992) characterized Chinese traditional society using what he called the mode of differential and orderly association. In early Chinese society, people are first and foremost associated with one another through specific personal relationships, and people's moral obligations are tied primarily to these relationships. People are born as individuals in a specific context with specific relationships, among which, the most important relate to family members, particularly the parent–child relationship: 'The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this' (Confucius, ca. 500 B.C.E.). Parents and children have a primary obligation toward each other, even if this goes against the law and state (Fei, [1947] 1992). To help their children advance within a meritocratic society, parents invest in their children's education (Xie, 2016). However, because families had different levels of economic and cultural resources, children with parents from higher levels of society had a much greater chance of advancing within the political hierarchy. Thus, this reproduced the political inequality. Therefore, Confucianism provided some of the important underlying ideas about the political inequality that characterized traditional China.

#### 3.2 Maoist China and Maoism

With Mao Zedong's founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, a new set of ideas was introduced to Chinese society. Maoism, based on Mao's thought, dominated Chinese society until the initiation of the reform and opening-up strategy in 1978. Marxist ideology and the Marxist notion of class struggle inspired Mao (Marx and Engels, [1848] 2020; Marx, [1867] 1999). Mao's goal was to establish a socialist society, and the most

important idea in realizing this was class struggle: ‘The class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the class struggle between the different political forces, and the class struggle in the ideological held between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie will continue to be long and tortuous and at times will even become very acute’ (Mao *et al.*, 1966). Class struggle was viewed as the most important element in the process of removing the distinctions between the upper and lower classes of society, thereby reducing inequality (Meisner, 1977, pp. 1022–1023).

Considering that 80–90% of China’s population lived in rural areas during the Maoist era (Gu *et al.*, 2017), this population predominately experienced inequality and class struggle, based on land ownership. Even though farmland was redistributed and later collectivized during the first years of the PRC (Whyte, 1975; Andreas, 2016), the pre-1949 exploiting classes continued to be categorized as such throughout the Maoist era and would be vilified during political campaigns to prevent them from threatening the socialist regime (Whyte, 1975; Kraus, 1977).

However, the urban exploiting class was not treated as harshly as the rural one, even though the state also seized the productive property of the urban exploiting class. The new political elite of cadres from the Communist Party of China (CPC) primarily comprised peasants with humble origins, so they needed the expertise of the educated old urban elite to manage government and economic activities. Thus, the urban exploiting class maintained a relatively high position within Chinese society after 1949, but the cadres supervised the old elites’ work; thus, they were more powerful. However, for both of these elite groups, their privileged positions provided their children with better opportunities to advance in society (Whyte, 1975; Andreas, 2016).

By abolishing private ownership of land and productive means, Mao wished to create an economically more equal society (Meisner, 1977), which seemed to have succeeded to some extent (Blecher, 1976). However, Maoist China was politically unequal, with CPC cadres at the top of the political hierarchy (Whyte, 1975), but during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the class struggle targeted this political elite. Mao feared that members of the political elite would try to restore a capitalist system in China; thus, they became the target of class struggle during the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, many of them returned to the same positions that they held before the Cultural Revolution (Kraus, 1977; Andreas, 2016; Gao, 2016).

To sum up, Mao’s ideas about class struggle were very important in shaping society in Maoist China, but the class struggles that Chinese people were exposed to throughout the Maoist era differed in intensity and in the kind of inequality experienced.

### 3.3 Reform China and Deng Xiaoping thought

Mao Zedong died in 1976, and 2 years later, Deng Xiaoping initiated the reform and opening-up strategy, which also aimed to establish a socialist society. However, instead of Mao’s emphasis on class struggle, Deng stressed that China’s socialist society would be a materially rich one; therefore, China needed to develop its economy (Chang, 1996, pp. 381–384).

Probably inspired by the neoliberal discourses of the 1980s (Harvey, 2005; Littler, 2017; Sandel, 2020; Weber, 2020), Deng also emphasized meritocratic ideas, i.e. hard work, talent and intellect should be rewarded (Deng, 1983; Deng, 1988; Chang, 1996, p. 389): ‘We stand for the principle ‘to each according to his work’, and we favor public citations and material rewards for those individuals and organizations that have made outstanding contributions’

(Deng, 1980). This aimed to ensure hard work from all people—both workers and intellectuals—thereby enhancing economic development.

Deng believed that increasing inequality could be tolerated: ‘It is our policy to let some people and some regions prosper before others, so that they can bring along the backward regions’ (Deng, 1986). Thus, increasing inequality was acceptable because those who become rich first can pave the way for better standards of living for everyone. This belief also corresponded with neoliberal thinking (Harvey, 2005; Littler, 2017). For Deng, this idea of elite-driven overall growth was central, although he was aware that overly excessive inequality levels could result in polarization, which would contradict socialist ideals: ‘If the rich keep getting richer and the poor poorer, polarization will emerge. The socialist system must and can avoid polarization. One way is for the areas that become prosperous first to support the poor ones by paying more taxes or turning in more profits to the state. Of course, this should not be done too soon. At present, we do not want to dampen the vitality of the developed areas’ (Deng, 1992). He argued that to avoid polarization, some redistribution might be applied in the future to decrease inequality. However, this should not be done too soon because excessive redistribution would slow economic development (Chang, 1996).

The reforms that Deng introduced after 1978 meant that the Chinese economy was converted from a planned economy into a market economy. Within the market economy, some people began to earn more than the rest of the population (Li, 2016). Consequently, economic inequality in China has increased significantly since 1978 (Xie and Zhou, 2014), but aside from this economic inequality, political inequality continues to exist in reform China (Li, 2016).

To sum up, the increasing economic inequality that has characterized China in recent decades has appeared on the back of economic reforms, which transformed the planned economy into a market economy. The ideas of Deng Xiaoping and neoliberalism shaped this transformation, which emphasized creating incentives for individual merit, and which perceived allowing some people to accumulate wealth as a way to create general growth within society that could benefit the whole population.

## 4. Methods

The empirical data from this paper’s analysis was gathered from 75 qualitative interviews conducted with Chinese people working in Beijing. I conducted four of the interviews, while Chinese student assistants conducted the rest. The interviews were conducted from October 2019 to September 2021. The initial 16 interviews were conducted face-to-face, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the remaining interviews were conducted online. The interviews were conducted in standard Chinese, then transcribed and translated into English.

The interviewee sample varied in age, gender and class. See Table 1 for an overview of the interviewees’ background characteristics. I recruited the interviewees through the student assistants and my own networks, and I reached out to different parts of our networks to ensure diversity in the sample. A diverse sample ensured that the findings based on these interviews would apply to more than just one segment of Chinese society, as the themes identified in the interviews were common among interviewees across the societal spectrum. However, the sample was not representative of the Chinese population geographically, as we only interviewed people in Beijing. Thus, people in the countryside and other cities were not represented in our sample. Therefore, I do not claim that the framings of inequality identified in this article are the dominant framings in China. However, they represent at least

**Table 1.** Interviewees’ background characteristics.

Age	30 and below	31–40	41–50	51 and above
	17	24	23	11
Gender	Female	Male		
	33	42		
Class	Working class	Middle class		
	39	36		

*Source:* Author’s overview of interviewees.  
*Note:* Number of interviewees. Class: Working class includes unskilled workers, skilled workers and routine non-manual employees. Middle class includes service Class II (lower-level controllers and administrators), service Class I (higher-level controllers and administrators) and self-employed (Svallfors, 2004).

some of the nation’s framings of inequality, and they very likely will be relevant for Chinese people living and working in environments similar to Beijing, e.g. other big cities in China. However, whether the findings are relevant for Chinese populations living outside of Beijing will need to be examined in future research.

The interviews were used to gauge interviewees’ views on social justice-related issues. Each interviewer asked questions about taxation and equality, unemployment, education and health care. Below are some example questions from the interview guide, which was central to the analysis in this article:

A very small group of people in society are very rich and influential. Is this fair? Why or why not)?  
Is economic equality a good thing? Why or why not? To what extent?  
Do you think that Chinese people are now economically more equal or more unequal than before? Do you think that this change has been for the better or worse? Why?

I began by developing the main codes gleaned from a subsection of the interviews. This initial coding primarily was data-based, i.e. I looked for themes in the interviewees’ statements. I coded the interviewee’s statements on economic (in)equality, i.e. statements in which they talked about differential economic resources among people. I coded the statements based on how the interviewees framed economic inequality, e.g. their views on why economic inequality exists or why it is (un)acceptable or (un)fair. I then consulted extant literature on framings of inequality to ascertain whether the framings I had identified among the Chinese interviewees corresponded with those identified in previous research. Furthermore, I consulted literature on Chinese culture, society and philosophy to provide some context to the framings of inequality that the interviewees applied. After establishing the main categories of framings, I went through the remaining interviews to check whether inequality was framed the same as in the initial subsection of interviews. Through my coding, I identified three major ways of framing economic inequality.

5. Findings

In this section, I present the framings of inequality identified through the interviews. In the first three subsections, I present the three most dominant framings of inequality, and in Subsection 5.4, I present some of the more critical framings of inequality.



### 5.1 The meritocratic framing

The most dominant framing of inequality that the interviewees applied was the meritocratic framing, within which, the answer to the question of inequality was that some people worked harder, had better abilities and qualifications, or generally were smarter and, therefore, deserved to be rewarded accordingly. Thus, distribution of resources should be based on individual merit. Many of the interviewees applied the meritocratic framing in their reasoning about inequality:

There are some people who, due to their own efforts and intelligence, have created their influence and their wealth accumulation. This is not a big problem, in my opinion.

(Female, 32, event planner)

Rich people earn it by their own ability. . . . They make great contributions to the country, so to pay them more money, we absolutely agree with this.

(Male, 61, gardener)

Merit that deserves a reward is not only limited to *effort*, but also includes attributes such as *intelligence*, *ability* and *contributions to the country*. The meritocratic framing that the Chinese interviewees applied entailed a rather broad notion of merit, within which many kinds of inequality could be justified. Accordingly, inequality that might seem to go against a work-based distribution logic can be justified as resulting from other kinds of merit.

The meritocratic framing of inequality is not only a uniquely Chinese framing of inequality, but also can be identified among people in, e.g. the USA (Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Xian and Reynolds, 2017; Mijs, 2021), Latin America (Bucca, 2016) and Europe (Sachweh, 2012; Heuer *et al.*, 2018; Hilmar, 2019; Mijs, 2021). Therefore, viewing differences in wealth and income as consequences of differences in personal merit is not only a Chinese way of framing inequality, but also a way in which people worldwide frame the phenomenon. This cross-continental presence of the meritocratic framing likely, to some extent, can be attributed to neoliberal thinking's prominent position in global economic discourses since the 1980s (Harvey, 2005). According to neoliberalism, individuals, through free market mechanisms, should be accountable for their own actions and well-being, and should be incentivized to work and make an effort. Subsequently, people with wealth are perceived as deserving of this wealth on the basis of their merits (Littler, 2017; Sandel, 2020). Neoliberalism influenced not only Chinese economic thinking and that of Deng Xiaoping, but also economic thinking globally (Harvey, 2005; Weber, 2020). Thus, the meritocratic framing of inequality can be identified among people worldwide.

However, it is also worth noting that the meritocratic framing corresponds with the Confucian emphasis on meritocracy, which characterized traditional China. Merit had to be rewarded to incentivize people to improve themselves, so that the most qualified could enter the emperor's government as officials. Therefore, this meritocratic principle was prevalent throughout the imperial era of China's history (Xie, 2016) and was accordingly not an entirely foreign idea within Chinese society before the spread of neoliberal thought in the past few decades.

Meritocratic ideas are an important part of Chinese people's cultural repertoires and are applied to frame inequality. The meritocratic framing regarding the question of why some people get rich while others do not is that those who get rich have worked harder, have better qualifications and abilities, or are generally smarter; therefore, they are more deserving of rewards. Behind the meritocratic framing is a worldview of individuals as selfish and, thus, in need of incentives to work and contribute. If they can gain resources without working, they will do just that. Accordingly, several interviewees highlighted that during the

planned economy of the Mao era, people would receive the same payment amount, but would not work equally hard:

In the past, it used to be the big rice bowl [system]. Collective work, collective gain. Some people didn't work hard, and they got the same share as others. This is unfair. Now it's all about performance. You get more if you do more. If you don't do anything, you earn less.  
(Female, 33, nurse)

Aside from being a central assumption in neoliberal thinking (Littler, 2017), selfishness is also a recurring concern in Chinese thought. Fei ([1947] 1992) viewed selfishness as a common problem in China, in which people seek to maximize gains and minimize effort. That people are selfish was also a basic assumption for many of China's traditional schools of thought, e.g. Confucianism, Legalism and Daoism (Barbalet, 2013, 2017). Tobin and colleagues also demonstrated how Chinese preschools were preoccupied with trying to counterbalance selfishness among children (Tobin *et al.*, 1991; Tobin *et al.*, 2009). As the interviews also indicated, many Chinese people seem to believe that human beings are selfish. They believe that individuals would not work and contribute if they received pay without making an effort or if they were not rewarded for their extra work. Therefore, considering that efforts and rewards are viewed as intimately intertwined, under the meritocratic framing of inequality, current economic inequality levels in China are viewed as fair.

## 5.2 The developmental framing

Another important framing of inequality that the interviewees applied was the developmental framing. Many of those who used this logic specifically referenced China as they reasoned about inequality. Instead of focusing on inequality, these interviewees focused on overall economic growth.

Before initiation of its reform and opening-up strategy in 1978, China had a planned economy, under which, Chinese people were guaranteed their livelihoods (Leung and Xu, 2015). However, it was not a rich society. In 1978, China's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (in constant 2015 US dollars) was \$381 (World Bank, 2022). However, after China began transitioning toward a market economy in 1978, economic inequality increased significantly (Xie and Zhou, 2014), but living standards also increased substantially. In 2021, GDP per capita (constant 2015 US dollars) was \$11188 (World Bank, 2022). Chinese people recognized this improvement in living conditions. Whyte (2016, p. 29) found that in 2014, almost 80% of Chinese people found that their living standards were better than 5 years earlier. Many of our interviewees expressed a similar view:

It used to be a planned economy. The conditions at that time were relatively ordinary; everyone's income was not high. Therefore, I think it is much better [now]. Everyone's [living standards], including the gross national product and personal income, have increased.  
(Male, 38, business agent)

Before . . . some people could earn 100 yuan; some people could not earn money. The current situation is that some people can earn 1,000–2,000 yuan, but everyone can earn 100 yuan. . . . So, in this case, do you think it is better, more equal, or more unequal? In a sense, of course, it is more unequal, but can you say it has become worse? Of course, you cannot put it that way. That is, it is developing.  
(Female, 23, cartoon editor)

Chinese people are aware of the improved living standards experienced over the past four decades. Within this framing, it is more important that overall living conditions in China have improved and less important that inequality has increased. For many of the interviewees, inequality is a necessary cost of economic growth. Indeed, many of the interviewees said that inequality promotes overall economic development. The rationale is that inequality can promote economic growth through trickle-down economics:

It is very good for a few people to become rich and drive everyone to become rich.  
(Male, 45, firefighter)

Indeed, these interviewees view inequality as a good thing because those who *become rich* first can promote the overall economic development of society, i.e. rich people can *help everyone become rich*.

The developmental framing of inequality corresponds with Deng Xiaoping's idea of elite-driven general growth, whereby some parts of the population get a head start on wealth accumulation. They then can create general economic growth and improve the whole population's living conditions. The developmental framing also corresponds with neoliberal notions of trickle-down economics and 'a rising tide lifts all boats', implying that in a free market, some people's wealth accumulation benefits the rest of the population because it generates general economic growth within society (Harvey, 2005; Littler, 2017). Therefore, inequality is acceptable because everyone's living standards improve.

For Deng, the market could create economic modernization, which the planned economy failed to accomplish. Therefore, a market economy should lead the way toward socialism in the long run, while increasing economic inequality (Moak and Lee, 2015). Instead, equality would be a long-term goal, but China first would need to develop its economy (Deng, 1992). Some interviewees also applied this idea of future equality:

It is a process of development. Now that we've chosen the reform and opening up, there should be such a process, a phenomenon like [inequality] would happen, and by gradual reform, it will slowly become more equal. It's a kind of progress; it cannot be judged good or bad.  
(Female, 28, executive director)

Thus, economic inequality is viewed as a necessary cost and a means of obtaining economic development. In the longer run, when a certain level of economic wealth has been achieved, some degree of economic equality ideally would surface. However, only some interviewees mentioned this. Therefore, what seems to be most central in the developmental framing of inequality is the importance attached to overall economic growth, which is used to justify greater wealth accumulation for some.

The developmental framing of inequality corresponds with some previous research. With their tunnel effect theory, Hirschman and Rothschild (1973) argued that in the process of economic development, people are more accepting of inequality. People's welfare not only depends on their current living conditions, but also on their expected future living conditions. As they witness the living conditions of people around them improve, they also believe that their own living conditions will improve soon. Therefore, people will be quite accepting of inequality at this point, as they can experience the economy as a whole improving. Previous research has found that people in China (Xie and Wang, 2009; Whyte, 2010,

2016; Xie *et al.*, 2012) and internationally (Larsen, 2016) are more accepting of economic inequality when they experience general improvements in living conditions.

Therefore, the developmental framing of inequality does not seem to be a uniquely Chinese way to frame inequality, but in recent decades, substantial economic growth in China has made the developmental framing particularly relevant to Chinese people's view of economic inequality. Many Chinese people have witnessed living conditions, including their own, improve, but they also have observed increasing economic disparities among people. Therefore, they tend to view economic inequality and economic wealth as closely interrelated (Xie and Wang, 2009). And because the idea underlying the developmental framing, as described above, also was a central part of neoliberal (Harvey, 2005; Littler, 2017) and CPC (Deng, 1986; Chang, 1996) discourses, Chinese people also have been exposed to this idea of elite-driven general growth.

The worldview underlying the developmental framing of inequality emphasizes comparisons with oneself over time, rather than comparisons across the larger society. Many Chinese people have experienced their own living conditions improve over the past few decades, but considering that economic inequality also has increased, this comparison with society is less important:

We should try our best to find a suitable way for our own development under the big environmental framework instead of every day questioning the environment itself.  
(Female, 29, tattoo artist)

Individuals should focus on improving themselves now compared with in the past, rather than dwelling on current social inequalities. Xie (2016, p. 338) described how 'Chinese culture encourages people to look forward.' Confucian values emphasize that individuals should focus on improving themselves, rather than looking for others to blame (Barbalet, 2013, 2017; Yang, 2017). Therefore, current economic inequality is not that important. It is more important how your life has improved compared with how it was before and how you can improve it further in the future (Xie, 2016). From this perspective, economic inequality in China today is not as important as the fact that most people now enjoy better living conditions than they did before.

### 5.3 The difference-order framing

The final framing of inequality identified among the interviewees was the difference-order framing, in which economic inequality is viewed as a natural phenomenon because people are born into different segments of society, with different families and different sets of resources. Therefore, individuals have different starting points in life, but this is not viewed as unfair:

(It) may be that their parents are richer, and then [the children] may enjoy some extra [education resources], such as evening classes or interest-oriented classes. ... I actually don't consider it an issue of fairness or unfairness because the condition you are born into is just what it is.  
(Male, 29, HR employee)

I think there are social circles. For example, if you grew up in a military compound in Beijing, your social circle is [different] from that of ordinary people. That is unequal. Equality is very difficult to achieve. ... I think it depends on social circles. ... I do not think that this can be judged as good or bad.

(Female, 43, teacher in extracurricular school)

Thus, if people are born into a specific context, e.g. a family with more resources, it is not something that the individual can control, so it is not unfair.

This framing of inequality corresponds with some of Fei's ([1947] 1992) thoughts on the mode of differential and orderly association, which he argued characterized traditional China. People are not born as independent individuals who are equal members of a larger society. Rather, they are born as individuals into a specific context with specific personal relationships. Therefore, moral obligations are not universal, i.e. they do not apply to all people equally. Moral obligations are tied to specific personal relationships, among which the most important is with family members, particularly the parent-child relationship. Parents' primary obligation is to their own children, and it would be morally wrong if parents did not do what was within their power to help their children. This logic is also apparent in the interviews regarding whether it is OK for some people to be able to afford better education for their children than others:

It's not unfair [that some people can afford to move to a better school district while others can't].  
It is money earned through their own ability.  
(Male, 46, financial and insurance salesman)

According to the difference-order framing, nothing is wrong with parents providing a better education for their children. As a consequence, it is impossible to have an equal start because individuals are always born into specific families with unequal resources. Several interviewees justified this unequal start by referring to the efforts of people's ancestors:

A rich second generation [person], maybe he didn't make any effort, [but] maybe his parents and grandfathers, they definitely made some [effort].  
(Male, 27, painter)

In this way, the difference-order framing of inequality is combined with the meritocratic framing, but ancestors' merits, rather than those of the individual, are emphasized. However, this is not a problem because moral obligations are tied to the parent-child relationship.

The difference-order framing of inequality emphasizes that people are born into different families with different levels of resources and that because individuals' moral obligations are primarily tied to their kinship relationships, they should take care of these people, particularly their parents and children. Therefore, people using their resources to provide better living conditions for their families is viewed as normal and expected. In this framing, the inequality arising from rich parents providing their children with better and more resources compared with poorer parents is not deemed unfair, but rather as something that parents should do if they have the resources.

The difference-order framing stands in contrast to framings of inequality identified in previous research. Within these framings, economic inequality is viewed as just if opportunities for economic advancement are perceived as being equally distributed (McCall, 2013; Larsen, 2016; Xian and Reynolds, 2017; García-Sánchez *et al.*, 2019; Mijs, 2021). Whereas the difference-order framing accepts that opportunities are not equal, but dependent on one's origin, this is viewed as a problem under the equal opportunities framing because opportunities to advance should not depend on having a wealthy family, but instead should be

distributed equally so that all segments of society have a fair chance of achieving economically.

The worldview behind the difference-order framing emphasizes that people are not independent individuals who are equal members of a larger society. Rather, they are always born into a specific context with specific personal relationships. They belong in one segment of society because this is where their relationships tie them. People within a society are originally unequal and, thus, different. This framing of inequality highlights that differences exist between people and their starting points in life, and that an order exists among people because certain moral obligations exist in specific relationships. Inspired by Fei's ([1947] 1992) mode of differential and orderly association, I termed this framing of inequality the *difference-order framing*, according to which, economic inequality in China today is a natural phenomenon because people simply are born into different segments of society, which is not unfair.

## 5.4 Critical framings

Even though the three framings presented in the previous three subsections all justified the unequal distribution of resources in China today, other ways of framing inequality that were less widespread among the interviewees had a somewhat more critical view of the distribution of resources.

One of these more critical framings emphasizes how economic inequality potentially could make society less stable. For instance, these interviewees would say that 'it would be better to have more equality in terms of the stability of the whole society' (female, 30) or that 'inequality causes crimes, such as robbing, beating, and smashing' (male, 53). Therefore, for these interviewees, economic inequality should not be too great. Even though the emphasis on social stability is not a particularly Chinese framing of inequality (Mau, 2004), the theme also has been central in CPC discourses (Williams and Woo, 1995; Leung and Xu, 2015) and also generally has been an important issue throughout Chinese history (Xie, 2016).

Another way in which inequality was framed in more critical terms relates to situations in which inequalities are perceived as not being the result of differences in merit. Accordingly, some interviewees would point out that a mismatch exists between the merits of certain groups and their rewards. For instance, they would say that 'the quality of life of the common people should be improved. Because ordinary people contribute a lot, farming and growing vegetables, I think ordinary people are also working very hard' (female, 43), or '[the fact that] the incomes of celebrities far exceed those of some scientists, I don't particularly understand this' (male, 45). Thus, these interviewees also would emphasize merit, but instead of using the meritocratic principle to justify the current distribution of resources within society, as described in Subsection 5.1, they used this principle to problematize elements of the distribution, indicating that the idea of meritocracy can be used to both justify and problematize wealth distributions (see also Son Hing *et al.*, 2011).

Finally, it is also worth noting that some interviewees pointed out that opportunities to advance economically should be more equal. For instance, unlike the difference-order framing, these interviewees said that 'educational resources should be distributed more according to the individual qualities of students than the economic factors of families' (female, 29), or that 'we should make these better educational resources more evenly distributed, so that this generation can receive a relatively fair education' (male, 35). Therefore, for these

interviewees, a fair distribution of resources is dependent on relatively equal opportunities for economic advancement and should not depend on one's social background. This is more in line with the equal opportunities framing identified in previous research (McCall, 2013; Larsen, 2016; Xian and Reynolds, 2017; García-Sánchez *et al.*, 2019; Mijis, 2021). Thus, not all interviewees applied the difference-order framing of inequality.

Thus, more critical framings of inequality were not completely absent among the interviewees, even though these critical framings were less widespread than the three framings of inequality presented in the previous three subsections.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

In this article, I examined the cultural resources that Chinese people deploy to frame economic inequality. In this final section, I discuss my findings. My theoretical starting point was Swidler's (1986, 2001) theory on cultural repertoires, which enable people to form attitudes toward inequality by providing them with the cultural resources they need to frame economic inequality in a specific way.

I found that the most dominant way of framing economic inequality was by emphasizing the meritocratic idea that people who work harder and are smarter should be rewarded. Existing research has also identified this framing in other parts of the world—probably due to neoliberalism's dominant position in economic discourses across the world in recent decades. However, the meritocratic framing of inequality also corresponds with Confucianism and Deng Xiaoping's thought. It is based on a worldview that views individuals as selfish, i.e. efforts and rewards must align to incentivize them to work and contribute. Thus, economic inequality is viewed as a consequence of rewards differing based on effort and contributions.

The second framing of inequality emphasized that economic inequality is a necessary cost of economic development. With this framing, the interviewees argued that because everyone's living conditions have improved, it is not important that inequality has increased. That people are more accepting of inequalities when they are experiencing general economic growth within society, has also been pointed out in previous research, but given recent decades' extraordinary economic growth in China, this framing of inequality is particularly relevant for Chinese society. The developmental framing corresponds with Deng Xiaoping's view on giving some people a head start to accumulate wealth so that they can create general economic growth. This idea also is embodied in the neoliberal notion of trickle-down economics. This framing is based on a worldview in which living conditions are compared over time, rather than across a population. Therefore, it is more important that general living conditions in all parts of society today are better than they were before and less important that some people in society have better living conditions than others.

The third framing of inequality emphasized that because people are born into different families with different levels of resources, economic inequality is normal. The difference-order framing corresponds with Fei's ([1947] 1992) description of Chinese society: Individuals are morally obligated to help family members, i.e. individuals' primary responsibilities are their families—their parents and children—and other people are secondary. Thus, inequality is acceptable and normal because people are born into different segments of society. The difference-order framing stands in contrast to framings identified in previous research, where it is emphasized that opportunities for economic advancement should be

equally distributed. According to the difference-order framing, people have unequal opportunities for economic advancement, i.e. some people will have more resources at their disposal when they are born, making inequality inevitable.

These three framings justify, rather than problematize, economic inequality. However, some interviewees applied some critical framings. Some framed economic inequality as a threat to social stability, while others criticized how current economic inequality in China does not reflect differences in merit between people. Finally, some interviewees believed that opportunities for economic advancement should be distributed more equally. Therefore, even though, given the Chinese political context, it is worth considering whether interviewees are holding back on expressing more critical views, more critical framings of economic inequality were not completely absent from the interviews. Nevertheless, the three framings used to justify economic inequality certainly were the most dominant ways of framing inequality that I identified among the interviewees. Thus, these three framings at the very least represent some ways that Chinese people frame economic inequality in this kind of social context. It cannot be ruled out that Chinese people would frame it differently, and maybe more critically, in other kinds of social contexts, but this is a question for future research.

It is also worth noting that the Maoist idea of the class struggle was not used by the interviewees to frame inequality, even though some of them were born during the Maoist era, an omission with some possible explanations. First, most interviewees were born after the Maoist era; thus, they have been less exposed to Maoist ideas than people were during the Maoist era. Therefore, Maoist ideas are not part of their cultural repertoires. Second, the classes that were the foci of the Maoist era's class struggles are very different from the economic classes we see in China today. In the countryside, it was a struggle between those who owned much land and those who owned little or no land. In the cities, the most intense class struggle was the Cultural Revolution, which primarily targeted the political elite. For both of these class struggles, it was not a struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in a Marxist context (Marx and Engels, [1848] 2020), i.e. they were not struggles that concerned the unequal distribution of economic resources within an industrialized economy (Marx, [1867] 1999). Therefore, the class struggle idea that Chinese people perhaps have as part of their cultural repertoires might not be so directly applicable to the economic inequalities that we see in China's industrialized society today.

Third, it also might help to consider Swidler's (1986, 2001) distinction between settled and unsettled periods. During the Maoist era—particularly during the Cultural Revolution—China was characterized by social instability. People lived very unsettled lives, and it was difficult to orient themselves. Maoist ideology then became a way for ordinary people to orient themselves in a changing environment. However, the Maoist ideology's influence was not unlimited. First, Maoist ideology focused on class struggle, but did not pay much attention to other aspects of life (Meisner, 1977; Chang, 1996; Womack, 2001). Therefore, Maoism did not completely replace older cultural resources, e.g. Confucian ideas. Second, Maoist ideology gained much of its strength through public meetings and sanctions, but as the context changed with Mao's death and the initiation of reforms, there were no more public meetings and sanctions, which could strengthen the ideological discipline. Thus, Maoist ideas decreased in importance in people's cultural repertoires (Swidler, 2001, p. 172). Third, Maoism competed with alternative cultural frameworks—primarily traditional Confucian ideas, Deng Xiaoping thought and neoliberalism. Thus, these alternative cultural frameworks outstripped Maoism, i.e. Chinese people's cultural repertoires seem to



be less informed by Maoist ideas and more by the ideas of Confucianism, Deng Xiaoping thought and neoliberalism.

These cultural resources enable Chinese people to frame economic inequality. First, Chinese people's conviction on human beings' selfishness means that economic inequality is viewed as a consequence of differences in merit because incentives are viewed as necessary to make people work and contribute. Second, individuals primarily are viewed as being tied to a network of specific personal relationships with moral obligations; thus, it is expected for people to help their families financially, particularly their parents and children. Therefore, economic equality is impossible because people are born into different families with different levels of resources. Third, the focus is on how individuals and individual parts of society are doing compared with before, rather than how they are doing compared with the remaining segments of society. People are too different to compare, as they have different merits and are born into different segments of society, with a greater emphasis on comparisons with oneself over time. Therefore, it is more important that most Chinese people have experienced improvement in their living conditions in recent decades and less important that economic inequality has increased.

This article has demonstrated that even though economic inequality is a relatively new phenomenon in Chinese society, Chinese cultural repertoires very much enable Chinese people to justify economic inequality, including current economic inequality in China. Inequality is framed less in line with Maoist ideas about class struggle and making society more equal, and more in line with Confucianism, Deng Xiaoping thought and neoliberal ideas on meritocracy, the family and economic growth. The framings that many interviewees applied represent a greater justification for economic inequality than the Maoist perspective on inequality.

Even though I found that Chinese people's cultural repertoires enable them to justify economic inequality, the findings also suggest that if large segments of the population begin to feel that their living conditions are not improving compared with before, or if they feel that economic inequality does not reflect differences in individuals or ancestors' merit, Chinese people might not be as accepting of economic inequality. This is a question for future research.

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