RUNNING HEAD: PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL MOBILITY IN CHINA

Chinese perceive upward social mobility:

How future mobility is influenced, but not limited by past mobility

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Abstract

Perceptions of social mobility vary across countries. However, past studies have mostly focused on populations in Western developed countries. Little is known about perceptions of social mobility in non-Western developing countries. The current paper focuses on Chinese perceptions of social mobility using a large-scale nationally representative sample. We found that, overall, Chinese believed in upward social mobility. Moreover, different patterns of perceptions of social mobility were identified, which suggest that respondents experienced either upward or downward social mobility in the past, but all of them thought that they can move up in the future. Perceptions of social mobility were also linked to important socio-demographic and economic factors. We discuss these findings in relation to the Chinese economic context.

Keywords: social mobility, optimism, economic growth, income inequality, China

Introduction

Although many people desire upward social mobility (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015), not all individuals believe that they can move up in the future (Alesina, Stantcheva, & Teso, 2018). For example, Americans show an optimistic bias—they think that the odds of moving up the social ladder is higher than the reality. Europeans, on the other hand, show the opposite tendency. They are more pessimistic and perceive that the odds of moving up is lower than the reality (Alesina et al., 2018). However, much of the research on perceptions of social mobility has focused on developed countries in the West. Little research has been undertaken in developing countries.

The present study used a large-scale nationally representative sample in China to examine perceptions of social mobility. This paper has three overarching goals. The first goal is to demonstrate overall patterns of perceptions of social mobility in China. The second goal is to explain who would be more likely to perceive the possibility of upward mobility. The third goal is to explore heterogeneity in perceptions of social mobility and examine sociodemographic characteristics related to various patterns of perceptions of social mobility. To achieve these three goals, we adopted both variable-centered and person-centered approaches.

Perceptions of Social Mobility Vary across Countries

Perceptions of upward social mobility reflect one's optimistic thinking, which is associated with a wide range of adaptive outcomes. Optimistic people have better psychological and physical well-being than pessimistic people (Scheier & Carver, 1993). Optimistic students have a greater long-term academic achievement (Day, Hanson, Maltby, Proctor, & Wood, 2010), and optimistic employees show better job performance (Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998). Holding an optimistic view that one can move up the social ladder might motivate people to work hard and succeed (Hochschild, 1996).

Prior research has explored Americans' perceptions of social mobility. The American dream is a typical example of optimistic perceptions of social mobility. From a social psychological perspective, it reflects the prevalent belief that everyone can climb up to the highest rung of the social ladder (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015). The majority of Americans believe that they have plenty of opportunities to move upward (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015). However, the real chance of upward mobility has been decreasing, such that rates of absolute mobility have fallen from approximately 90% for children born in 1940 to 50% for children born in the 1980s. This means that the American dream is fading in reality (Chetty et al., 2017). Americans overestimate the chance of upward social mobility within an individual's lifetime (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015). Therefore, belief in the American dream seems to be based on an overly optimistic view of the chances of upward mobility that, at least currently, are no longer realistic.

Although one could surmise that rising inequality in the United States might weaken Americans' perceptions of social mobility (Davidai, 2018), the ironic fact is that Americans underestimate the levels of economic inequality (Norton & Ariely, 2011). This leads them to persist in their belief in the American dream. However, when Americans realize the large gap between the rich and the poor, they then lower their estimates of upward mobility (Davidai, 2018).

Is the 'American dream' also prevalent in all other countries? In comparison to the United States, residents in European countries including France, Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom perceive lower upward social mobility than actual mobility in their societies (Alesina et al., 2018). These findings suggest that perceptions of social mobility vary across countries, even within Western developed countries.

Perceptions of Social Mobility in China

Past studies on social mobility perceptions have been limited to populations in Western and developed countries, where the majority of psychological research involves Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) participants (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Considerable variations in fairness, cooperation, and preference for equality have been demonstrated between the WEIRD people and people from non-industrialized countries (Henrich et al., 2010). Therefore, the findings of perceptions of social mobility based on the WEIRD people may not be generalized to populations in developing countries. Little research has been undertaken to understand perceptions of social mobility among populations in developing countries. For example, is there such a thing as the ‘Chinese dream’—optimistic perceptions of upward social mobility in China? The current paper aimed to address this gap by investigating perceptions of social mobility in China, as an exemplar case of a developing country experiencing rapid economic growth.

China’s national economic conditions, regional development gaps, and the complexity of social structures make it fundamentally different from developed Western countries (Y. Chen & Fan, 2019). China has experienced rapid economic growth in the past 40 years. However, at the same time, income inequality has also increased substantially. For example, China had a Gini coefficient above 0.5 in 2010, compared with 0.45 in the United States (Xie & Zhou, 2014). Moreover, rising inequality is widely perceived by ordinary Chinese in their own lives (Du, Chi, & King, 2019; Du, King, & Chi, 2019; Du, Zhou, et al., 2021) and recognized as one of the most serious social problems that needs to be addressed (Du, Chen, Chi, & King, 2020; Wu & Xie, 2013). Rising inequality leads people to pay more attention to their social status (Du, Chen, et al., 2021), which may further affect their perceptions of social mobility. Moreover, rapid economic growth accompanied by rising inequality makes China an interesting context to examine perceptions of social mobility. Considering the preponderance of cases wherein economic growth goes hand in hand with rising inequality in

developing countries (Fosu, 2017; Milanovic, 2005; Ravallion, 2001), China serves as a suitable setting to examine perceptions of social mobility in a non-Western developing economy.

To the best of our knowledge, only one recent study (H. Chen, Wang, Chen, & Li, 2018) investigated perceptions of social mobility among Chinese. This study showed that 52.39% of 8,602 respondents in a national survey perceived upward social mobility in the next five years, and perceptions of upward mobility were associated with individual-level sociodemographic factors (e.g., age, gender, marital status, education), but not with regional-level economic factors (e.g., economic inequality, GDP per capita). The study of H. Chen et al. (2018) provided preliminary evidence on perceptions of upward social mobility in China; however, we note three key limitations that our study hopes to address. First, their study did not consider the role of past mobility in shaping expectations of future mobility. Although they did measure past experiences of social mobility, they did not link this to future mobility. Individuals are very likely to perceive their future mobility based on their experience of mobility in the past (Piketty, 1995). For example, people who have experienced upward mobility in the past ten years may expect similar upward mobility in the future ten years. Hence, failing to account for past mobility makes it difficult to understand perceptions of future mobility and may lead to biased estimates. Second, the longer the time horizon is, the greater the extent of perceived mobility. For example, individuals estimate that their children, upon growing up, will experience greater upward mobility than themselves (Shariff, Wiwad, & Aknin, 2016). The relatively short time horizon in the study of H. Chen et al. (2018) (i.e., estimate one's own social mobility five years later) may have limited the generalizability of their study. Third, and more importantly, not all individuals hold the same belief in upward social mobility (Alesina et al., 2018). The study of H. Chen et al. (2018), as well as the studies in Western countries, focused on the overall trend in terms of perceptions of social

mobility using variable-centered approaches but neglected heterogeneity in these perceptions (Alesina et al., 2018; Cheng & Wen, 2019; Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015). The current research attempted to capture both overall trends and potential heterogeneity in perceptions of mobility using both variable- and person-centered approaches.

Variable- and Person-Centered Approaches to Perceptions of Social Mobility

Variable-centered approaches pertain to a suite of statistical approaches that focus on examining relationships among variables (e.g., correlation, multiple regression, structural equation modelling) (Von Eye, Bogat, & Rhodes, 2006). Previous studies on social mobility have mostly used a variable-centered approach (Alesina et al., 2018; H. Chen et al., 2018; Cheng & Wen, 2019; Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015). Using the variable-centered approach allows us to understand the overall relationships among variables. For example, one important finding of a variable-centered study was that people with higher income were more likely to perceive upward social mobility (H. Chen et al., 2018).

In contrast to variable-centered approaches, person-centered approaches focus on identifying distinct groups of individuals in a population (e.g., cluster analysis, latent profile analysis) (Von Eye et al., 2006). Person-centered approaches might be especially relevant to research on social mobility perceptions because individuals can hold different beliefs about social mobility (Alesina et al., 2018). For example, people who have experienced upward social mobility in the past might be more optimistic about the future and expect continuous upward mobility. In contrast, for individuals who have experienced downward social mobility, will they expect upward or downward mobility in the future? Without examining various patterns of perceptions of social mobility in a population, researchers may have made an overgeneralization of optimistic/pessimistic perceptions of social mobility to all individuals in a population.

The variable-centered approach, which has been most commonly used in previous research on perceptions of social mobility, cannot distinguish individuals with different patterns of social mobility perceptions as variable-centered approaches only focus on overall trends. To overcome this shortcoming, in addition to the use of the variable-centered approach, we also adopted a person-centered approach (Von Eye et al., 2006) to analyze heterogeneity in perceptions of social mobility (e.g., individuals with perceived downward mobility in the past and perceived upward mobility in the future).

The Present Study

The present study aimed to understand perceptions of social mobility among Chinese. Specifically, we aimed to examine a) whether there was an overall pattern of perceptions of upward social mobility among Chinese, b) what sociodemographic and economic factors would be associated with mobility perceptions, and c) whether there were different patterns in perceptions of social mobility across individuals.

Based on the extant literature, we hypothesized that overall, Chinese would demonstrate perceptions of upward social mobility. We did not formulate hypotheses on the prediction of sociodemographic and economic factors on perceptions of social mobility, because of limited existing findings. Regarding different patterns in perceptions of social mobility, we expect to reveal two patterns of upward social mobility: one pattern showing that Chinese have perceptions of upward mobility in the past and also expect upward mobility in the future, and the other pattern showing that Chinese have perceptions of downward mobility in the past but still expect upward mobility in the future.

Because previous research demonstrated that both individual-level sociodemographic factors and society-level economic factors were associated with perceptions of social mobility (Alesina et al., 2018; H. Chen et al., 2018; Davidai & Gilovich, 2015), we used sociodemographic measures as personal predictors in the survey and also retrieved data of

economic factors as society-level predictors (wealth, income inequality, economic growth). Given the lack of research among Chinese, we did not formulate specific hypotheses.

The current paper contributes to the literature in three ways. First, we adopt both variable-centered and person-centered approaches. With the variable-centered approach, we described the overall pattern of perceptions of upward social mobility and examined the sociodemographic and economic factors related to perceptions of social mobility. With the person-centered approach, we identified different groups of Chinese who showed various patterns of perceptions of social mobility and examined the sociodemographic composition of these different groups.

Second, to address the limitation of neglecting the role of past mobility in past studies, we adopted a developmental perspective to investigate perceptions of social mobility in the context of past experience of mobility. Past studies have examined the roles of sociodemographic (e.g., income, gender, education, and ethnicity) and economic (e.g., GDP per capita, economic inequality) factors in social mobility (Alesina et al., 2018; H. Chen et al., 2018; Davidai & Gilovich, 2015); however, one essential aspect neglected in the prior literature is one's past experience of social mobility. Individuals' personal experiences of upward/downward mobility may determine their views about social mobility in the future (Piketty, 1995). Therefore, the current paper puts perceptions of social mobility in the context of past experience of mobility. To achieve this goal, we assessed perceived social status in the past, the present, and the future, and estimated perceptions of social mobility through subjective social status. Social mobility in the past was indicated by the change in social status from the past to the present, and social mobility in the future was indicated by the change in social status from the present to the future. This approach can shed light on future research linking past mobility to perceptions of future mobility.

Third, the longer the time horizon is, the more optimistic individuals are about their prospects of moving up the social ladder such that individuals estimate that their children after growing up will have greater upward social mobility than themselves (Shariff et al., 2016). The short time horizon in a previous study by H. Chen and colleagues (2018) (i.e., estimate one's own social mobility five years later) may have limited the extent of perceived social mobility. To broaden the potential extent of perceptions of social mobility, the present study examined individuals' estimation of their social mobility in the future ten years.

Method

Data source

The data for our main analyses were derived from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS; Bian & Li, 2012). The CGSS is a nationally representative survey of China's urban and rural households on social structure and quality of life, which was conducted by Renmin University of China (<http://www.chinagss.org/>). Data were collected through personal interviews with a structured questionnaire. Targeted participants were adults aged 18 and older. Participants were recruited from 30 provinces/municipalities in China. For the current analyses, we used the cross-sectional data of the second phase of the CGSS, which were conducted in 2010-2013, and 2015, with available data of perceptions of social mobility (the 2014 data were excluded from analysis because of its limited data on the elderly population). Through a stratified sampling strategy, households were randomly selected in regions based on China's fifth population census, and one eligible household member was further selected from each sampled household as a participant.

The current study used publicly available de-identified secondary data and the authors had no interaction with the participants; therefore, human subjects ethical review was not required.

Participants

The data of the CGSS in five years were combined for analyses, which contained 51,574 participants, 51.20% of whom were females, with an average age of 48.71 (see Table S1).

Measures

Perceptions of social mobility. The CGSS survey asked respondents to estimate their subjective social status in the present, ten years ago, and ten years later, respectively. The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Goodman et al., 2001) was used, which is a widely used instrument of subjective social status. Subjective social status plays an important role in one's well-being, beyond the impact of objective social status (Zell, Strickhouser, & Krizan, 2018). The scale contained a picture of a 10-rung ladder on which participants can place themselves. The top of the ladder represents people who are the best-off in the society, but the bottom represents people who are the worst off. Participants rated their own social status successively in the present, ten years ago, and ten years later, by using the number ranging from 1 (the bottom of the ladder) to 10 (the top of the ladder). The ladder scale has been commonly utilized to estimate perceptions of social mobility in prior literature (Alesina et al., 2018; Davidai, 2018).

In the current study, perceptions of social mobility were indicated by the comparisons among social status in the past, in the present, and in the future. Specifically, perception of social mobility in the past was estimated by subtracting one's social status ten years ago from social status in the present, whereas perception of social mobility in the future was estimated by subtracting one's social status in the present from social status ten years later. Positive values of perceptions of social mobility indicate upward social mobility, whereas negative values indicate downward social mobility. This method of estimating social mobility based on social status in the past, present, and future has two methodological strengths (Cheng & Wen, 2019). This method differentiates perceived social status at different time points and

allows us to assess perceptions of social mobility from a developmental perspective.

Moreover, the items of social status were relatively simple to estimate for respondents with minimal cognitive burden.

Sociodemographic factors. Participants' sociodemographic information was collected in the survey, including age, gender (0 = male; 1 = female), education (1 = no formal education; 7 = postgraduate and higher), personal annual income (log-transformed), urban/rural sites (0 = countryside; 1 = city).

Economic factors. We included three provincial-level economic factors to predict perceptions of social mobility: wealth (i.e., GDP per capita), income inequality (i.e., Gini index), and economic growth rate (i.e., GDP change rate). To assess wealth across provinces in China, we obtained the data of provincial-level GDP per capita in 2010 from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2010).

Gini index was used to assess economic inequality across provinces in China. We adopted the data of provincial-level Gini index in 2010, which were estimated based on China Family Panel Studies and proven as a reliable and valid index of income inequality (Xie & Zhou, 2014).

To assess various economic growth rates across provinces in China, we obtained the data of provincial-level GDP change rates from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2010), in which the GDP change rates were indicated by the ratio of 2010 GDP to 2009 GDP, with 2009 GDP equal to 100. For example, if the economic growth rate of a province increased by 10% from 2009 to 2010, then the GDP change rate will be 110.

Results

Variable-centered analyses: Is there a Chinese Dream of upward social mobility?

Our first question focuses on overall patterns of social mobility perceptions among Chinese. A preliminary analysis showed that perceptions of social status were moderately or

highly correlated with each other: past and present status $r = .593$ ($p < .001$), past and future status $r = .376$ ($p < .001$), and present and future status $r = .741$ ($p < .001$). These moderate to high correlations suggest that perceived social status in the past, present, and future were closely related to but distinct from each other.

We first compared the proportions of respondents in each of the 10 rungs between the past, the present, and the future, to understand whether, on the whole, Chinese perceive upward social mobility (i.e., higher social status at later timepoints). Regarding the comparison between social status in the past and the present, 10.8% of respondents ranked at rungs 6-10 in the past, and this percentage increased to 17.2% in the present. Looking at the ranks more specifically, the numbers of respondents who rated themselves at rungs 1 to 3 in the present were significantly fewer than the numbers of respondents at these rungs in the past ($ps < .001$) (see Fig. 1). In contrast, the number of respondents who rated themselves at rungs 4 to 8 in the present were significantly more than the numbers of respondents at these rungs in the past ($ps \leq .001$). Moreover, the number of respondents who rated themselves at rung 10 in the present was significantly more than the number of respondents at rung 10 in the past ($p = .038$). The only non-significant comparison between the past and the present was at rung 9 ($p = .313$). These results suggest that Chinese perceived upward social mobility in the past ten years.

Insert Fig. 1 about here

Fig. 1. The distributions of perceptions of social status in the past, in the present, and in the future.

In terms of the comparison between social status in the present and the future, we found proportions of people at rungs 6-10 increased from 17.2% in the present to 43.8% in the future. Specifically, the number of respondents who rated themselves at rungs 1 to 5 in

the future were significantly fewer than the numbers of respondents at these rungs in the present ($ps < .001$). In contrast, the numbers of respondents who rated themselves at rungs 6 to 10 in the future were significantly more than the numbers of respondents at these rungs in the present ($ps < .001$). These results suggest that the Chinese were optimistic about future upward mobility, which are in line with our hypotheses.

Variable-centered analyses: Who perceives more upward social mobility?

Unequal distributions of social status in the 10 rungs suggest that individuals did not perceive social mobility to the same extent. Moreover, varieties of perceptions of both social mobility in the past (see Fig. 2A) and in the future (see Fig. 2B) were shown across the provinces of China. In this section, we wanted to understand who would perceive more upward social mobility from the past to the future in China and therefore explored personal and economic determinants of perceptions of upward social mobility. We conducted a multilevel analysis by which perceived social status in the future was regressed on personal and economic predictors, when controlling for perceived social status in the past. Personal predictors included age, gender, education, income, urban/rural sites, and economic predictors included provincial-level wealth (indicated by GDP per capita), income inequality (indicated by Gini index), and economic growth rate (indicated by GDP change rate) (see detailed results in Table S2).

Insert Fig. 2A and Fig. 2B about here

Fig. 2A. Perception of social mobility in the past ten years across provinces in China.

Fig. 2B. Perception of social mobility in the future ten years across provinces in China.

At the individual level, Chinese who were younger ($p < .001$), females ($p < .001$), more educated ($p < .001$), with higher income ($p < .001$), and with higher social status in the past ($p < .001$), perceived higher social status in the future. No difference was found between

urban and rural areas ($p = .416$). These results suggest that Chinese, who were younger, females, more educated, better paid, and living in rich areas, and experienced upward social mobility in the past, perceived a higher possibility of upward social mobility.

At the province level, GDP per capita ($p = .022$) and the Gini index ($p = .002$), were positively associated with higher social status in the future, indicating that Chinese living in provinces with more wealth and higher income inequality perceived more upward social mobility. In contrast, the GDP change rate was negatively associated with higher social status in the future, suggesting that Chinese living in provinces with lower growth rates perceived more upward social mobility.

Person-centered analyses: Are there different patterns of perceptions of social mobility?

The overall pattern of upward social mobility among Chinese does not mean that all respondents perceived upward social mobility to the same extent. Hence, we explored the heterogeneity in perceptions of social mobility by conducting latent profile analysis. The analysis revealed five classes of social mobility: upper class, upper-middle class, middle class, lower-middle class, and lowest class (see detailed results in Tables S3 and S4). As shown in Fig. 3, the top four classes (83.79%) perceived upward social mobility in the past ten years ($ps < .001$), and respondents in these classes perceived upward social mobility in the future ten years ($ps < .001$). In contrast, the lowest class (16.21%) experienced downward social mobility in the past ten years ($p < .001$). However, they still perceived that they would experience upward social mobility in the future ten years ($p < .001$). These results largely confirmed our hypotheses of two patterns of perceptions of social mobility. The first pattern, which applied to the top four classes, reflects a trend wherein upward mobility was experienced in the past and there is a continued expectation of upward mobility in the future. The second pattern, which applied to the lowest class, shows downward mobility in the past accompanied by an expectation of upward mobility in the future. These findings indicate

optimistic attitudes of Chinese toward the future, regardless of upward or downward mobility in the past.

Insert Fig. 3 about here
Fig. 3. The illustration of latent profiles based on perceptions of social status in the past, in the present, and in the future.

Among the top four classes with positive perceptions, the upper class is worth discussing. Respondents in the top-status group reported upward mobility from rank 6.26 on average in the past to rank 8.58 in the present. Although they still perceived upward social mobility in the future, their estimated average rank ten years later was 8.89, without reaching the highest rank range 9 to 10. These results suggest that when people already have a very high social status, they would not perceive that they can continuously have a very big upward mobility perhaps reflecting ceiling effects.

Person-centered analyses: What accounts for various patterns of perceptions of social mobility?

To understand what makes an individual more likely to be in a certain class, we further examined how sociodemographic characteristics were associated with classes of perceptions of social mobility using multinomial regression analysis. Our earlier multilevel analyses answered the question of who was more likely to have perceptions of upward social mobility. This multinomial regression analysis seeks to answer who were more likely to be in the top four classes (with upward mobility in both the past and the future), compared with the lowest class (with downward mobility in the past but perceived upward mobility in the future). Table S5 presents the results of the multinomial regression analysis.

Income and gender were significant predictors across all classes, such that higher-income ($ps < .001$) and female ($ps < .001$) respondents were more likely to be in higher

classes than the lowest class. Relative to uneducated respondents, respondents with higher levels of education were more likely to be in the higher classes ($ps \leq .006$), except that respondents with primary school and postgraduate education were not distinguishable from uneducated respondents between the lower-middle class and the lowest class. Older respondents were more likely to be in the upper class and the upper-middle class ($ps < .001$), but not in other classes. Urban respondents were more likely to be placed in the higher classes than the lowest class, but only among the upper class ($p = .082$) and the upper-middle class ($p = .001$). These results suggest that Chinese, who were older, females, more educated, better paid, and living in urban cities, were more likely to experience upward mobility in the past and also expect upward mobility in the future.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the overall patterns of social mobility perceptions among the Chinese population, identify the sociodemographic and economic predictors of these mobility perceptions, and explore whether there are heterogeneities in social mobility perceptions. We have three key findings. First, a large-scale nationally representative sample of Chinese held optimistic perceptions of upward social mobility and believed that they were able to move up the social ladder. Second, personal and economic characteristics accounted for the extent of perceptions of social mobility and the different patterns of perceptions of social mobility. Third, various patterns of perceptions of social mobility were identified, which indicated that not all respondents perceived upward social mobility in the past, but all of them perceived upward social mobility in the future.

Our findings suggest that perceptions of upward social mobility can be observed in non-Western developing countries. This work extends previous findings in China (H. Chen et al., 2018) by showing that perceptions of upward social mobility in the future among Chinese were based on, but not limited by, perceptions of social mobility in the past. The use of

variable-centered and person-centered approaches provides consistent evidence. With the variable-centered approach, we found that 10.8% of respondents perceived that their social status ten years ago was higher than the average (at rungs 6-10). The percentage increased to 17.2% when respondents perceived the current social status, and further increased to 43.8% when they perceived social status ten years later. With the person-centered approach, we found that not all Chinese perceived upward social mobility in the past, but even those who perceived downward mobility in the past expected upward mobility in the future. These findings provide strong evidence on the optimistic perceptions of social mobility among Chinese.

The findings on patterns of social mobility indicate that perceptions of social mobility are partly based on, but not constrained by, past experience of social mobility. On one hand, these results echo theoretical arguments that individuals' views of social mobility can be determined by their personal experience of mobility (Piketty, 1995). For example, although low-status individuals (classes 1-2) believed in upward social mobility, they did not perceive that they would reach the rungs 6-10 on the social ladder in the next ten years. On the other hand, the pattern of downward mobility in the past and upward mobility in the future among low-status individuals (class 1) suggest that perceptions of social mobility do not solely depend on their past experience. Societal-level economic development may bring low-status people higher hopes for their future and a positive view on changes in socioeconomic status (Browman, Destin, Carswell, & Svoboda, 2017; Zhao, Du, Li, Wu, & Chi, 2021).

Perceptions of social mobility were partly explained by three economic factors, including provincial-level wealth, income inequality, and economic growth rate. These results were inconsistent with the findings of H. Chen et al. (2018) who found that these three factors were not significantly associated with perceptions of social mobility in the future. In contrast, our findings showed that Chinese who lived in provinces with higher GDP per

capita perceived more upward mobility. Perhaps, individuals in wealthier provinces where there are more economic opportunities were more optimistic about their future social status.

We also found that Chinese who lived in provinces with higher income inequality perceived more upward social mobility. Perhaps, in developing contexts, inequality shows that there is a possibility of moving up the social ladder. It might also reflect a misunderstanding that inequality is necessarily goes hand in hand with economic development. In other words, individuals may attribute income inequality to regional wealth, so that they expect to achieve financial success in the future. Surprisingly, the economic growth rate was negatively associated with perceptions of upward mobility. It is worth noting that a higher economic growth rate in a province is not equal to more wealth of the province (GDP per capita), and a province may have a high or a low growth rate, regardless of GDP per capita. Therefore, this counterintuitive finding may be accounted for by other potential factors that were not assessed in the current study. Future research is needed to clarify this finding.

Limitations and future research

Despite the large-scale sample and mixed analytic approaches, the current study has four limitations. First, although we adopted a developmental perspective to examine perceptions of social mobility, the data were cross-sectional and therefore we cannot make causal conclusions. Future research can utilize experimental and longitudinal approaches to generate stronger causal conclusions. Second, social status in the past, present and future were all self-reported, which may involve retrospective and self-serving bias. Informant-report methods can be used to replicate our findings. Third, future studies can investigate whether different classes are associated with distinct psychological and behavioral outcomes. Fourth, cross-cultural studies have shown that Chinese are more likely to perceive change, whereas Westerners are more likely to perceive stability or linearity (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001).

Hence, these cultural differences may also have implications for social mobility perceptions which is inherently about change in one's social status. This is an interesting question for future studies to explore.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current research revealed optimistic perceptions of social mobility among Chinese. Regardless of upward or downward mobility in the past, Chinese perceived that they will experience upward social mobility in the future perhaps reflecting a “Chinese dream” similar to the “American dream”. Our findings enrich the emerging psychological literature on perceptions of social mobility by extending it to a developing economy in a non-Western context.

Ethical Compliance Section

Funding: This research was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC31600911).

Compliance with Ethical Standards: The current study used publicly available de-identified secondary data and the authors had no interaction with the participants; therefore, human subjects ethical review was not required.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent: The current study used secondary data, where were derived from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) (Bian & Li, 2012). The CGSS team obtained informed consent from participants included in the study.

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