

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Changing attitudes towards government responsibility for social welfare in China between 2004 and 2014: Evidence from three national surveys

Kristin Dalen^{1,2} 

¹Fafo Research Foundation, Oslo, Norway

²University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

Correspondence

Kristin Dalen, Fafo Research Foundation, Borgata 2b, 0608 Oslo, Norway.
Email: Kristin.Dalen@fafo.no

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Abstract

Social policies in China have expanded rapidly since the early 2000s, broadening welfare provisions aiming to improve citizens' well-being in a context of rapid development and increasing inequality. How people see the role of the government in the provision of welfare is important to policy-making in an authoritarian state, such as China, because regime legitimacy is tied to evaluations of government performance. To what extent have welfare attitudes changed as a new Chinese social security system has emerged? Drawing on nationally representative datasets from the China Inequality and Distributive Justice Survey Project for 2004, 2009 and 2014, this study finds that support for government provision of welfare has increased substantially within all population groups since 2004. Furthermore, traditional social cleavages, such as the urban–rural divide, seem to lose strength as a predictor of redistributive preference, possibly 'deactivating' these social cleavages as vehicles of political mobilisation.

KEYWORDS

China, national survey, social cleavage, welfare attitude

INTRODUCTION

Welfare attitudes indicate the social needs of the public and can be seen as an expression of a government's legitimacy to provide social welfare. Public perceptions of the government's responsibility for welfare provisions are at the core of research aiming to understand what determines preferences for social welfare and distribution. This research uses established theoretical frameworks developed in advanced industrialised democracies, in which self-interest and ideology feature as explanations of divergent levels of support for the range of government responsibility in providing social welfare (Blekesaune & Quadagno,

2003; Gelissen, 2000; Jæger, 2006; Roosma et al., 2014; Svallfors, 2007). However, studies of welfare attitudes in newly developed market economies and outside advanced democracies are still relatively limited (Ansell & Samuels, 2011; Haggard et al., 2013; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017). In the particular context of China, few studies have contributed to the theory, even though emerging literature is establishing new knowledge in the field (He et al., 2020; Huang, 2019; Yang et al., 2019). Studying welfare attitudes is particularly interesting in the Chinese context due to the rapid expansion of social policy and the relative importance of performance legitimacy for China's authoritarian regime (Zhu, 2011).

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TABLE 1 Non-employment based social policy programmes (health, basic education and pensions)

	Implemented	Eligibility
Medical insurance		
New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme (NRCMS)	2005	Rural non-employed
Urban Resident Basic Medical Insurance (URBMI)	2006	Urban non-employed
Basic education		
Free Compulsory Education Act	2006	Including rural students
Pensions insurance		
New Rural Social Pension Scheme	2009	Rural non-employed (if enrolled)
Urban Resident Social Pension Scheme	2011	Urban non-employed (if enrolled)
Unified Urban-Rural Resident Basic Pension System	2014	All non-employed (if enrolled)

At the turn of the 21st century, large portions of the Chinese population were left with limited social protection (Whyte, 2010). Inequality increased rapidly, and China became one of the world's most unequal societies (Riskin et al., 2001; Wang, 2008). Due to fragmentation and privatisation of welfare provision, coupled with decades-long urban–rural segregation via the household-registration system (*hukou*) and development strategies prioritising urban areas, most rural people lacked both health insurance and pension schemes (Whyte, 2010). Rising inequality, paired with unequal opportunities and life chances, became the focus of media reporting and debates. Social unrest and public protests spiked as social stability seemed threatened by the people's growing sense of distributive injustice.

Entering the 21st century, the Chinese government gradually strengthened their provision of social welfare through substantial reforms within important fields such as health, pensions and basic education (Table 1). The government's role and responsibility were relatively limited but, during the political leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao this gradually changed. The role of government was strengthened, and social welfare broadened, aiming to meet the people's social rights and needs and strengthen well-being (Peng & Wong, 2010). The New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme (NRCMS), an insurance system for non-employed rural residents where the government pays the larger part of the premium, was implemented nationwide in 2005. A similar insurance system for non-employed urban residents (The Urban Residents Basic Medical Insurance) was rolled out in 2006, with guaranteed participation for all. New social pension schemes were established to secure basic pensions for those not covered by the pension system for contracted workers in rural and urban areas in 2009 and 2011. The two schemes were merged into one nationwide system in 2014. By including those previously excluded from established pension schemes, the government aimed to

reduce the risk of falling into poverty due to illness and lack of basic pensions in old age (Tang et al., 2014). The revision of the compulsory Education Act issued in 2006 enhanced the central government's responsibility for rural basic education including free tuition, free textbooks and construction and maintenance of school premises over the national budgets. Reforms particularly targeted the countryside to include rural populations previously left with little or no social security.

The wide array of welfare reforms initiated and implemented during the first decade of the 2000s were largely a top–down effort. Perception surveys in the early 2000s (Whyte, 2010; Zhang & Pedersen, 2006) found that people were concerned about specific welfare issues (e.g., access to health and basic education) but, despite the collapse of the former basic welfare schemes, the regime's overall legitimacy prevailed. In general, the people saw real improvements in their living conditions, were satisfied with life, were optimistic about the future and had high levels of trust in both central and local governments (Wang, 2008). Notwithstanding its top–down characteristic and development within an authoritarian system, the Chinese welfare regime, as any other welfare regime, depends on public support to sustain its legitimacy (Kulin, 2011). At the same time, social policy expansions and welfare reforms are important in building the regime's performance legitimacy as a whole. Understanding how government policies shape political attitudes is central to the study of regime dynamics. Elites often implement social policies that economically benefit the wider public in order to garner popular support for regime survival (e.g., Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; Boix, 2003; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003; Wintrobe, 1998). Welfare attitudes thus can contribute to knowledge about peoples' perceptions of the government's performance and legitimacy.

Using data from the China Inequality and Distributive Justice Survey Project, a unique set of nationwide surveys of public perceptions in China conducted in 2004, 2009

and 2014, this study focuses on changes in Chinese welfare attitudes over the 10 years between 2004 and 2014. It addresses three main questions: (1) How have attitudes towards government responsibility for social welfare provision changed over a 10-year period with rapid expansion of social policy? (2) Have determinants of welfare attitudes changed across population groups over time? (3) To what extent do welfare attitudes reflect traditional social cleavages in Chinese society? Analyses of welfare attitudes over time will provide insight into how the design of social policies and their reforms reflect, answer to or drive expectations of government responsibility within certain groups or the population as a whole. Few other studies have analysed Chinese welfare attitudes over time using comparable datasets;³ hence, this study provides new research within the field. Furthermore, these findings can contribute to theories on welfare attitudes developed mainly in advanced democracies by introducing results from a rapidly developing and authoritarian context.

Attitudes towards government provision of basic welfare: Determinants, dimensions and aspects

Both individual factors and institutional contexts shape people's welfare attitudes. It is commonly assumed that welfare perceptions are influenced by two types of individual factors, briefly referred to as *interests* (structural positions) and *ideas* (values and ideologies; e.g., d'Anjou et al., 1995; Gelissen, 2000; Gevers et al., 2000; Jæger, 2006; Roosma et al., 2014; Svallfors, 2007). The 'interests factor' refers to an individual's structural characteristics, indicating the degree of personal stakes in the welfare state's provisions. Generally, people with a stronger structural position are expected to have less interest in a large, generous welfare state than would be people with a weaker structural position—including lower income, class position and education—who therefore are at a higher risk of becoming dependent on welfare benefits (Kangas, 1997; Kulin, 2011; Svallfors, 2003).

People with higher socioeconomic status in China are able to pay for health care and education services in a growing private market, options unavailable to lower status groups highly dependent on government-provided services. Previous research from China showed mixed results on the ability of interest factors to predict welfare attitudes. Han and Whyte (2009) found that both higher economic status and higher education led to more positive views on the state's responsibility for welfare, whereas Yang et al.

(2019) found that senior citizens who perceived their social status as low held more positive attitudes towards government responsibility for welfare. Using data from the World Value Surveys, Huang's (2019) results showed that Chinese preferences for redistribution varied with income and occupation. However, neither He et al. (2020) nor Li and He (2019) found that socioeconomic status significantly predicted support for government welfare provision.

The 'ideas factor' explains the support for the welfare state based on individuals' generic political values, ideological affiliations and preferences and is linked to the distinction between economical individualism and social collectivism orientations (Tam & Yeung, 1994). People will support the welfare state not only from self-interest but also because they adhere to political principles and values constituting the foundation of the welfare state and its institutionalisation (Andreß & Heien, 2001; Arts & Gelissen, 2001; Jæger, 2006). Research on welfare attitudes in China has shown that perceptions of individual rights and personal social cognition are important drivers of welfare attitudes (He et al., 2020; Wu & Chou, 2017; Yang et al., 2019). Furthermore, Munro (2017) found that inequality aversion was the strongest and most important predictor of support for state provision of social welfare in China, concluding that ideology mattered most.

Particular institutional arrangements have been identified by previous research as a crucial influencing factor in motivating welfare attitudes in China (Han, 2012; He et al., 2020; Huang, 2019). The household-registration system (*hukou*) is one of the most important institutional divides in China, entailing a sharp divide and unequal distribution of welfare resources between urban and rural areas, favouring urban residents in public goods and social service provision. The migrant population without official residency in the place; their life and work have been left with very limited welfare entitlements. Beyond the *hukou* system, the clear divide between public- and private-sector employment status is important to understand welfare attitudes in China. Employees in the public sector have traditionally benefitted more from government redistribution and social insurance than others (Zhou, 2004). Previous research shows that both *hukou* status and employment sector are important drivers of welfare attitudes (Han, 2012; Huang, 2019). Although both *hukou* status and employment sector may overlap with factors related to self-interest, the importance of these institutional classifications with regard to access to social security (Huang, 2019; Liang & Wang, 2014; Yang et al., 2019) justifies that they are treated as an independent institutional factor. Huang (2019, p. 430) finds that regardless of income level, public sector employees are substantially more likely to support government redistributions than private-sector employees. With the introduction of free basic education and the expansion of health

³See Huang (2019) as an exception.

and pension insurances beyond urban residents and people employed in the public sectors, the institutional setup of the Chinese welfare regime has developed towards a more inclusive system since 2004. As the access to benefits and services increase among previously uncovered populations, their anticipations about the government's provision of welfare are expected to increase.

Beyond individual factors and institutional arrangements, the implementation of social policies and the setup of the welfare regime can influence individual-level orientations in terms of policy-feedback or 'spill-over' effects, sometimes called 'path dependency'. Wlezien (1995) argued that the relationship between public opinion and policy output is reciprocal. Not only do policies respond to people's preferences but people also adjust or update their opinions according to the changed policy. Thus, Wlezien claimed, there is a feedback loop between public opinion and policy. In this perspective, certain policies, once enacted, create incentives, interests, subjective experiences and normative standards that further strengthen or weaken support (e.g., Mettler & Soss, 2004; Pierson, 1993; Svallfors, 2007). According to theories on the feedback effects of policy implementation and institutional change, broadening access to basic welfare benefits in China can be expected to influence people's attitudes towards government responsibility for welfare provision through a 'spill-over' effect beyond particular welfare schemes and benefits (Im & Meng, 2016). The institutional setup of the welfare state (and implicitly the regime it exists within) can be an important predictor of attitudes towards the state's range in welfare provision (Andrefß & Heien, 2001; Arts & Gelissen, 2001; Gelissen, 2000; Jæger, 2006; Larsen, 2008; Svallfors, 2003). Roosma et al. (2014) found that in countries with a universal and generous welfare state (in Esping-Andersen's terminology, *social-democratic welfare regimes*), a larger part of the population preferred more government responsibility. Research from highly unequal societies has however found weaker preferences for redistribution among all population groups (Ansell & Samuels, 2011; Cramer & Kaufman, 2011). Research from post-communist regimes (Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017) indicates that those previously exposed to communism expected that the government took a higher degree of responsibility for welfare provisions.

Conceptual framework and expectations

Because attitudes can be seen as an individual's general response to certain objects being favourable or not (Sundberg, 2014), welfare attitudes among Chinese citizens between 18 and 70 years old in this study represent dispositions to support or object to the view that government should be responsible for

providing basic welfare. Given the general theoretical framework, previous research on preferences for state welfare provision and social policy reforms in China, this study hypothesised that interests factors, ideas factors and institutional context factors shape attitudes towards government's responsibility to provide welfare. Further, it hypothesised that attitudinal patterns changed between 2004 and 2014 as social policies within both health care, basic education and pensions expanded. Including measures of *interests*, such as age, education, self-defined and social status; *ideas*, such as inequality preferences, reasons for poverty and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership; and *institutional context*, such as *hukou* status and employment sector, this study aims to investigate the following expectations:

1. Public support for the state provision of health care, basic education and elderly care is expected to have increased between 2004 and 2014 in tandem with the expansion and reform of basic social security schemes related to health insurance, basic education and pension insurance.
2. People who are averse to inequality and see lack of equal opportunities as the root cause of poverty are expected to have higher preference for state provision of welfare, all other conditions being equal.
3. People with higher social status are expected to be less supportive of government provision of welfare than are those with a lower social status, all other conditions being equal.
4. Attitudinal differences across *hukou* and employment status are expected to weaken from 2004 to 2014 given the expansion of access and entitlement to welfare schemes across traditional institutional divides.
5. Despite previous research (Huang, 2019; Munro, 2017; Whyte, 2010) indicating that welfare reforms reinforce inequalities along social and economic cleavages, this study expect that broader access to basic welfare will reduce attitudinal differences between social groups.

METHOD

Data

This study uses data from the China Inequality and Distributive Justice Survey Project. The project implemented three nationally representative surveys in mainland China in 2004, 2009 and 2014 aiming to examine how ordinary Chinese citizens view the social developments within China in light of distributive justice and fairness (Whyte, 2010).⁴ The Fafo Research Foundation directed

⁴For more details on the purpose and implementation of the surveys see Whyte (2010).

the 2014 survey, and Professor Martin Whyte directed the 2004 and 2009 surveys. To secure the inclusion of regions with varying levels of economic and social development, the samples were stratified to be representative of each of China's seven official regions.⁵ High-quality random sampling procedures ensured that survey data were representative of all citizens aged 18 to 70 years residing in Mainland China. Global Positioning System (GPS)-assisted random area sampling, which incorporates populations as a measure of size, stratification and multistage PPS sampling, was employed to select physical spaces in each province based on population density to ensure inclusion of migrants and others informally registered in the population.⁶ After regional stratification, the survey team sampled primary sampling units (PSUs) consisting of cells of spatial grids defined as half-square degrees of latitude and longitude; two secondary sampling units (SSUs) consisting of half-square minutes (about 1 × 1 km) within each PSU; and tertiary sampling units of approximately 90 × 90 m within each SSU. Trained surveyors located and enumerated all dwellings within the tertiary sampling unit before making a final random Probability Proportional to Size (PPS) sample of dwellings. Finally, interviewers selected individual respondents from dwellings using Kish-Grid methodology. Interviews were conducted face-to-face by trained interviewers. Interviews were completed with 3267 respondents in 2004, 2967 in 2009 and 2507 in 2014, yielding a response rate of between 75% and 66%. Sampling weights were developed and used, where appropriate, to facilitate comparisons across the three surveys. Table 2 shows the profile of the respondents in the three surveys.

The combined datasets from the three surveys were of great value. No equivalent datasets repeatedly asking the same questions specifically related to perceptions of welfare and distribution over a 10-year period exist. The surveys' timeframe overlaps with some of the profoundest welfare-state reforms in modern Chinese history and with the rhetorical shift in social politics towards well-being and social justice. Hence, the data provided unique insight into Chinese welfare attitudes and how these changed over time and within social groups.

Measures

The dependent variable is respondents' preferences for the role of the state in providing welfare within three basic

⁵North, north-west, north-east, south, south-west, central and east.

⁶For details on spatial probability sampling applied in all three surveys, see Landry and Shen (2005).

TABLE 2 Profile of respondents in all three surveys

	2004 (N = 3267)	2009 (N = 2967)	2014 (N = 2507)
Gender			
Male	50.00%	50.80%	49.60%
Female	50.00%	49.20%	50.40%
Age group			
18–24	14.40%	15.90%	9.20%
25–39	41.10%	26.20%	34.40%
40–54	28.80%	29.90%	34.80%
55–64	10.80%	20.90%	12.60%
65+	4.90%	7.10%	9.00%
Education			
Primary and below	42.70%	24.30%	25.80%
Secondary	33.40%	42.10%	32.00%
Tertiary and above	23.90%	33.60%	42.20%
Hukou status			
Urban	27.30%	24.50%	42.40%
Migrant	3.60%	4.50%	9.80%
Rural	69.20%	71.00%	47.80%
Self-perceived social status			
Low	19.20%	7.20%	8.80%
Low-middle	29.40%	29.30%	23.60%
Middle	25.30%	33.80%	36.40%
Middle to high	22.30%	26.60%	26.40%
High	3.90%	3.00%	4.80%
Social insurances			
Health insurance	21.60%	85.60%	90.30%
Pension insurance	16.40%	23.40%	48.10%

Source: China Inequality and Distributive Justice Survey Project.

schemes: health care, basic education and elderly care. This dimension of welfare attitudes, referred to as the *range dimension of welfare* (Gelissen, 2000; Roller, 1995; Roosma et al., 2014; Svallfors, 2003), pertains to the issue of whether government should take up welfare responsibilities and in which policy areas (van Oorschot, 2010). The 5-point response scale ranges from *government fully responsible* to *individuals fully responsible*, with a neutral mid-category. This scale aligns with indicators used in other surveys of attitudes towards government responsibility for welfare in Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2009; Wong & Wong, 2005) and mainland China (Yang et al., 2019). With such scales, there is a risk of response bias whereby systemic variation in the variable reflects differences in propensity to opt for or avoid extreme ends of a scale

TABLE 3 Descriptive results

Variables	Range	2004 (N = 3267)		2009 (N = 2967)		2014 (N = 2507)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Responsibility—health care	1 = government–5 = individual	3.14	1.54	2.40	0.75	2.17	0.77
Responsibility—basic education	1 = government–5 = individual	3.02	1.67	2.00	0.83	1.95	0.79
Responsibility—elderly care	1 = government–5 = individual	3.32	1.73	2.58	0.91	2.37	0.84
Inequality preferences	1 = equality 5 = inequality	3.20	1.19	3.03	1.16	3.12	1.16
Lack of equal opportunity = poverty	1 = strongly agree–5 = s disagree	3.95	2.23	2.88	0.89	2.67	0.95
CCP member	0–1	0.06	0.24	0.06	0.23	0.11	0.31
Public employee	0–1	0.11	0.32	0.10	0.29	0.12	0.32
Age	Years	38.40	13.31	41.91	15.60	41.79	13.85
Woman	0–1	0.50	0.50	0.49	0.50	0.50	0.50
Education	Years completed	7.29	4.43	7.31	4.45	9.60	4.38
Social status	1 = low status–5 = high status	2.62	1.14	2.89	0.98	2.95	1.02

Source: China Inequality and Distributive Justice Survey Project.

rather than qualitative differences in opinion. In order to mitigate such risk, I constructed binary variables coded 1 for ‘government fully’ and ‘government mainly’ responsible and 0 otherwise. This recoding of the ‘government responsibility’ variable is in line with several other studies of welfare attitudes in China (see for example Huang, 2019; Yang et al., 2019). The binary variable was employed in the main analysis, as additional tests employing the full scale of the variable indicate that the main findings were reproduced in both approaches. The results are reported as an additional test in the Appendix. Because the dependent variables in the analysis were dichotomous, binary logistic regressions were applied.

In the analysis, the explanatory variables were categorised into three dimensions. The *interest dimension* included self-perceived social status (five categories recoded to three: high, middle and low), age (years) and education (years of education completed). The *ideology dimension* included inequality preferences, constructing a dummy variable based on whether respondents agreed with the statement, ‘Distributing wealth and income equally among people is the most just method’. Those who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement were coded as 1 (*inequality averse*); others were coded as 0 (*inequality tolerant*). Furthermore, a dummy variable indicating whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement, ‘Lack of equal opportunity is an important reason for poverty’ was created, wherein those who agreed or totally agreed with the statement were coded as 1 and others as 0. The recording of both the above variables was done to mitigate the risk of bias due to systematic difference in propensity to opt for extreme ends of a scale. Finally, CCP membership was included in the ideology dimension, assuming party members to favour government initiated policies more than non-members would. The *institutional*

dimension included *hukou* status (urban, rural or migrant)⁷ and employment sector, with private or public sector derived from the types of work unit to which respondents belonged.

To isolate the effects of these three social-identity dimensions (*interest*, *ideology* and *institutions*) on Chinese people's attitudes towards the government's responsibility in providing basic welfare and to control for other relevant background variables, logistic regressions were used to relate preferences for government responsibility with other factors. Three models were developed to indicate attitudes towards provision of health care, basic education and elderly care. Using preference for government responsibility as the dependent variable, analyses for all three identified welfare schemes were conducted based on data from 2004, 2009 and 2014, controlling for a range of background variables including age, education, social status, *hukou* status, employment sector, CCP membership, inequality aversion and unequal opportunity as main cause of poverty agreement.⁸

RESULTS

The results confirmed the broadening of basic welfare services and entitlements across the Chinese population. From 2004 to 2014, health-insurance coverage increased from 22% to 90% whereas pension insurance coverage

⁷Rural *hukou* holders residing in urban areas or respondents with non-local urban *hukou* registration.

⁸In other analyses, I also included gender and other preferences (such as *the value of hard work* and *reasons for getting rich*) with no change in the results. Thus, for brevity, those factors are not presented in this article.

TABLE 4 Welfare scheme preferences across population groups and years

Variable	Group	Percentage that prefers government take main responsibility for providing:								
		Health care			Basic education			Elderly care		
		2004	2009	2014	2004	2009	2014	2004	2009	2014
Social status	High	32.44	54.71	62.02	53.46	72.55	78.03	38.57	41.92	47.66
	Middle	25.79	48.83	63.13	35.15	71.45	76.88	29.31	47.55	55.75
	Low	32.45	59.03	72.77	44.11	80.40	81.94	32.87	49.14	57.96
<i>Hukou</i> status	Urban	45.91	63.74	64.17	61.55	76.57	78.56	50.17	52.86	51.60
	Migrant	29.83	52.51	68.88	53.51	72.76	76.99	41.17	56.92	51.25
	Rural	24.17	50.85	67.13	36.28	74.51	79.60	25.61	43.20	57.08
Lack of equal opportunities causes poverty	Agree	34.95	54.01	66.14	54.15	73.63	80.18	36.12	51.56	54.47
	Disagree	29.97	55.64	65.21	44.34	76.03	78.32	34.81	44.45	52.71

TABLE 5 Regression results (odds ratio): attitudes towards government responsibility—health care

Variable	Group	2004		2009		2014	
		OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Age		1.017***	0.004	1.011***	0.004	1.013**	0.004
<i>Hukou</i>	Rural						
	Migrant	1.365	0.206	1.524*	0.179	1.18	0.17
	Urban	2.865***	0.11	1.428***	0.11	1.053	0.113
Education		1.005	0.013	1.000	0.013	1.005	0.015
Social status	High						
	Middle	0.995	0.12	0.954	0.11	1.044	0.113
	Low	1.577***	0.11	1.271*	0.113	1.398*	0.123
CCP membership	Nonmember						
	Member	1.685**	0.169	1.396	0.169	1.253	0.156
Employment sector	Public						
	Private	0.802	0.13	0.743*	0.154	1.073	0.156
Inequality preference	Tolerance						
	Aversion	0.978	0.098	1.092	0.094	0.861	0.1
Lack of equal opportunity is an important reason for poverty	Agree						
	Disagree	0.772*	0.093	0.898	0.095	0.999	0.096
Constant		0.114***	0.351	0.563	0.344	0.737	0.371
Valid <i>N</i>		3034/2413		2771/1973		2371/1898	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

increased from 16% to 48% (Table 2). Preferences for government responsibility for health care, basic education and elderly care rose substantially (Table 3) and, by 2014, most Chinese preferred the government to be the main provider of these welfare schemes. Hence, the first expectation of increased support for government provision of welfare as new and broader welfare schemes were introduced was confirmed. Seen in light of when the government introduced major health-insurance system reforms (2005 and 2006), secured free basic education through the

amendment and adoption of the compulsory Education Law (2006)⁹ and reformed the pension system (2009 and 2011), these results illustrated a sharp increase in support for government provision after the introduction of important welfare reforms. This increase is particularly prevalent within rural and migrant populations previously not covered in such schemes.

⁹Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC Presidential Order No. 52 of 2006).

Changing expectations within social groups

Although the Chinese people in general had become more positive towards the government's role as the provider of basic welfare, there were clear differences in how preferences changed across population groups (Table 4). Broadening and extending welfare schemes to rural areas could be seen as contributing to changes in welfare attitudes among rural populations. Descriptive results showed that in 2004, preferences for government responsibility for all three basic welfare schemes were substantially lower among rural than among urban populations. As access to services and benefits were broadened in rural areas welfare attitudes converged across the urban–rural divide by 2014. The results also indicated a shift along the socioeconomic status line—from greater support for government provision of welfare among high- than among low-status groups in 2004—to equal or more support for government responsibility among the low-status groups than among the high-status groups in 2014. In both 2004 and 2009, respondents who agreed that lack of equal opportunities is the main cause of poverty were more in favour of government provision of welfare. However, by 2014, welfare attitudes were not related to opinions on equal opportunities and poverty.

Descriptive statistics (Table 4) showed less support than expected for government responsibility for 5 welfare among low-status groups and rural residents in 2004. This result can be seen as contrary to theoretical expectations based on interests, which argued that those with low social positions have more to gain from government responsibility for welfare. Thus, a subsequent multivariate analysis was conducted to identify which factors significantly predicted welfare attitudes in the Chinese population in 2004, 2009 and 2014 and how those findings related to previously presented expectations and theoretical assumptions.

The first regression model (Table 5) addressed perceptions about the governments' responsibility to provide health care. Results indicated that in 2004, age, *hukou* status, social status, CCP membership and whether lack of opportunity was seen as an important reason for poverty significantly affected the likelihood to prefer government to be the main provider of health care. As expected, respondents with lower social status were more likely to prefer that government take the responsibility. Holding other factors constant, people who saw themselves as having low social status were more than 50% more likely than their peers who saw themselves in a higher social-status group to prefer government as the main health care provider. Being a member of the CCP also increased the likelihood to prefer the government as the main provider by almost 70%. Furthermore, those who did not see the

lack of equal opportunity as an important reason for poverty were 23% less likely than others to prefer government responsibility for health care. The strongest predictor of support for government responsibility for health care was having an urban *hukou* registration. Urbanites were close to three times more likely to prefer government health care provision than were their rural peers in 2004.

In 2009, low social status and urban or migrant *hukou* status were still significant predictors. Specifically, urban residents and migrants were, respectively, 43% and 52% more likely to prefer government as the main health care provider than were people with rural *hukou*. People who saw themselves as belonging to the lowest social status were 27% more likely to prefer government health care than were those who saw themselves as belonging to the highest social status group. The notion that poverty is caused by unequal opportunities, along with CCP membership, no longer made a difference with regard to preferences.

By 2014, only self-defined social status had a significant effect on support for government responsibility for health care. In line with 2004 and 2009 data, those who in 2014 defined their social status as low were 40% more likely than those in the highest status group to prefer government provide health care. Looking at the results across all three years, social status was the only characteristic that prevailed as a significant predictor of support for government responsibility for health care each year. For example, urban *hukou* status, by far the strongest predictor in 2004, was no longer significant 10 years later.

In 2004, a range of characteristics had significant impact on the degree to which people thought the government should be the main provider of basic education (Table 6). Urban *hukou* holders and migrants were close to twice as likely to prefer government to be the main provider of basic education than were their rural counterparts. Respectively, low social status, CCP membership and aversion towards inequality increased preferences for government provision of basic education by 29%, 40% and 68%. A somewhat puzzling finding is that the middling social status group was less likely to prefer government as the main provider of basic education in 2004. One possible explanation is that the middle social group in 2004 may stress self-reliance and economic individualism as they have reached this social status through what they perceive as hard work and individual contributions. If respondents were employed in the private sector or disagreed that lack of equal opportunities was a cause of poverty, they were 27% and 39%, respectively, less likely to prefer the government to be the main provider of basic education. Respondents' higher education also significantly predicted preferences for more government responsibility.

TABLE 6 Regression results (odds ratio): attitudes towards government responsibility—basic education

Variable	Group	2004		2009		2014	
		OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Age		1.005	0.004	0.998	0.004	1.006	0.005
<i>Hukou</i>	Rural						
	Migrant	1.422*	0.187	0.839	0.203	0.874	0.191
	Urban	2.085***	0.105	0.978	0.126	0.973	0.131
Education		1.048***	0.013	0.978	0.015	1.037*	0.017
Social status	High						
	Middle	0.765*	0.114	1.315*	0.122	0.955	0.131
	Low	1.287*	0.106	1.659***	0.129	1.312	0.145
CCP membership	Non-member						
	Member	1.405*	0.163	0.679	0.200	1.267	0.180
Employment sector	Public						
	Private	0.729*	0.135	1.230	0.167	1.157	0.182
Inequality preference	Tolerance						
	Aversion	1.684***	0.095	1.725***	0.105	1.125	0.115
Lack of equal opportunity is an important reason for poverty	Agree						
	Disagree	0.614***	0.092	0.926	0.109	0.944	0.112
Constant		0.345**	0.338	2.800	0.390	1.325	0.426
Valid N		3041/2423		2756/1971		2358/1891	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

TABLE 7 Regression results (odds ratio): attitudes towards government responsibility—elderly care

Variable	Group	2004		2009		2014	
		OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Age		1.014***	0.004	1.019***	0.004	1.016***	0.004
<i>Hukou</i>	Rural						
	Migrant	1.818***	0.192	1.300	0.180	0.910	0.160
	Urban	2.924***	0.180	1.309*	0.111	0.916	0.108
Education		1.019	0.013	1.001	0.013	1.013	0.014
Social status	High						
	Middle	0.955	0.117	1.280*	0.111	1.382**	0.110
	Low	1.470***	0.108	1.464***	0.114	1.424***	0.117
CCP membership	Non-member						
	Member	1.324	0.163	1.471*	0.173	1.231	0.152
Employment sector	Public						
	Private	0.813	0.129	0.924	0.152	1.164	0.152
Inequality preference	Tolerance						
	Aversion	1.124	0.097	1.090	0.095	1.001	0.095
Lack of equal opportunity is an important reason for poverty	Agree						
	Disagree	0.757*	0.092	0.731***	0.096	0.937	0.092
Constant		0.136***	-1.998	0.251***	0.349	0.320**	0.358
Valid N		3004/2404		2756/1957		2358/1896	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

Three years after the introduction of the reform that secured free basic education for rural areas in 2006, the only significant predictors of support for government responsibility were lower social status and ideological aversion to inequality. Respondents in the lowest and middle social-status groups, respectively, were 66% and 32% more likely to prefer the government as the main provider than were their peers in the highest social-status group. Respondents with an aversion to inequality were 73% more likely to prefer government as the main provider of basic education. By 2014, however, no significant predictors of welfare-state attitudes were identified among the background variables included in the analysis, beyond a slight effect of higher education.

Attitudes towards the government's role in providing elderly care (Table 7) indicated some of the same trends as for the other two welfare schemes. Urban *hukou* status was a significant predictor of positive attitudes towards government responsibility in both 2004 and 2009. In 2004, urban dwellers were almost three times, and migrants 82%, more likely than people with a rural *hukou* to have positive attitudes towards the government as the elderly care provider. Five years later (2009), urbanites were still more supportive of that government responsibility, but only by 31%. By 2014, when the introduction of a national social pension insurance scheme was completed, *hukou* status was no longer a significant predictor. However, defining oneself in the lower status group increased the likelihood of preferring government as the main provider of elderly care by almost 50% compared to the high-status groups across all three survey years. In 2009 and 2014, people in the middle-status groups also differed significantly from their peers in the high social-status group, respectively 28% and 38% more likely to prefer government provision of elderly care. In 2009, the data show that CCP members are more likely to prefer government as the main provider of elderly care, even though this finding is not reproduced in the other surveys. Finally, seeing unequal opportunities as an important reason for poverty led to about a 30% higher likelihood of preferring government elderly care provision in 2004 and 2009, but it lost that predicative power in 2014.

Conflating attitudes across population groups was the most striking trend in the results. In 2004, belonging to different social categories, including class, *hukou* registration and ideological preferences, significantly predicted attitudes towards government provision of welfare. Although belonging to a particular social group or having a certain ideological preference was less powerful predictors of welfare attitudes in 2009 than in 2004, class, *hukou* and values related to distributive justice were still statistically significant. By 2014, however, only self-perceived social status still had predicative power. Neither *hukou*

status, CCP membership, education level nor inequality aversion significantly predicted the dependent variable. The broadening of entitlements to basic education, health and pensions across traditional institutional divides seems to have made Chinese more equal in their preferences for government provision of welfare. These findings confirm the fourth expectation as the results showed weakened attitudinal differences across traditional institutional divides such as *hukou* and employment status between 2004 and 2014. Furthermore, the fifth expectation that broader access to basic welfare will reduce attitudinal differences between social groups is supported.

The second expectation about the strength of moral conviction as a strong predictor of welfare attitudes was only partly confirmed. In line with previous research (Munro, 2017), moral conviction was an important predictor of attitudes towards the government's role in 2004 and 2009; however, in the 2014 survey, such conviction no longer mattered. Instead, only low self-perceived social status consistently—across all surveys—increased the likelihood of favouring government responsibility for welfare provision; hence, the third expectation was confirmed. Contrary to other research (Han, 2012; Huang, 2019; Munro, 2017; Whyte, 2010), this study did not find that welfare reforms reinforced inequalities in attitudes along socioeconomic cleavages. Rather, attitudinal differences were reduced, lending support to the fifth expectation presented by this study, predicting that broader access to basic welfare will reduce attitudinal differences between social groups. Multivariate analyses reiterated results from the descriptive analysis—they supported not only that the preferences for government provision of welfare increased from 2004 to 2014 but also that important social characteristics no longer seemed to predict welfare attitudes along traditional social cleavages.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explores Chinese attitudes towards responsibility for basic welfare schemes from 2004 to 2014, with particular focus on what motivates welfare attitudes and how these motivations change over time. The study finds increased support for government responsibility for welfare provision. This confirms that the traditional description of Chinese society as emphasising self-sufficiency and familial obligation in welfare provision may no longer explain current public opinion (He et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2019) and that the expansion of services and entitlements generated positive feedback through spill-over effects into people's attitudinal patterns (Im & Meng, 2016). Furthermore, this study finds that motivations for welfare attitudes have changed substantially from 2004 to 2014, significantly

reducing differences in attitudes across important social cleavages and institutional divides in Chinese society.

With broader participation in welfare schemes and increased policy focus on reducing the substantial inequalities between groups within the Chinese population, the convergence of attitudes across groups supports the picture of a more ‘universal’ social security system. In line with the institutional feedback theory, descriptive statistics show a sharp increase in preferences for government-provided welfare among rural and migrant populations after welfare benefits and entitlements were introduced in rural areas. This suggests that experience with social welfare programmes generates a tendency to strengthen perceived entitlements and expectations of government responsibility of such programmes through ‘feedback loops’ (Im & Meng, 2016; Wlezien, 1995). Such a tendency is illustrated in the more coherent anticipation of government responsibility for basic education in 2009, mirroring the free basic education secured by law in 2006 (Wang & Shi,), as well as in the more equal expectations about government responsibility for health and elderly care in 2014 after health and pension insurance reforms were broadly implemented after 2010.

Against the backdrop of research from developed welfare states and emerging research on Chinese welfare attitudes, this study explores how self-interest, ideology and institutional factors influenced attitudes towards the role of government in welfare provision between 2004 and 2014. The main conclusion is that the multiple social cleavages coexisting within Chinese society significantly predicted attitudes towards government provision of welfare in the early 2000s. Support for government responsibility for all three welfare schemes included in the study was motivated by interest, ideology and institutional factors. However, after reforms of the social security system provided broader access to services and entitlements to benefits, the ideological and institutional factors lost their power to predict preference for government redistribution. By 2014, only self-defined socioeconomic status significantly predicted the likelihood of being more in favour of government responsibility for health and elderly care, leaving only the interests hypothesis to perform relatively well. From a situation where both status inequality and income inequality had profound impacts on preferences for government redistribution, this study identifies a development towards a strengthening of socioeconomic conditions as the main predictor of welfare attitudes and more equal levels of support across the low- and high-status groups.

The finding that *hukou* status no longer significantly predicts welfare attitudes is important. The organisation of the Chinese population (including access to welfare benefits) +along urban and rural household-registration

lines has been one of—if not *the*—main cleavage in Chinese society (Gao et al., 2013). Previous research (Han, 2012; Huang, 2019) showed that urban residents were significantly more in favour of government provision of welfare than rural residents were. Results from the 2004 and 2009 surveys included in this study support these findings but, by 2014, *hukou* status lost its significance. The 2014 survey results are in line with He et al. (2020), who found that migrants and local residents largely hold similar views regarding responsibility for welfare provision, and with Yang et al. (2019), in that rural respondents held more supportive views of government responsibility for welfare provision than did their urban peers.

According to the current study’s results, Chinese redistributive preferences have developed to align more with attitudes in other advanced countries. Traditional class lines and interest factors are the strongest predictors of redistributive preferences rather than occupation and place of residence as Haggard et al. (2013) found to be important in developing countries. Findings from this study also align with research from post-communist countries (Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017) showing high expectations on state provision of welfare. As an authoritarian regime without democratic elections and with restrictions on both organisational freedom and civic liberties, China is far from a social-democratic welfare model. Yet, with a political doctrine based on Socialist Core Values, growing expectations on government provision of basic welfare, focus on socioeconomic differences and a need for popular regime legitimacy, the developing welfare system in China may bring new insights to typologies of welfare regimes internationally.

The amelioration of attitudinal cleavages indicates a development away from the description of Chinese society as fragmented by multiple interweaving social cleavages, preventing fracturing along a single, deep class line (Huang, 2019). With socioeconomic status emerging as the most important predictor of perceptions on distributive justice, the ability of a ‘new’ Chinese social security system to meet the people’s needs and expectations across class lines becomes increasingly important for the regime’s legitimacy and continued social stability. This is particularly true in the authoritarian political context of China, where service provision and social security are important aspects of the CCP’s performance legitimacy (Dickson et al., 2016; Zeng, 2014; Zhao, 2009). As China strives to reach the centennial goal of ‘better quality of life for all’ most likely facing an unavoidable economic downturn, balancing reduced fiscal capacity with growing welfare demands and newfound feelings of entitlement may be one of the biggest challenges to maintaining the government’s legitimacy. The absence of competitive elections makes performance legitimacy through securing

basic welfare to all of particular importance to the regime. With a more universal social security system emerging and a continued need for popular support, the growing expectations for more robust social services across the population—including groups that previously did not express high demands for welfare delivery—is challenging.

Nevertheless, research has shown that such service delivery increases trust in and legitimacy of local governments in China (Dickson et al., 2016, 2017). The current study's results suggest that social policy expansions have improved people's access to basic welfare and increased their expectations of what the government should provide. The regime's performance-based legitimacy seems strengthened, but as people anticipate more from the state, expectations become increasingly harder to meet and performance legitimacy increasingly harder to maintain. Theories of government overload (Crozier et al., 1975; Kaase & Newton, 1995) may add valuable perspectives to the development of a more comprehensive social security system in China. In this context, government rhetoric may be an important source of managing people's prospects. Through heavily censored media and a strong propaganda system, the regime has the opportunity to influence public opinion. Although not covered in this project, government rhetoric towards inequality and social security could be an important factor in shaping people's welfare attitudes (Jin, 2017) and would be valuable to include in future research.

Based on a unique set of nationally representative data allowing analysis of preferences for government responsibility for welfare across a 10-year period, this study contributes new and important research to a growing field of studies on welfare attitudes in China. However, it has some important limitations. First, the share size and regional differences in China provide largely different welfare contexts with regard to economic development, services and benefits. Such regional and institutional variations are not explored in this survey, and information from other institutions (e.g., markets, communities and government spending) would be useful to include in future research. Furthermore, the possibility of endogeneity is always present in survey work in general and perception surveys in particular. In this study, care was taken to distinguish between questions aiming to capture preferences on the one hand and values on the other, assuming that values shape preference, while recognising that endogeneity is always possible.

Despite these limitations, the study not only contributes new knowledge but also provides implications for social policy-making in China by identifying expectations of welfare delivery across the population as a whole and within particular groups. It thus provides valuable insight into how social policies may be developed and implemented to best contribute to regime legitimacy. Public

opinion is of crucial importance to the Chinese government in policy-making and implementation. Lacking a competitive electoral system and open public debate, opinion polls and perception surveys provide feedback and allow for implementation of policy adjustments.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Kristin Dalen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4660-0664>

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APPENDIX

ROBUSTNESS CHECKS—REGRESSION RESULTS ON REDISTRIBUTIVE PREFERENCES

	2004				2009				2014			
	Ordered probit		Logistic regression		Ordered probit		Logistic regression		Ordered probit		Logistic regression	
	Estimate	SE	OR	SE	Estimate	SE	OR	SE	Estimate	SE	OR	SE
<i>1. Government responsibility for health care (compare 5-point Likert scale and odds ratio)</i>												
Age	−0.008***	0.002	1.017***	0.004	−0.003	0.002	1.011***	0.004	−0.006**	0.002	1.013**	0.004
Migrant	−0.130	0.098	1.365	0.206	−0.124	0.096	1.524*	0.179	0.075	0.086	1.180	0.170
Urban	−0.554***	0.054	2.865***	0.110	−0.185**	0.059	1.428***	0.110	0.037	0.058	1.053	0.113
Education (years)	−0.009	0.007	1.005	0.013	0.006	0.007	1.000	0.013	−0.003	0.008	1.005	0.015
Middle status	−0.059	0.057	0.995	0.120	0.040	0.059	0.954	0.110	0.007	0.059	1.044	0.113
Low status	−0.264***	0.054	1.577***	0.110	−0.121*	0.061	1.271*	0.113	−0.168**	0.063	1.398*	0.123
CCP member	−0.149	0.082	1.685**	0.169	−0.077	0.091	1.396	0.169	−0.077	0.081	1.253	0.156
Private sector	0.127	0.067	0.802	0.130	0.163*	0.082	0.743*	0.154	−0.047	0.082	1.073	0.156
Inequality averse	0.035	0.048	0.978	0.098	−0.069	0.051	1.092	0.094	0.134**	0.051	0.861	0.100

	2004				2009				2014			
	Ordered probit		Logistic regression		Ordered probit		Logistic regression		Ordered probit		Logistic regression	
	Estimate	SE	OR	SE	Estimate	SE	OR	SE	Estimate	SE	OR	SE
Unequal opportunity	0.157**	0.047	0.772*	0.093	0.151**	0.051	0.898	0.095	0.061	0.049	0.999	0.096
<i>2. Responsibility for basic education (compare 5-point Linkert scale and odds ratio)</i>												
Age (years)	-0.002	0.002	1.005	0.004	-0.001	0.002	0.998	0.004	-0.004	0.002	1.006	0.005
Migrant	-0.149	0.096	1.422*	0.187	0.141	0.095	0.839	0.203	-0.019	0.087	0.874	0.191
Urban	-0.469***	0.054	2.085***	0.105	0.065	0.059	0.978	0.126	0.075	0.058	0.973	0.131
Education (years)	-0.030***	0.007	1.048***	0.013	0.002	0.007	0.978	0.015	-0.029***	0.008	1.037*	0.017
Middle status	0.094	0.057	0.765*	0.114	-0.107	0.059	1.315*	0.122	-0.018	0.059	0.955	0.131
Low status	-0.203***	0.053	1.287*	0.106	-0.233***	0.060	1.659***	0.129	-0.299***	0.064	1.312	0.145
CCP member	-0.153	0.081	1.405*	0.163	0.173	0.091	0.679	0.200	0.041	0.082	1.267	0.180
Private sector	0.047	0.067	0.729*	0.135	-0.094	0.081	1.230	0.167	-0.127	0.082	1.157	0.182
Inequality averse	-0.163***	0.047	1.684***	0.095	-0.263***	0.050	1.725***	0.105	-0.007	0.051	1.125	0.115
Unequal opportunity	0.267***	0.046	0.614***	0.092	0.086	0.051	0.926	0.109	0.155**	0.050	0.944	0.112
<i>3. Government responsibility for old age care (compare 5-point Linkert scale and odds ratio)</i>												
Age (years)	-0.008***	0.002	1.014***	0.004	-0.010***	0.002	1.019***	0.004	-0.010***	0.002	1.016***	0.004
Migrant	-0.153	0.096	1.818***	0.192	-0.196*	0.095	1.300	0.180	0.050	0.085	0.910	0.160
Urban	-0.473***	0.054	2.924***	0.180	-0.166**	0.058	1.309*	0.111	0.051	0.057	0.916	0.108
Education (years)	-0.027***	0.007	1.019	0.013	-0.011	0.007	1.001	0.013	-0.017*	0.008	1.013	0.014
Middle status	-0.011	0.057	0.955	0.117	-0.107	0.058	1.280*	0.111	-0.130*	0.059	1.382**	0.110
Low status	-0.167**	0.053	1.470***	0.108	-0.199**	0.060	1.464**	0.114	-0.253***	0.062	1.424***	0.117
CCP member	-0.054	0.081	1.324	0.163	-0.149	0.090	1.471*	0.173	-0.069	0.081	1.231	0.152
Private sector	0.110	0.066	0.813	0.129	0.034	0.080	0.924	0.152	-0.043	0.081	1.164	0.152
Inequality averse	-0.069	0.048	1.124	0.097	-0.029	0.050	0.090	0.095	0.033	0.050	1.001	0.095
Unequal opportunity	0.174***	0.046	0.757*	0.092	0.176**	0.051	0.731***	0.096	0.102*	0.049	0.937	0.092

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p \leq 0.01$ *** $p \leq 0.001$.