SNUAC Asia Square Brown Bag Seminar Series, Autumn 2026

Changing Perceptions of Social Fairness in China: Distributive and Opportunity Dimensions, 2006-2023

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Social fairness is not only reflected in the objective distribution of social resources but also in how people perceive and evaluate the legitimacy of the social order. Since China's reform and opening-up, rapid economic growth and profound social transformation have been accompanied by widening income disparities, educational expansion, intensified employment competition, and changes in social mobility. However, subjective perceptions of fairness do not necessarily correspond directly to objective levels of inequality. Understanding social fairness in contemporary China therefore requires attention not only to how resources are distributed, but also to how people evaluate distributive outcomes and opportunities within the broader social structure.

Existing research has approached fairness perceptions from various angles, including self-interest, the underdog principle, educational enlightenment, socioeconomic status, and social mobility. Two limitations, however, stand out. One is a predominantly cross-sectional focus, which offers little insight into how fairness perceptions shift over an extended period of social change. The other is a tendency to treat fairness as a single, undifferentiated construct, overlooking the distinction between distributive fairness—the distribution of wealth and income—and opportunity fairness—access to jobs and employment. While these two dimensions may share common social roots, they plausibly diverge in both their patterns of change and their underlying determinants.

Using six waves of the Chinese Social Survey (CSS) conducted in 2006, 2013, 2015, 2019, 2021, and 2023, this study examines changes in Chinese people's macro-level perceptions of distributive and opportunity fairness over nearly two decades. It addresses three questions: First, how did perceptions of distributive fairness and opportunity fairness change between 2006 and 2023, and to what extent did the two dimensions follow similar or divergent trajectories? Second, which social groups are more likely to perceive the distribution of wealth and income, and access to jobs and employment opportunities, as fair or unfair, and which groups experienced significant changes in their perceptions over time? Third, what factors shape perceptions of distributive and opportunity fairness, and have the effects of these factors changed over time?

The study focuses particularly on differences associated with income, education,

occupation, urban-rural status, subjective social status, age and generation, and other dimensions of social stratification. Preliminary descriptive analysis indicates an overall shift toward more positive evaluations of both distributive and opportunity fairness between 2006 and 2023, although the trajectories of the two dimensions are not identical. The subsequent analysis therefore moves beyond the question of whether Chinese society is perceived as becoming "more fair" or "less fair" to investigate who has changed their perceptions, how inequalities in fairness perceptions among social groups have evolved, and whether distributive and opportunity fairness are shaped by different social mechanisms.

Dan Kou, visiting scholar at the Asia Center of Seoul National University, is also serving concurrently as an Assistant Professor at Henan University of Economics and Law. Her research interests include social inequality, the concept of equality, legal sociology, and social governance. She is currently focused on comparative studies of social equity and research on the development of a juvenile crime prevention system.

Date& TIme: Tuesday, 15th September, 12:00-13:00
Place: SNUAC Room 304 (3rd Floor)