

# Understanding Subjective Inequality in China

by Prof. SONG Xi *University of Pennsylvania*



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Webinar via **zoom**



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China has experienced a sharp rise in inequality, even greater than that seen in the U.S. and most democratic societies. Yet most people in China are misinformed about inequality because of the government's control over media via propaganda and censorship. This paper examines how rising inequality is perceived, publicized, and interpreted in contemporary China, where reporting on inequality is actively framed and consumed in the interests of political stability. Combining automated text analysis of millions of news articles and social media data and metric methods for survey questions on individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and opinions, I test the formation of public misperception of inequality through two interlocking processes. First, during the production of news, Chinese media suppresses and selectively covers some topics related to inequality. Second, Chinese media also affects individuals' perceptions about inequality during the consumption of news. Users of state-owned media tend to underestimate the level of inequality compared with users of marketized or social media. These findings call attention to the political roots of the gap between real and perceived inequality.

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Xi Song is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Demography at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research uses statistical, demographic, and computational techniques to understand how patterns of social inequality are created and changed within and across generations. Her current topics of investigation include the gap between factual and perceived inequality, multigenerational social mobility and kinship inequality, the evolution of occupational structure, and statistical methods for characterizing the link between intra- and intergenerational mobility. She received the 2021 William Julius Wilson Early Career Award from the American Sociological Association. Her previous publications have received multiple awards from the American Sociological Association, the International Sociological Association, IPUMS, and the Demographic Research. She holds a PhD in Sociology and an MS in Statistics, both from UCLA, and a MPhil from HKUST.