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# *Beyond Economic Growth: Rural–Urban Integration and Citizens’ Perceptions of Social Justice in China*

Lin Gong, Juan Chen, Xue Bai, and Alfred M. Wu

## *Abstract*

Can integrating rural and urban systems foster a stronger sense of justice in society? Since 2002, China has advanced rural–urban integration to promote balanced development and reduce inequality. However, its impact on how citizens perceive social justice remains underexplored. Using survey data from 28 provinces, this study examines how three dimensions of rural and urban integration—economic, quality of life, and social development—relate to perceived social justice. The findings reveal a striking contrast: while integration in social development is positively associated with perceptions of justice, integration in the economic and

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quality of life domains is negatively associated. Further analysis suggests that economic integration has failed to deliver equitable income distribution (result justice), which may contribute to public dissatisfaction. In contrast, integration in social development has enhanced both welfare provision (result justice) and social mobility (opportunity justice), improving individuals' perceptions of fairness. These findings suggest that although rural and urban integration has the potential to enhance perceptions of justice, its impact differs across reform domains. Promoting inclusive social development, particularly through welfare provision and reforms that improve social mobility, may be essential to fostering a fairer society during China's ongoing transition.

## **1. Introduction**

The pursuit of justice is a vital societal goal. Scholars have identified different dimensions of social justice: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice. Distributive justice mainly focuses on the fair distribution of social and economic resources.<sup>1</sup> Procedural justice is concerned with outcomes and the decision-making procedures determining those outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Interactional justice involves more informal or interpersonal treatment by others in everyday life.<sup>3</sup> Sociological studies on social justice mainly address the issue of distributive justice, which reflects the overall fairness of rewards within a society.<sup>4</sup> Individuals' perceptions of social justice can be shaped by the overall distribution of resources and rights such as income, education, social welfare, and opportunity for mobility.<sup>5</sup>

Experience from both developing and developed countries has confirmed the necessity of paying close attention to perceived social justice during periods of social transition.<sup>6</sup> A wide variety of studies have demonstrated the links between measures promoting social justice and positive consequences such as improvements in subjective well-being, social stability, and harmonious development.<sup>7</sup> In countries experiencing rapid socio-economic growth like China, perceptions of social justice have attracted particularly close attention. Previous studies on perceived social justice in China were preoccupied with a key question: since rapid economic growth had resulted in far greater social inequality, why has there been no outrage in response? Many scholars concluded that China's social stability is ensured by the perception of a high degree of social justice on the part of the rural population who tend to have more tolerant views of social inequities.<sup>8</sup> Further studies have investigated the determinants of

perceived social justice, such as health, education, social capital, and regional spatial change in China.<sup>9</sup>

While continuous social and economic growth has led to many social transitions in China, the recent movement toward rural-urban integration has attracted wide public attention. From a policy perspective, rural-urban integration has been seen as an attempt to strike a balance between growth and equality in rural-urban development.<sup>10</sup> Studies have explored the consequences of this transition on regional development, land use, and the change of objective social inequalities.<sup>11</sup> For example, Chen and his coauthors have shown that the raft of policy measures promoting rural-urban integration has narrowed the actual rural-urban gaps of income and agricultural workforce.<sup>12</sup> However, few studies have examined the impact of these developments on citizens' perceptions of social justice.

The present study drew on existing literature gaps, aiming to disentangle the relationship between rural-urban integration and individuals' perception of social justice. The key research question was how and to what extent rural-urban integration is associated with perceptions of social justice? The analysis also aimed to better understand the factors attributable to individuals' perception of social justice.

## **2. Background: From Rural-Urban Division to Rural-Urban Integration**

"Rural" and "urban" are terms that denote distinct cultures, values, life patterns, and social identities.<sup>13</sup> In many countries, rural-urban divisions have long been accepted facts, and the transition from rural-urban isolation to interaction usually involves various institutional arrangements.<sup>14</sup> These institutional arrangements determine economic, political, and social interactions through formal rules, such as policies and informal constraints, such as traditions.<sup>15</sup> In China's case, the rural-urban dichotomy was institutionalized in a much wider range of social and economic policies.

After the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the central government introduced strict controls over resource allocation to achieve a quick economic recovery.<sup>16</sup> During the planned economy period, greater priority and resources were given to urban development. Rural development was valued insofar as it supplied the material for industries and economic growth. This urban-biased principle was also deeply rooted in social development, leading to a fragmented rural-urban

system of housing, education, employment, and health insurance.<sup>17</sup> Based on the household registration system (戶口 hukou), Chinese urbanites had an “iron rice bowl” (providing a package of generous benefits; 鐵飯碗 *tie fanwan*) and rural hukou holders “stood on their own feet” (with minimal benefits). While the opening-up reform brought rapid economic growth and massive improvement in living conditions, it also accelerated growing inequalities. From 1978 to 2002, the national Gini coefficient rose from 0.24 to 0.45, China becoming one of the world’s most unequal societies.<sup>18</sup> The rural-urban distinction, paired with unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, entrenched the country’s social disparities.<sup>19</sup>

China’s urban-biased development strategy, elaborated as “let some get rich first,” has essentially ignored equality issues. The social problems caused by serious inequalities have hindered China becoming a better-off society as a whole.<sup>20</sup> In response to rising social inequalities, the Chinese government made necessary policy adjustments and notable actions were taken during the period under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. From 2003 to 2013, social policy reforms were directed at more equitable distributions in health, pensions, public education, and other resources.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the earlier strategy in which urban development was the only priority, the emphasis of the new approach shifted away from a “productivism” focus on economic growth towards a more “protective” approach, characterized by broadening welfare provisions for more disadvantaged populations.<sup>22</sup> During the Hu-Wen era, rural-urban interactions were heavily promoted. For example, hukou restrictions on rural-urban migration were gradually loosened, allowing more originally rural residents to settle in cities and acquire urban hukou. Rural-urban interactions were further advanced by policies promoting rural industrialization, in-situ urbanization, and people-centred urbanization.<sup>23</sup> As more rural populations become urbanites, they are entitled to more generous benefits packages and can take advantage of rural-urban integrated development.

From a policy perspective, rural-urban integration stands high on the state policy agenda.<sup>24</sup> The goal of creating an integrated rural-urban society was clearly elaborated in 2002 at the Sixteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. From 2004 to 2020, the No. 1 documents issued by the central government at the beginning of every year consistently focused on strategies to promote rural-urban integration. In 2021, the central government further announced the *Key Tasks for the*

*Development of New-Type Urbanization and Rural-Urban Integration* (2022 年新型城镇化和城鄉融合發展重點任務 2022nian xinxing chengzhenhua he chengxiang ronghe fazhan zhongdian renwu). To date, the promotion of rural-urban integrated reform has achieved staged outcomes. In the field of social welfare reform, in particular, a unified social insurance program has been quickly rolled out. The integration goals have been mainly implemented by province-level governments, though the pace of the reform process varies.<sup>25</sup>

In general, rural-urban integration refers to a series of government-driven policy adjustments that make rural-urban development interdependent.<sup>26</sup> The institutional deployments from a rural-urban segmented development approach to an integrated one underlie these changes. The implementation of various policies lies behind the marked rural-urban gaps. Guided by the existing policy documents, the integration reform involves not only the integration of the economy but also integration of multiple key areas, including population, environment, living conditions, and social welfare.<sup>27</sup> Each facet has a distinct effect on individuals. Following this rationale, this study considered rural-urban integration as a multi-faceted transition and examined its impact from three specific aspects: the economy, quality of life, and social development.

### 3. Perceived Social Justice in the Context of Rural-Urban Division

Research on social justice mainly focuses on the rationality of necessary goods distribution and personal needs.<sup>28</sup> Perceived social justice is commonly defined as the perceived fairness of substantive outcomes resulting from the distribution of resources.<sup>29</sup> According to Meng, social justice is further treated as a two-dimensional concept: result justice and opportunity justice.<sup>30</sup> Result justice refers to direct distributive outcomes, such as income distribution. Opportunity justice describes people's life chances to achieve their goals, such as upward social mobility.

A series of studies have demonstrated how China's rural-urban division has shaped its people's perceptions of social justice. For example, Whyte and Im argue that rural populations are less likely to perceive social injustice because the distribution of resources and opportunities in rural regions is evenly low.<sup>31</sup> Studies on urban populations are generally concerned with whether objective structural factors or subjective comparisons determine their perceptions of social justice. Though adopting different approaches, scholars agree that the rural-urban system

in China has exerted a profound effect on perceived social justice, either by forming objective social strata or by shaping the standards for subjective comparisons.<sup>32</sup>

The uneven pace of recent reforms across localities has triggered a branch of social justice research that takes account of regional factors. These studies mainly focus on the heterogeneity caused by economic, geographic, and political variations across regions.<sup>33</sup> For example, data such as GDP per capita, the Gini index, and public expenditures are controlled when estimating individuals' perceptions of social justice in China. Using Gini coefficients to measure regional income inequity, Wu explained how the perception of justice is correlated with objective income inequities in mainland China and Hong Kong.<sup>34</sup> The study revealed that people value opportunity justice in their measurement of distributive justice. In another study, Zhao estimated the negative relationship between non-agricultural investment by local governments and perceived social justice: people living in more modernized areas are more inclined to see a lack of social justice in the whole society.<sup>35</sup> However, Mei et al. observed a positive relationship between local fiscal investment in social services and individuals' perceptions of social justice.<sup>36</sup> These studies demonstrate that factors related to regional socio-economic conditions should be considered in accounts of perceived social justice.

Nevertheless, there are several gaps in existing research. First, although rural-urban integration reform has been widely implemented and changed regional inequalities, few studies provide empirical evidence of its association with perceived social justice. Second, when considering regional factors, studies have merely drawn data from economic or financial investment statistics. Economic indicators alone, however, cannot provide sufficient insight into regional variances. Other aspects such as education, living conditions, and health insurance that involve rural-urban integrated reforms are also essential gains that may shape individuals' perceptions of social justice. To fill these research gaps, the impact of rural-urban integration on perceived social justice merits further investigation.

#### 4. Theoretical Mechanisms and Research Hypotheses

From a different theoretical perspective, previous research has discussed the determinants of perceived social justice. According to social position theory, individuals' perceptions of justice are determined by their objective socio-economic status. This theory suggests that people of a higher social

status generally endorse a more favorable view of social justice because they tend to support the current distribution system favoring their own interests.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, relative deprivation theory believes that perceived social justice is not a direct function of the objective quality of the rewards or resources.<sup>38</sup> Instead, it is determined by whether the rewards are equitable based on the comparisons involving their own experiences or other referents.<sup>39</sup> The same objective outcome can be either satisfying or disappointing, depending on the result of comparisons.

While considering social position and social comparison, the development of this study's hypotheses was mainly developed from institutional culture theory. This theory posits that there is little or no direct relationship between socio-economic status and perceptions of justice because this association is mediated by the specific institutional context.<sup>40</sup> According to the theory, individuals' interest positions and the value orientation they use to judge social justice conditions are socially constructed.<sup>41</sup> In a specified social setting, institutional context will shape the distribution rules and outcomes, thereby affecting perceptions of social justice. Further, institutional arrangements, especially their design features, convey the messages to members of society about what the government is supposed to do, which citizens are deserving (and which are not), and what kinds of attitudes and perceptions are appropriate.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, living under a particular institutional regime should affect how people view social justice. The institutional culture effect may be particularly pronounced in China, where there is an emphasis on social values such as altruism, solidarity, and government intervention.<sup>43</sup>

China's rural-urban fragmentation has been institutionalized in a wide range of social and economic policies since the planned economy era. The institutional transition from rural-urban division to integration involves a series of policy adjustments, oriented by which resources and opportunities will be more equitably distributed in cities and the countryside. On the one hand, the integrated transition affects the distributive outcome for individuals; that is, the equitable distribution of the benefits of rural-urban integration will enhance the distribution of rewards for individuals, thus leading to a higher sense of social justice. On the other hand, rural-urban integration is regarded as a promising vehicle for pursuing the value of equality in Chinese society.<sup>44</sup> The equitable distribution rules adopted by rural-urban integration will reshape the value of deservedness and entitlement of Chinese citizens and give rise to improved perceptions of social justice.



As institutional culture theory assumes that rural-urban integration should be a predictor of perceptions of social justice, we further formulated our hypotheses based on recent empirical findings. Rural-urban economic and quality of life integration are two aspects of China's economic rural-urban integration, in which equitable income distribution is an extremely important aspect of its result justice.<sup>45</sup> Existing literature, however, has documented an unbalanced model of economic growth in China. For example, Brockmann and her colleagues found that along with the economic transition in China, inequality became increasingly skewed towards the upper-income groups.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Li observed a trend that only a small group of elites benefited massively from the boom.<sup>47</sup> During China's rural-urban integration reform, the persistent hukou-based social stratification may perpetuate the inequitable distribution of the benefits of economic growth.<sup>48</sup> Because current economic rural-urban integration has failed to promote equitable income distribution (result justice) and even exacerbated income disparities, it will negatively shape individuals' perceptions of social justice. Following this rationale, this study proposes two hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Rural-urban economic integration will be negatively associated with individuals' perceptions of social justice.

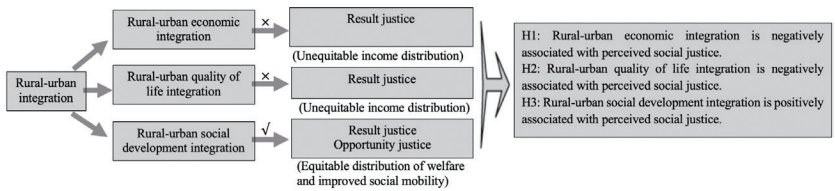
**Hypothesis 2:** Rural-urban quality of life integration will be negatively associated with individuals' perceptions of social justice.

By contrast, empirical studies focusing on rural-urban social development integration have reported positive outcomes.<sup>49</sup> The key aspects of social development reform involve providing education, health insurance, pensions, and social security. Building a national unified social insurance system represents the most substantial achievement. According to Tang et al., the new institutional structure of a rural-urban integrated social insurance system has been generally well-developed.<sup>50</sup> Wider coverage signals to society that the new social welfare system provides better care of vulnerable populations. From the perspective of result justice, the positive feelings resulting from equitable welfare distribution will produce positive feedback on individuals' perceptions of social justice. Moreover, the equitable distribution of social welfare will contribute to society's opportunity justice. Education and health are considered two key drivers of opportunity justice. Previous studies have widely discussed the role of

education and health in promoting social mobility and narrowing the income distribution gaps between different strata.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, by enhancing both result justice and opportunity justice, rural-urban social development integration will promote a sense of social justice. Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 was:

**Hypothesis 3:** Rural-urban social development integration will be positively associated with individuals’ perceptions of social justice.

**Figure 1: Mechanism Approaches of the Linkages between Rural-Urban Integration and Perceived Social Justice**



## 5. Data and Methods

### a. Data from CGSS 2015

Data were drawn from two sources. The individual-level data came from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). Introduced in 2003, the CGSS is China’s first nationwide large-scale social survey project providing detailed information on changes in the social structure and the population’s attitudes and perceptions. The survey collects a nationally representative sample of adults living in both rural and urban regions, using the multi-stage stratified design and PPS (Probability Proportionate to Size Sampling) random sampling methods.<sup>52</sup> The 2015 data were collected from 28 provinces, 89 prefecture-level cities, 134 county-level administrative units, and 370 township-level administrative units. A total of 10,968 respondents were interviewed.

#### *Perceived Social Justice*

Perceived social justice was the dependent variable. The CGSS survey asked respondents, “Overall, do you think the whole society is fair?” Based on this question, perceived social justice was coded as an ordinal variable, with a possible value from 1 to 5 (1= unfair, 2 = not very fair, 3 = average, 4 = quite fair, and 5 = fair). It should be noted that a

multi-item measure might be preferable for gauging such a core variable. As illustrated by previous research, however, using single-item measures has been quite prevalent, and their reliability has received considerable empirical support.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Individual-Level Covariates*

Drawing on the literature, we included a number of covariates in the model estimation. Socio-demographic variables included age (years), gender (1 = female; 0 = male), marital status (1 = married; 0 = other), ethnicity (1 = ethnic minority; 0 = Han), education (years of schooling), occupation (1 = professional/managerial occupation; 0 = other), Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership (1 = CCP members; 0 = other), and migration status (1 = migrants; 0 = other). Respondents' annual income was coded as a continuous variable. For any missing income data, we conducted multiple imputations to estimate missing values. Hukou status included rural hukou, urban hukou, and jumin hukou,<sup>54</sup> all coded as dummy variables.

#### **b. Rural-Urban Integration Index**

The key independent variables were the rural-urban integration variables, drawn from the yearbook of the Index of Rural-urban Development Integration in China published by Zhu and his colleagues in 2018.<sup>55</sup> At the provincial level, this yearbook provides a specialized dataset with continuous assessment on the degree of annual rural-urban integration from 2010 to 2016. Related data were derived from various sources, including statistical yearbooks, political guidance documents, official annual reports, etc. In this study, we used the data regarding rural-urban integration on the economy, the quality of life, and social development, coded as continuous variables.

The value of the rural-urban integration index quantitatively describes the degree of integration between urban and rural areas in the specific reform area. In the field of economic reforms, rural-urban economic integration was mainly measured by economic indices, such as rural-urban gaps in GDP and the urbanization population rate. Similarly, rural-urban quality of life integration is mainly constructed by economic indices regarding income and consumption levels in rural and urban regions. Lastly, rural-urban social development integration was measured by rural-urban gaps in social welfare fields, including basic education, health

insurance, pension insurance, and social assistance. Details of the construction of the index system are presented in Table 6 in the appendix.

After matching the index with the CGSS data, the final sample for the analysis was 10,870 respondents from 28 provinces. Provincial GDP per capita in 2014 was also included in the analysis to control for economic variations across regions. The GDP data were taken from the 2015 China Statistical Yearbook. Sampling weights provided by CGSS were used throughout the data analysis.

### c. Analysis

Because the data have a hierarchical structure, we estimated three-level mixed-effects models. In addition to the provincial data, township data were used to provide another level of analysis because townships are widely considered a stable control for the subordinate level of regional differences.<sup>56</sup> According to previous research, a regular regression model does not correct the biases in parameter estimates for the clustering data. This subsequently leads to underestimating coefficients and overstatement of coefficient significance.<sup>57</sup> Given the categorical nature of the outcome variable, we employed ordered logistic regressions in data analysis. The three-level ordered logistic regression models were used to account for the effects of individual characteristics and contextual factors on the outcome variable. The general form of the three-level ordered logistic regression model is as follows:

$$y_{ijk} = X'_{ijk}\beta + v_k + v_{jk} + \varepsilon_{ijk}$$

In the equation,  $y_{ijk}$  represents the measure of the perception of social justice of individual  $i$  in township  $j$  and province  $k$ .  $X_{ijk}$  is the covariate vector;  $\beta$  represents estimated regression parameters;  $v_k$  is the unknown random effect at the provincial level;  $v_{jk}$  indicates the random effect at the township level; and  $\varepsilon_{ijk}$  are the model residuals following a logistic distribution.

We estimated four models. Model 1 was the baseline model with a constant term in the fixed effects. Individual socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, education, occupation, CCP membership, income, and hukou status were added in Model 2. In Model 3, we added variables representing the change in rural-urban integration while keeping other control variables. Model 4 further controlled for the provincial GDP per capita in 2014. All coefficients were standardized to

allow comparisons across variables. Using the methods established by Hedeker and Gibbons, we calculated the intra-unit correlation coefficients (ICCs) of each model.<sup>58</sup>

6 Results

a. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 displays the weighted descriptive statistics of individual-level variables. The sample included 5,778 men (53 percent) and 5,092 women (47 percent), with an average age of around 53 years. Most respondents (69 percent) were married. The average years of schooling were 8.456, indicating a low level of educational attainment. The percentage of respondents with professional or managerial occupations was lower than 9 percent. Annual income on average was around RMB 29,035. More than half of the respondents (54 percent) were rural hukou holders, followed by urban hukou holders (28 percent) and jumin hukou holders (18 percent). This result indicates that most of the respondents' hukou were still registered as traditional rural or urban while a few had converted to the newly unified jumin hukou. Non-migrants and migrants represented 72 percent and 28 percent of the sample, respectively.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Socio-Demographic Characteristics of CGSS 2015

Variables	Mean/percentage	Range
Perceived social justice	3.224 (0.997)	1-5
Age	52.711 (17.331)	18-95
Gender (female, %)	46.840	0,1
Marital status (married, %)	69.290	0,1
Ethnicity (ethnic minority, %)	7.225	0,1
Years of schooling	8.456 (4.834)	0-18
Occupation (professional/managerial, %)	8.724	0,1
CCP membership (CCP members, %)	11.185	0,1
Income	29,035.300 (58,570.650)	0-1000000
Hukou status (%)		
Rural hukou	54.362	0,1
Urban hukou	28.147	0,1
Jumin hukou	17.491	0,1
Cross-town migrants (%)	27.466	0,1

Notes: N = 10,870. Data were weighted. Means or percentages are reported. Standard deviations in parentheses.

Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics of the province-level variables. The average level of rural-urban economic integration was relatively low (around 46). In contrast, rural-urban social development integration had the highest average (63), likely the result of nationwide progress in consolidating health and pension insurance. The average level of rural-urban quality of life integration was around 58.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Rural-Urban Integration Indices and GDP per capita at Province Level (N = 28)**

Rural-urban integration variables	Definitions	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Rural-urban economic integration	Constructed index based on regional statistics in 2015	46.392	0.261	-31.140	82.660
Rural-urban quality of life integration	Constructed index based on regional statistics in 2015	58.327	0.196	34.820	100
Rural-urban social development integration	Constructed index based on regional statistics in 2015	63.311	0.208	-39	94.040
GDP per capita	GDP per capita at province level in 2014	49,202.700	207.889	9,995	105,231

Note: Means are reported.

Figure 2 illustrates the level of rural-urban integration of 28 provinces. Figure 2a shows the degree of rural-urban economic integration. Figure 2b shows the degree of rural-urban quality of life integration, with an overall positive value for all 28 provinces. Figure 2c depicts the level of rural-urban social development integration: all provinces scored positively except Qinghai. According to Figure 2, provinces located in the central and coastal regions such as Beijing, Tianjin, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang have a higher level of rural-urban integration, which is largely consistent with the measurement results of existing research using different sets of indices.<sup>59</sup> The results demonstrate the significant variations in rural-urban integration at the provincial level, which could lead to variations in individuals’ perceptions of social justice.

Figure 2: Rural-Urban Integration in 28 Provinces in China, 2015

Figure 2a: Rural-Urban Economic Integration in 2015

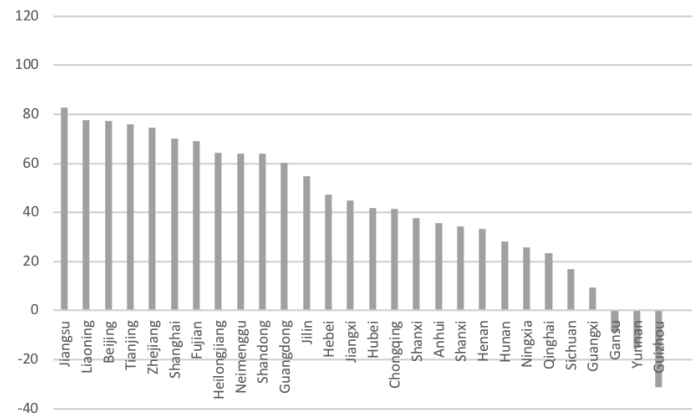


Figure 2b: Rural-Urban Quality of Life Integration in 2015

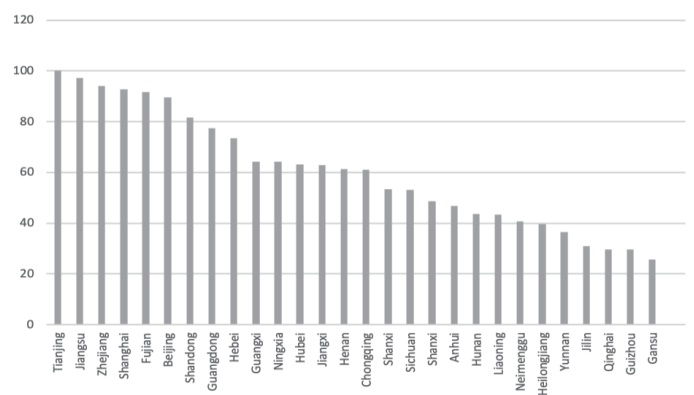
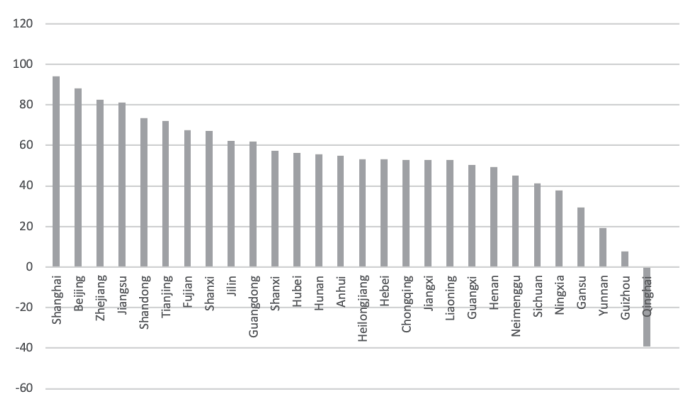


Figure 2c: Rural-Urban Social Development Integration in 2015



## b. Regression Results

Three-level ordered logistic regressions were used to assess the relationship between rural-urban integration and perceived social justice. The standardized coefficients are presented in Table 3. The results of Model 1 indicate the statistically significant variations in perceptions of social justice at the individual, township, and provincial levels. The intraclass correlations (ICCs) in Model 1 were 0.069 and 0.024, suggesting that 6.9 per cent and 2.4 percent of the variations in the dependent variable can be attributed to provincial and township differences, respectively. Though the ICCs do not seem significantly high, previous scholars have suggested that multi-level modelling should be considered in analyzing clustering data.<sup>60</sup>

According to Models 3 and 4, rural-urban integration was statistically significant in predicting the variance of perceptions of social justice. These findings remained consistent after controlling GDP per capita. Specifically, rural-urban economic integration was negatively associated with the outcome variable ( $\beta = -0.130$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This result indicates that people living in provinces with more integrated rural-urban economies were less likely to think society is fair. Similarly, there was a negative relationship between rural-urban quality of life integration and individuals' perceptions of social justice ( $\beta = -0.142$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The negative results suggest that the current integration reforms in the two economic fields have failed to improve perceptions of social justice. This finding mirrors unbalanced economic growth in China. Supported by previous research, it is argued that China's rural-urban economic integration has exacerbated rather than reduced income distribution inequality.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, people are less likely to perceive the whole society as fair. Thus, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were confirmed.

On the contrary, rural-urban social development integration and perceptions of social justice were positively and significantly correlated. As Model 4 in Table 3 shows, integrated social welfare reform was associated with perceptions of increased social justice ( $\beta = 0.230$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This result extended previous findings by showing that rural-urban integration not only narrowed actual rural-urban social welfare gaps but also shaped a higher sense of social justice. The positive linkage reflects that the pursuit of equality achieved in building a national unified social welfare system contributed to a favorable view of social justice. According to institutional culture theory, equitable distribution of social welfare



promotes perceptions of social justice through enhancing both result justice and opportunity justice. Our results suggest that people living in provinces where rural-urban social development gaps are smaller are more likely to perceive the whole society as fair. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was confirmed.

Table 3: Three-Level Mixed-Effects Ordered Logistic Regressions on Perceived Social Justice

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Individual-level variables</b>				
Age (years)		-0.503***	-0.503***	-0.503***
		(0.157)	(0.156)	(0.156)
Age (squared)		0.809***	0.809***	0.809***
		(0.158)	(0.158)	(0.158)
Gender (female)		-0.040	-0.039	-0.039
		(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.037)
Marital status (married)		-0.001	-0.000	-0.000
		(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)
Ethnicity (ethnic minority)		0.266***	0.266***	0.266***
		(0.095)	(0.092)	(0.092)
Education (years of schooling)		0.071	0.069	0.069
		(0.045)	(0.045)	(0.045)
Occupation (professional/managerial)		0.157*	0.157*	0.157*
		(0.083)	(0.082)	(0.082)
CCP membership (CCP members)		0.144*	0.144*	0.144*
		(0.076)	(0.076)	(0.076)
Annual income (ln)		-0.030	-0.030	-0.030
		(0.036)	(0.036)	(0.037)
<b>Hukou status (ref. urban hukou)</b>				
Urban hukou		-0.088	-0.082	-0.082
		(0.059)	(0.058)	(0.056)
Jumin hukou		-0.081	-0.076	-0.076
		(0.076)	(0.076)	(0.076)
Cross-town migrants		-0.109***	-0.108**	-0.108**
		(0.041)	(0.041)	(0.041)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Province-level variables</b>				
Rural-urban economic integration			-0.130** (0.051)	-0.130** (0.051)
Rural-urban quality of life integration			-0.142** (0.067)	-0.142** (0.067)
Rural-urban of social development integration			0.229*** (0.049)	0.230*** (0.072)
GDP per capita in 2014 (ln)				-0.003 (0.086)
<b>Constants</b>				
Constant cut1	-2.926*** (0.120)	-2.966*** (0.129)	-2.978*** (0.125)	-2.978*** (0.126)
Constant cut2	-1.042*** (0.080)	-1.064*** (0.100)	-1.076*** (0.095)	-1.076*** (0.097)
Constant cut3	-0.010 (0.070)	-0.011 (0.094)	-0.023 (0.090)	-0.023 (0.092)
Constant cut4	3.455*** (0.154)	3.516*** (0.170)	3.504*** (0.167)	3.504*** (0.167)
<b>Random-effects Parameters</b>				
Variance (Township   Province)	0.159*** (0.033)	0.147*** (0.034)	0.146*** (0.033)	0.146*** (0.033)
Variance (Province)	0.084*** (0.032)	0.079** (0.030)	0.058*** (0.023)	0.058*** (0.022)
<b>ICC</b>				
ICC (Township   Province)	0.069	0.064	0.058	0.021
ICC (Province)	0.024	0.022	0.017	0.017
<b>Observations</b>				
Number of Provinces	28	28	28	28
Number of Townships	357	357	357	357
Number of respondents	10,870	10,870	10,870	10,870
<b>Log pseudolikelihood</b>	-13913.423	-13765.337	-13591.263	-13587.249

Notes: Data were weighted. Standardized coefficients are reported. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. \*p < 0.1, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01.

### **c. Robustness Checks**

We conducted several robustness checks to validate the reliability of our findings. First, we ran separate ordered logistic regression models to compare specifications. The multilevel model demonstrated superior fit, as indicated by lower AIC and BIC values. Second, we introduced the province-level urbanization rate (measured as the proportion of urban residents in the total population) as an additional covariate. The inclusion of this variable resulted in minimal changes, with core patterns remaining consistent. Finally, we excluded respondents classified as cross-town migrants to account for mobility-related bias. The results remained robust. Full robustness check outputs are available upon request.

## **7. Mechanisms Linking Rural-Urban Integration to Perceptions of Social Justice**

The above empirical findings show that the impact of rural-urban integration on perceptions of social justice differ, depending on the reform domains. In this section, we further elaborate the mechanisms through which rural-urban integration may discourage or encourage individuals' perceptions of social justice. Following the approach proposed by Baron and Kenny,<sup>62</sup> a series of regressions were estimated to assess potential mediation effects. The results are presented in Tables 4 and 5 (full tables are available upon request).

### **a. Rural-Urban Economic and Quality of Life Integration Fail to Promote Equitable Distribution of Income**

The CGSS survey covered a wide range of questions regarding respondents' socio-economic status and social attitudes. The survey asked, "Given your ability and the status quo of current work, do you think your current income is fair?." Based on the answer to this question, perceived income justice was coded as a categorical variable in ordered logistic regression.

The results presented in Table 4 show that perceived income justice serves as a mediating variable between rural-urban economic integration and perceived social justice. According to Model 2, rural-urban economic and quality of life integration are negatively associated with perceived income justice. And the lower the perceived income justice, the lower the sense of social justice. Results from Models 1 and 3 in Table 4 further

suggest that adding the mediator variable to Model 1 reduces rural-urban economic and social development integration effects from a coefficient of -0.130 to -0.113, and -0.142 to -0.127, respectively. These results indicate that rural-urban economic integration reforms in China have failed to diminish income disparities and thus failed to improve perceived social justice. The negative coefficients, though not statistically significant, reflect a potential trend of enlarged income inequality in the process of rural-urban economic integration growth. Due to the inequitable distribution of the benefits of the reforms, people were less likely to think society was fair.

Table 4: Results of Mediation Analysis of Perceived Income Justice

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Perceived social justice	Perceived income justice	Perceived social justice
Rural-urban economic integration	-0.130** (0.051)	-0.068 (0.086)	-0.113* (0.060)
Rural-urban quality of life integration	-0.142** (0.067)	-0.089 (0.076)	-0.127* (0.076)
Rural-urban social development integration	0.230*** (0.072)	0.019 (0.063)	0.230*** (0.072)
Mediator variable			
Perceived income justice			0.787*** (0.047)
Number of respondents	10,709	9,437	9,437
Log pseudolikelihood	-13840.977	-7570.685	-13589.376

Notes: Data were weighted. Individual and province level covariates were controlled in the model estimation. Standardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors in parentheses. \*p < 0.1, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01.

**b. Rural-Urban Social Development Integration Enhances Social Welfare Distribution and Social Mobility**

The equitable provision of social welfare is the key aspect of rural-urban social development integration. By merging the existing rural-urban insurance subsystems, a national unified health and pension insurance system has been established in recent years.<sup>63</sup> Previous researchers have used coverage as a good indicator of the outcome of

social welfare reforms.<sup>64</sup> From the perspective of access equality, higher coverage represents more equitable distribution of social welfare for individuals. In the CGSS survey, each respondent was asked, "Have you enrolled in the following social insurance programs?." The answers cover major health insurance schemes, including Urban Basic Health Insurance, New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme, and Public Health Care and pension insurance schemes, including Urban Residents Basic Pension Scheme and New Rural Pension Scheme. A categorical variable of social insurance coverage was coded as 2 if the respondent was covered by any type of health insurance and pension scheme, 1 if the respondent was covered by either health insurance or pension insurance and 0 if uninsured.

Opportunity justice is the core content of social justice and is often measured by the status of social mobility.<sup>65</sup> The CGSS survey asked, "To what extent do you agree that in our society, the descendants of workers, farmers and other ordinary people have the same opportunities to become rich and have high status". Social mobility was coded as a continuous variable dependent on respondents' answers to this question, with a possible value from 1 to 5.

As shown in Table 5, Models 1 to 3, social insurance coverage mediates the relationship between perceptions of social justice and rural-urban social development integration, confirming Hypothesis 3. Similarly, social mobility plays a role in mediating the positive effect of rural-urban social development integration on the perception of social justice. The results indicate that rural-urban social development integration was positively and significantly associated with social insurance coverage and social mobility, which are positive determinants of the perception of social justice.<sup>66</sup> This suggests that along with rural-urban social development integration, individuals are more likely to perceive the whole society as fair because they feel social mobility and social welfare system have been improved. Thus, the analysis empirically tested the two mechanisms through which rural-urban social development integration has translated into increased social justice perceptions.

Table 5: Results of Mediation Analysis of Social Insurance Coverage and Social Mobility

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	Social justice	Social insurance coverage	Social justice	Social mobility	Social justice
Rural-urban economic integration	-0.130** (0.051)	-0.369** (0.159)	-0.128** (0.055)	-0.052*** (0.020)	-0.103** (0.052)
Rural-urban quality of life integration	-0.142** (0.067)	0.196 (0.158)	-0.139** (0.070)	-0.092*** (0.019)	-0.130* (0.067)
Rural-urban social development integration	0.230*** (0.072)	0.270* (0.143)	0.223*** (0.073)	0.0533** (0.023)	0.220*** (0.068)
Mediator variables					
Social insurance coverage			0.111** (0.044)		
Social mobility					0.230***
Number of respondents	10,709	10,544	10,544	10,606	10,606
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>				0.024	
Log pseudolikelihood	-13580.324		-13430.901		-13727.032

Notes: Data were weighted. Individual and province level covariates were controlled in the model estimation. Standardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors in parentheses. Linear OLS regression was conducted in Model 4. \*p < 0.1, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01.

8. Conclusion

Rural–urban distinctions institutionalized in a wide range of social and economic policies have deeply shaped social inequalities in China. Since 2002, rural-urban integration has been an attempt to strike a balance between growth and equality. However, the impact of relevant reform outcomes in shaping citizens’ perceptions of social justice remains unclear. Pooling data from the 2015 CGSS and the yearbook of China’s Rural-Urban Integration Index, this study investigated whether rural-urban integration at the provincial level can explain individuals’ perceptions of social justice and test the proposed theoretical mechanisms. The results suggest that rural-urban integration is significantly correlated with perceived social justice, yet the relationships diverge depending on the specific integration field.

Specifically, our empirical results show that people residing in provinces with a higher level of rural-urban economic or quality of life

integration tend to perceive a lower degree of social justice. Equitable income distribution is the main objective of promoting rural-urban economic and quality of life integration. However, our results suggest that the current integration reforms in specific fields have failed to promote equitable income distribution and thus failed to enhance perceived social justice. This result is understandable given the fact that although rural-urban integration reforms have narrowed the economic gaps between rural and urban areas, income inequalities still exist or are even exacerbated in other levels, such as education, occupations, and social class.<sup>67</sup> In provinces having a higher level of rural-urban economic integration, such as Jiangsu, current reforms have greatly narrowed economic gaps at the regional level. However, remaining hukou-based restrictions still act as an obstacle for non-urban or non-local hukou holders to get equal access to more resources and opportunities.<sup>68</sup> An alternative explanation for the negative linkages is that even advantaged social groups who have achieved considerable income gains during economic rural-urban integration may feel society is unfair because their relative income position has deteriorated compared to the winners.<sup>69</sup>

On the positive side, rural-urban social development integration has generated perceptions of increased social justice. The positive link underlines the significant role welfare provision plays in satisfying individuals' desire for justice.<sup>70</sup> The result is also consistent with previous findings that educational attainment and good health are essential factors preventing stagnation of social classes, unblocking channels for upward social mobility, and creating opportunities for more people to become rich.<sup>71</sup> By the end of 2021, the newly integrated Urban and Rural Resident Medical Insurance covered more than 1 billion Chinese.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, the new pension program (Urban and Rural Residents Pension Insurance) has been rolled out nationwide.<sup>73</sup> Our findings suggest that these measures have translated into an increase in perceptions of social justice nationwide. By enhancing both the equitable distribution of welfare (outcome justice) and social mobility (opportunity justice), rural-urban social development integration has shaped a favorable view of social justice.

From a policy perspective, our results suggest an urgent need to promote the more equitable distribution of fruits of economic growth. The long-lasting hukou-based social stratification has been proven to cause social inequalities and unbalanced economic growth.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, supportive policies are needed to loosen the hukou restrictions to

ensure the equitable distribution of wealth and fairness to allow all members of society to enjoy the same opportunity to accumulate wealth. Meanwhile, scholars have previously identified low levels of financial satisfaction in the initial stage of economic transition, arguing this phenomenon would fade away once income distribution had become more egalitarian again.<sup>75</sup> Our findings suggest that continued progress on the road towards equality should not merely rely on economic performance. As China plans to promote further rural-urban integration, during the transition, local governments should devote more effort to meet the demand for social welfare provisions. Therefore, more financial investment in education, social assistance, and the newly unified social insurance system is needed, especially given there remains substantial room for improvement.<sup>76</sup>

As we conclude, a few limitations shall be noted. First, the use of cross-sectional data in this study limits our ability to draw causal inferences. Our analyses mostly support associations but not causal claims. Second, scholars have argued that perceptions of procedural justice could generate social pressure on the government to commit to fairer policy-making processes.<sup>77</sup> Notwithstanding, this study only focuses on outcome-oriented distributive justice. Third, is the caveat that some mediating variables checked in this study are also measures of subjective attitudes. Unfortunately, objective measures are unavailable in the dataset to confirm the mediating pathways. Prospective data and research are needed to provide more comprehensive evaluations to tackle these problems.



Appendix: Index of Rural-Urban Economic, Quality of Life, and Social Development Integration

First-level indicators	First-level indicators	Second-level indicators	Specific indicators	Unit
Rural-urban economic integration	Economic development	GDP level	GDP per capita	RMB
		Urbanization rate	Percentage of urbanized population	%
		Rural-urban dual economy	Dual contrast coefficient	
	Industry coordination	Agricultural development	Labor productivity of primary industry	10,000 yuan / person
			Agricultural comprehensive mechanization rate	%
			Ratio of non-agricultural labor	%
	Factors allocation	Allocation of labor force	Relative intensity of agricultural credit	
			Relative degree of fiscal expenditure on agriculture	
		Capital allocation		
		Land allocation	Relative utilization rate of land	Billions of yuan/ square kilometres
Rural-urban quality of life integration	Income and consumption level and rural-urban gap	Income of rural residents and the gap between rural and urban areas	Per capita disposable income of rural residents	yuan
			Ratio of average incomes between rural and urban residents	
		Consumption gap between rural and urban residents	Ratio of living consumption expenditure between rural and urban residents	
	Sanitary conditions of residence	Safe drinking water in rural regions	Penetration rate of rural tap water	%
			Prevalence of harmless sanitary toilets in rural areas	%

Notes: Data were extracted from Zhu Gang, Zhang Haipeng, and Chen Fang, *Zhongguo chengxiang fazhan yitihua zhishu (2018): Yi quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui wei mubiao* (Index of Urban-Rural Development Integration in China: To Build a Moderately Prosperous Society in an All-Round Way) (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2018).

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