



Where do opportunity beliefs come from? Implications of intergenerational social mobility for beliefs about the distribution system in China

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ABSTRACT

People's understanding of the drivers of inequality is a function of their position in the social structure. Nevertheless, the ways in which intergenerational social mobility is associated with opportunity beliefs remain under researched. Recent findings in cultural sociology suggest that individuals seldom update their beliefs, and that settled dispositions lead people to reproduce their beliefs in their adulthood. This study used a probabilistic and representative survey of Chinese citizens to explore how intergenerational social mobility relates to opportunity beliefs. China presents an interesting context to explore this question, since Chinese society is considered to be highly unequal yet highly tolerant of social inequalities. Our results indicate a U-shaped relationship between social class and opportunity beliefs. The upper class and farmers exhibit stronger meritocratic beliefs than middle-classes. Moreover, upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals show greater weights for origin and destination, respectively. Thus, opportunity beliefs are explained by the social class where they rank lower. These findings suggest that when beliefs are updated through social mobility, they interact with the mobility trajectory. In addition, the stronger meritocratic beliefs of the farmers' class and the greater weight of social origin for upwardly mobile individuals could help explain the dormant social volcano in China.

1. Introduction

Major economies have experienced a substantive rise in economic inequality in the past decades (Piketty & Saez, 2003; Piketty & Zucman, 2014; Xie & Zhou, 2014), which may cast public skepticism over the mainstream beliefs in the system of stratification and opportunity (McCall et al., 2017). Meanwhile, people of different social positions hold distinct subjective propositions about factors to get ahead in society (Kluegel & Smith, 1981; Lei & Yu, 2021; Xian & Reynolds, 2017). Nevertheless, there is still a lack of research on understanding how changes in social positions, especially intergenerational changes in social class, are associated with opportunity beliefs.

In stratification beliefs research, a burgeoning body of literature has examined how individuals update their subjective beliefs about social structure and redistributive policies (Alesina et al., 2018; Cruces et al., 2013; Mijs & Hoy, 2021). Nevertheless, their focus is on how objective information about inequality and intergenerational social mobility in society triggers changes. It is still unknown whether other people's mental states, such as perception of opportunities⁵ to advance in society, are also influenced by social mobility, and whether the influence differs in contexts where drastic changes in class structure and the distribution system have occurred simultaneously. People's understanding of the drivers of inequality and opportunities are the root causes of their politics and policy views (Mijs & Hoy, 2021), and leaving them unexamined

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⁵ Analytical sociologists define beliefs as subjective propositions about how the world works (Rydgren, 2009). Nevertheless, the literature on stratification beliefs often conflates the perceptions that individuals have about social inequalities (as it is) and their preferences about them (what ought to be) under the umbrella concept of beliefs. In order to maintain the conceptual consistency with previous studies (McCall et al., 2017; Olivos, 2021; Wilson et al., 2022), we refer to opportunity beliefs as the perception of opportunities rather than any normative stand of individuals.

misses an important piece of the puzzle to understand the implications of social mobility for the belief system and broader political attitudes.

We used probabilistic and nationally representative survey data from China to explore this link between intergenerational mobility and opportunity beliefs. As a country simultaneously experiencing massive social mobility and fast-rising inequality, China provides a unique case to examine the questions above and enriches the discussion about the cultural consequences of social mobility. Most of the recent studies in social mobility and stratification beliefs are based on data from the US and the EU (Mijs et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2022), where societies exhibit a more stagnant situation. This contrasts with societies that have undergone structural transformations that have both widened social inequalities and given millions of people the chance of upward mobility. During the last four decades, China has witnessed vast social and economic changes stemming from its post-socialist economic transition from a planned economy to a market-based economy, and its transformation from an agrarian society to an industrial society. A large scale of social mobility has occurred in China, especially upward mobility represented by the army of workers who have migrated from rural areas to east-coast cities (Liang, 1999, 2001; Zhou & Xie, 2019). Therefore, if cultural updating is to some extent driven by social mobility, it may be prominent in societies where people have largely experienced it. The aim of the paper does not directly compare China with other contexts but to use this particular case to bring the implications of social mobility into sharper relief.

As its economy has undergone processes of marketization and industrialization, China's economic inequality has increased rapidly (Piketty et al., 2019; Xie & Zhou, 2014). While some scholars have warned that people's anger towards rising levels of inequality may lead an eruption of the social volcano (Kahn, 2006; Ma, 2005), large-scale social surveys provide little evidence of this. On the contrary, surveys show a relatively high tolerance toward social inequality in China (Lei, 2020; Whyte, 2010; Whyte, 2016). The current population's experiences of upward mobility and their tendency for meritocratic beliefs are proposed as the key explanations of the Chinese "dormant social volcano" (Lei & Yu, 2021; Whyte & Im, 2014; Xie, 2016). Nevertheless, few studies have explored the association between the two factors: how social mobility affects individuals' subjective beliefs about the opportunity structure and to what extent it can explain Chinese people's confidence in a merit-based distribution system.

In this study, against the intriguing background of China, we examined how one's views on the determinants of distribution of rewards in society vary across social classes and whether these beliefs are reproduced by encultured social origin dispositions or reshaped by their destination social position. By virtue of this, we have extended recent debates on cultural change to the field of opportunity beliefs and tested it from the intergenerational perspective. Furthermore, given that rising inequality may arouse people's feelings of injustice and erode their beliefs in meritocracy, this study also sheds light on whether social mobility fuels meritocratic beliefs during China's social transition.

2. Background

2.1. Social class as a determinant of opportunity beliefs

One's class position contains the information about resource possession and one's structural relationship with other classes. This explanatory importance has long been recognized and extensively discussed in studies of cultural dispositions (Devine & Wright, 1997; Wilson et al., 2022). As argued by Bourdieu (1979), people's image of the social structure is a function of their position within it. Nonetheless, previous research has struggled to reach a consensus concerning how social positions determine people's beliefs about the distribution of rewards. Thus, we test two competing effects of social class on opportunity beliefs supported by the literature as a previous step to examine mobility effects.

Theories pertaining to self-interest and social dominance expect a positive relationship between class positions and support for a merit-based distribution system. Individuals from advantaged social positions may endorse and justify a system where rewards are determined by merit, particularly education and its correlates, because they are more likely to attain higher educational levels and gain more from this system (Cokley, 2007; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007).

Many societies share the dominant ideology that socioeconomic achievements are based on individual ability and effort (Kluegel & Smith, 1981; Reynolds and Xian, 2014), which provides the legitimacy of an unequal status quo (Mijs, 2016; Olivos, 2021). The dominant ideology around merit-based opportunity distribution justifies the structure of inequality and maintains a group-based hierarchy, which is easier for people located in advantaged positions to endorse (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001).

On the contrary, disadvantaged individuals will easily perceive more unfair treatment. They are more aware of the objective inequality and less likely to trust the present distribution system (Davis & Robinson, 1991). Although without using specific indicators of social class, previous empirical studies in China show support for a positive relationship between socioeconomic status and beliefs in meritocracy (Li & Hu, 2021; Olivos, 2021). Based on this evidence, we propose our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1.1. *The higher the class position of individuals, the stronger the belief that merits are rewarded in society.*

Nevertheless, the reverse relationship has been supported by other studies, meaning that the opposite prediction can also be made. In social psychology, system justification theory holds the view that individuals are biased in favor of their social systems. They accept the existing system to reduce guilt and discomfort, avoid existential threat, and sustain feelings of safety and certainty by rationalizing the status quo (Jost et al., 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Ledgerwood et al., 2011). Thus, disadvantaged groups embrace the dominant ideology even more firmly than privileged groups.

Moreover, recent studies in sociology have provided a plausible alternative explanation (Mijs, 2019). People often see partial pictures of social inequality in their society, and the awareness of the forces driving social stratification is constrained by the inability to see beyond their social milieu. In the case of China, the wide rural and urban divide may differentiate the beliefs of farmers from the other social classes and even more from urban elites. Thus, farmers may lack awareness of the inequalities between themselves and the higher social classes, with their points of comparison being their own former living conditions and the people around them. On the other hand, without the shelter of socialist equalitarian policies, the urban workers in state-owned enterprises lost their "iron rice bowl" and experienced a wave of layoffs during the period of reform, which may have made them depressed and lose faith in a justified distribution of opportunities (Solinger, 2002; Wang & Xie, 2015). These perspectives explain why China-centered research has consistently found that farmers and farm workers show a higher acceptance of inequality and a more optimistic attitude towards the distribution system than other social classes (Han, 2009; Whyte, 2010; Whyte & Im, 2014). Therefore, contrary to the first hypothesis, we expect that:

Hypothesis 1.2. *The lower the class position of individuals, the stronger the belief that merits are rewarded in society.*

Apart from the two linear predictions of the relationship between social class and beliefs in meritocracy, a combination of both hypotheses in which the upper class and farmers favor stronger meritocratic beliefs is also tenable. Recent evidence (Otero et al., 2021) suggests that social classes at the top and at the bottom of the social hierarchy have segregated social networks and, thus, they only provide a partial picture of the rewards' distribution in society. Therefore, the middle classes have more heterogeneous networks due to their bridging position, which

could make them aware of the high levels of social inequality in China. Thus, in addition to the two linear hypotheses, we test a quadratic relationship between social class and opportunity beliefs:

Hypothesis 1.3. *High and low social classes have stronger beliefs that merits are rewarded in society than intermediate social classes.*

In sum, in this paper we contribute to solve the puzzle of the net effect of social class effect on opportunity beliefs by testing these competing hypotheses for a representative and probabilistic sample of Chinese citizens.

2.2. Three versions of the social mobility argument

Over the last years, cultural and cognitive sociologists have strived to understand whether individuals update their personal culture (Bročić & Miles, 2021; Kiley & Vaisey, 2020; McDonnell et al., 2021; Vaisey & Lizardo, 2016). This body of literature yields three possible hypotheses about the implications of intergenerational mobility for subjective propositions about the importance of factors for getting ahead in society.

The first hypothesis is derived from the settled disposition argument (SDA), which suggests that individuals acquire their personal culture in early life through socialization and become stable over time (Kiley & Vaisey, 2020; Vaisey & Lizardo, 2016). In this perspective, socially mobile individuals were brought up in the cultural milieu of their family of origin and are unlikely to change their personal culture.

Individuals internalize culture through socialization or enculturation, and social origin is the milieu where this process happens (Guhin et al., 2021; Lizardo, 2021). Thus, the symbolic forms that “exist in the world” and make individuals evaluate their society as meritocratic or not become their own disposition. Cultural representations become part of the individuals (D’Andrade, 1995). Therefore, the SDA suggests that these encultured beliefs are completely determined by social origin through internalization, with social destination playing little or no role.

Despite the ongoing debate, cultural and cognitive sociologists have systematically found that individuals hardly update their culture. Kiley and Vaisey (2020) showed for a set of 183 General Social Survey items (i.e., measures of attitudes, beliefs, self-perceptions, and social behaviors) asked in three waves that most of the changes across years respond to measurement error or temporary changes that return to the baseline. These items included redistributive preferences, inequality beliefs, and other measurements related to opportunity beliefs. In addition, if there is cultural change, it is driven by cohort replacement and not within-person updating (Vaisey & Lizardo, 2016). Derived from this hypothesis, we propose:

Hypothesis 2.1. *Individuals’ origin class plays a predominant role in determining their opportunity beliefs about factors that are rewarded in society ($O > D$).*

The second hypothesis is yielded from the active updating model (AUM). However, the state-of-the-art evidence is less consistent with this model. In contrast to the SDA, according to the AUM, the experience of social mobility may change elements of personal culture, such as opportunity beliefs. Following a Bayesian approach (Morgan, 2005; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Tormos, 2019), individuals can learn about their social experience and update their personal culture. This personal culture does not necessarily require perceived social mobility but also, more broadly, the acquisition of conscious or unconscious knowledge of how the world operates (Lizardo, 2017) through the practical experience of different social positions in the life course. From this point of view, both upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals will make sense of their new position through cultural beliefs.

More recent refinements of the role of explicit, symbolically mediated, and reflective forms of culture—i.e., declarative culture—have suggested that it even has the potential of overriding and interacting with the internalized or subconscious mental systems described above (Vila-Henninger, 2015). In certain situations, individuals can use

self-control and reasoning to operate with independence from implicit and durable dispositions learned through a slow process of long exposure—i.e., non-declarative culture. Attitudes and behaviors of individuals are based on their interpretation of the context and the signals given to them. Therefore, what individuals learn and experience can potentially alter the encultured dispositions. Thus, the effect of destination class may play a non-negligible role in shaping opportunity beliefs.

This argument is implicit in recent studies on diverse symbolic forms. For instance, several studies examine whether individuals can update their beliefs about social inequalities or redistributive preferences when given objective information about social inequalities or their position in the social structure (Alesina et al., 2018; Cruces et al., 2013; Mijs & Hoy, 2021). Another example is the recent discussion of whether higher education can affect personal culture. In this regard, Bročić and Miles (2021) show that higher education has a liberalizing moral effect, promoting moral absolutism rather than relativism. Similarly, McDonnell and colleagues (2021) concluded that, although there is growing evidence against the updating argument, it is “too soon to give up on” (2021:1317) the efforts of pursuing changes in personal culture. Overall, the idea that personal culture can be updated is a central argument in this literature.

In this context, the social class destination may be a fundamental predictor of subjective propositions about social mobility and inequality. In the framework of the literature on class mobility and political attitudes, individuals are acculturated in their beliefs because they are resocialized into the new status group (Jackman, 1972). Thus, under the assumption of updating, changes in the social position entail changes in the individual’s beliefs about the social structure. This argument is consistent with what has been recently found for Western European countries (Langsæther and Evans, 2020), where class origin is not an important factor in explaining concurrent class differences in support for redistribution. People’s preferences and beliefs about social structure are more related to their current social class than their early socialization. Thus, we expect the effect of class destination as follows:

Hypothesis 2.2. *Individuals’ destination class plays a predominant role in determining their opportunity beliefs about factors that are rewarded in society ($O < D$).*

In the third argument, we not only examine the main effects of origin and destination but also their interaction (Chan & Turner, 2017; Duncan, 1966). Previous studies consider current class position and class of origin simultaneously (Langsæther & Evans, 2020), but they do not consider the distinction between mobility trajectories. Namely, upward and downward social mobilities.

Social scientists have argued that the process of the active updating model is likely to be different for upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals (Abramson & Books, 1971; Daenekindt, 2017). For instance, downwardly mobile individuals are more likely to remain loyal to their social origin worldviews, but individuals who experience upward mobility tend to adopt the values, norms, and beliefs of the higher-status group they have achieved (Martinussen, 1992; Weakliem, 1992).

Alternatively, it is also possible that individuals have an innate predisposition and experiences that give greater weight to negative entities (Rozin & Royzman, 2001), thus the lower social class between origin and destination may be more salient for the explanation of worldviews. This is what we can term the asymmetric approach. Two hypotheses can be proposed in this context:

Hypothesis 2.3. *Upwardly mobile individuals will attribute more weight to social destination ($O < D$), while social origin will be more salient for those who occupationally fall relative to their parents ($O > D$).*

Hypothesis 2.4. *Upwardly mobile individuals place greater weight on social origin dispositions ($O > D$), while downwardly mobile individuals give greater weight to social destination ($O < D$) on the explanation of opportunity beliefs.*

2.3. Opportunity beliefs and social mobility in the Chinese context

China has embraced a longstanding merit-based social selection system. The imperial examination system (*keju*), which operated for more than 1000 years, was built on the principle that officials must be selected on the basis of ability and intellectual achievement rather than of social origin (Feng, 1995; Ho, 1962). This system not only promoted the prospect of upward mobility for the populace historically but has also contributed towards a social emphasis on meritocracy contemporarily (Xie, 2016). Although meritocracy was undermined during the communist revolution when “red” social backgrounds, political loyalty, personal ties became more decisive factors in upward mobility, it returned quickly after the end of the revolution when university entrance examinations resumed and reform and opening policies were implemented in the late 1970s (Liu, 2013, 2016). During China’s transition towards a market-oriented economy, merit-related attributes, especially education, exerted increasingly strong effects on socioeconomic achievements (for a review, see Bian, 2002). As a channel of social mobility, meritocracy has become a dominant ideology in modern Chinese society (Li & Hu, 2021; Olivos, 2021; Whyte, 2010; Xian & Reynolds, 2017). However, there is still a lack of discussion on the role of social mobility in affecting opportunity beliefs in the Chinese context.

The economic reform since the late 1970s has transformed China from a center-planned economy to a market-based economy, leading to economic growth and shifts in occupation structure. Amid rapid industrialization and the loosening of the household registration system (*hukou*), large numbers of agricultural laborers have migrated from rural areas to cities to work in the flourishing manufacturing and service sector (Liang, 2001, 2016). The expansion of higher education and increasing demand for high-skill workers also provide abundant opportunities for upward mobility to other groups of workers. In short, the transition brought about widespread intergenerational mobility in China, which has made it a highly fluid society even compared with some advanced industrial economies (Zhou & Xie, 2019).

As aforementioned, the large-scale social mobility that has occurred as a result of structural transformation may have changed how individuals perceive and evaluate their opportunities in Chinese society. This scenario directly contrasts with countries where scholars have discussed changes in personal culture (Chan & Turner, 2017; Kiley & Vaisey, 2020; McDonnell, Stoltz, & Taylor, 2021; Vaisey & Lizardo, 2016). The massive social mobility in post-reform China can influence the opportunity beliefs from two perspectives. On the one hand, it may affect relative weights of social origin and destination in determining beliefs in meritocracy. For instance, since a large number of people have experienced an upgrade of social position in a short period of time, they are likely to maintain the culture internalized through socialization and diverge significantly from nonmobile counterparts of their destination class. In addition, the strong family solidarity and intergenerational connections in China may also enhance the effect of social origin on cultural propositions (Gruijters, 2017). On the other hand, social mobility may cast an independent influence on the degree of believing meritocracy. Classical research in social mobility has predicted that during industrialization, ascribed attributes will be replaced with achieved attributes as critical factors in social mobility (Treiman, 1970), which can enhance individuals’ confidence in the merit-based opportunity structure. Yet in China a decline in social fluidity was also observed in recent years, which indicates stronger barriers to upward mobility for disadvantaged classes (Li et al., 2018; Zhou & Xie, 2019). In addition, the soaring economic inequality and unequal access to education can also impair individuals’ meritocratic beliefs, especially for those who are of lower-class origin and exposed to unequal competition during upward mobility (Lei & Yu, 2021; Xie & Zhou, 2014). As a result, beyond the relative importance of social origin and destination, the experience of mobility itself may also have a positive or negative impact on beliefs in a merit-based distribution system. Thus, this study aims to shed light on the independent effect of intergenerational mobility on

opportunity beliefs in the setting of China.

3. Data & method

3.1. Data

This study draws on 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) data. As a nationally representative longitudinal survey that adopts a multi-strata and multistage probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling method, CFPS has been conducted biennially by the Institute of Social Science Survey of Peking University since 2010. The baseline wave of the survey covered 25 provincial units (provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions) in mainland China, representing about 95% of the Chinese population (Xie & Zhou, 2014). We used the data from 2018 wave of the survey because it collected information about how Chinese over the age of 18 perceive the factors that are rewarded in society.⁶ Moreover, as a more recent survey year, this dataset can indicate the current implications of China’s rising inequality on opportunity beliefs. Previous waves of CFPS were also used to obtain the information needed in the analyses if necessary. We confined our sample to adults who were 25–64 years old according to the common practice in social mobility research (DiPrete & Grusky, 1990; Hout, 1988), mainly to reduce the bias brought by school enrollment among the younger groups and mortality among the older groups (Hout, 2018). Moreover, we only focus on individuals for whom the occupation information of them and their fathers are available in the dataset. An eligible sample of 14,245 individuals was defined at this stage.

3.2. Dependent variable

Individuals’ opportunity beliefs about factors that help them get ahead in society are variables we are most interested in. In the 2018 survey of CFPS, respondents were asked to rate several statements based on their beliefs, among which three were statements about perception of opportunities in society: (1) Hard work is rewarded in today’s society; (2) Intelligence and wisdom are rewarded in today’s society; (3) *Guanxi*⁷ is more important than personal ability in today’s society. Respondents rated their agreement towards these statements using a 5-level scale for each item, with 1 referring to “totally disagree” and 5 indicating “totally agree.” The option “neither agree nor disagree” is coded as 3.

The first two items respectively reflect the most salient feature of meritocracy, which is the importance of effort and intelligence in socioeconomic attainment (Lei & Yu, 2021; Reynolds and Xian, 2014; Young, 1958). The last item refers to the predominance of social connections in determining rewards distribution. As one of the guiding principles in social interaction, *guanxi* has long been regarded as a non-negligible variable in affecting status attainment and job mobility in China, the significance of which has even increased after the market reform and industrialization process (Bian, 2018; Bian & Ang, 1997). Since *guanxi* is mainly based on family, kinship, and extended ties with reciprocal obligations, it is seldom deemed as an element of merit but a ramification of family background and personal connections. Therefore, by considering both meritocratic and non-meritocratic elements, we generate a single scale that measures to what extent Chinese people think the

⁶ The telephone interviews and family member proxy questionnaires were used to maintain a relatively ideal response rate of CFPS. Compared with the baseline wave, the cross-wave retention rate was 80.8% for the individual sample of CFPS 2018 (Wu et al., 2021). In the process of constructing the cross-sectional weights, in addition to considering the design weights during baseline sampling, the risk of attrition in follow-up surveys was also taken into account. We thus used the cross-sectional weight in our analysis to ensure the national representativeness of the data.

⁷ It is a term used in Chinese to describe an individual’s social network of reciprocal relationships.

rewards are meritocratically allocated in society. Following the practice of prior research (Li & Hu, 2021; Reynolds and Xian, 2014), the scale for beliefs in meritocracy is calculated by subtracting individuals' scores on the non-meritocratic item from their scores on the average of the meritocratic items. A score of 0 indicates that individuals believe that meritocratic factors are as important as the non-meritocratic factor in terms of the role in the distribution system of rewards. A score higher than 0 denotes individuals who attribute opportunities to getting ahead in society to meritocratic factors. Considering that there could be more factors that are not been accounted for, we also take the separate items of opportunity beliefs as dependent variables in the sensitivity analyses.

3.3. Independent variables

Distinct facets of class mobility, including origin class, destination class, and their difference, are core independent variables in our analyses. Class positions in this study were measured with information on occupation categories of both respondents and their fathers, coded as 4-digit ISCO88 categories in the dataset. For respondents, their current job — or the latest job when the current is missing — was used to measure their social destination. For fathers, their job when respondents were at the age of 14 — or their current job when the previous job was missing — was used to measure the social origin of respondents.⁸ The aforementioned occupational categories were firstly transformed into EGP classes based on the widely used EGP class schema (Erikson et al., 1979; Ganzeboom & Treiman, 1996). To measure the hierarchy of class positions and determine the direction of social mobility, we then collapsed the categories into a refined fourfold class schema (Wilson et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2017). The schema consists of: (1) the managerial-professional class (EGP classes I and II, also called the service class or salarieds); (2) intermediate class (EGP classes IIIa, IIIb, including routine non-manual occupations⁹); (3) manual workers (EGP classes V, VI, and VIIa, including foreperson and skilled and unskilled manual workers); and (4) farmers (EGP classes IVc and VIId). Though the farming class has been merged into manual workers in some prior studies (Chen, 2018; Zhao et al., 2017), these two categories were distinguished in this study because farmers in China are generally considered to locate at the lowest social position, and often show distinct cultural propositions from other classes, especially in terms of political attitudes and opportunity beliefs (Fan & Yan, 2019; Whyte, 2010; Whyte & Im, 2014).

3.4. Control variables

We introduced a set of control variables in the statistical modeling, including individual-level socio-demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, marital status, and health conditions. Considering that migrants may experience special treatments during their geographical mobility, the migrant status of respondents is also considered as a control. Models are also controlled for respondents' education level and family income per capita. Controlling for both enables us to understand the effect of social class as worldviews emerging from a similar position in the occupational structure. Since the configuration of beliefs systems and cognitive schemes is related to political positions (Hunzaker & Valentino, 2019), models are controlled for Chinese Communist Party

⁸ The alternative approach of data imputation was tested in the sensitivity analyses.

⁹ Since CFPS has no information on father's self-employment status when respondents were 14 years old, we did not distinguish between self-employed and employed workers. Self-employers are thus mainly absorbed by intermediate class and manual workers according to their detailed occupation categories. Nevertheless, it may hardly affect the results considering the small proportion of self-employers for the previous generation in China (less than 4% referring to relevant research, e.g., Fan & Yan, 2019).

(CCP) membership and whether they work in the public sector (state-owned enterprises or the government), respectively. Models are also controlled for *hukou*¹⁰ status to account for the urban-rural divide in China, and the logarithmically transformed value of property is used as a proxy for family wealth. In addition, the inequality at the regional level and cultural variations between regions are also notably large in China, which can have some implications on value changes (Cao, 2020; Xie & Zhou, 2014). Therefore, province-level fixed effects are also considered in the modeling to account for regional disparities. The final sample size in this study is 13,517 after the list-wise deletion.

3.5. Analytical strategy

When disentangling the mobility effect from prior social class and current social class, we face the challenge of inherent collinearity among the three, given that social mobility is defined as the difference between origin and destination (Hendrickx et al., 1993; Kaiser & Trinh, 2021). The traditional approaches — the square additive (SA) model and diamond additive (DA) model (Duncan, 1966; Hope, 1971, 1975) — are capable of partially addressing the problem while acknowledging the difficulty of either differentiating effects or making strong theoretical assumptions (Hendrickx et al., 1993; Sobel, 1981). To separate the mobility effects and deal with the problem of linear dependence, we applied diagonal reference models (DRMs) in our analysis.

The DRM was initially proposed by Sobel (1981, 1985) and has been widely used in research about objective and subjective consequences of class mobility, status inconsistency, assortative mating, among others (Chen, 2018; Jin et al., 2019; Olivos & Wang, 2022; Zang & de Graaf, 2016). This method follows a nonlinear design that assumes the outcome is affected by both social origin and destination, with the sum of influencing weights equaling 1. To measure the weights, respondents are cross-classified in a contingency table by origin class (row factor) and destination class (column factor), with the diagonal cells as class-immobile groups and the off-diagonal cells as mobile groups. The model considers the estimated effects of class-immobile individuals as the primary referents for that of mobile ones, which is based on the rationale that the nonmobile or permanent members of a given class bear the key attributes of this class and make up the core of it (de Graaf et al., 1995). For those who have experienced mobility, their beliefs have been “contaminated” by either origin or destination, making them not suitable for representing the attributes of a certain class (Hope, 1975; Sorokin, 1959). Therefore, each off-diagonal cell has referents of both row and column dimensions. Following from this line of thought, the baseline model of DRM in this paper takes the following form:

$$Y_{ijk} = p\mu_{ii} + q\mu_{jj} + \sum \beta_m X + \varepsilon_{ijk}. \quad (1)$$

Where Y_{ijk} represents the dependent variable, which refers to the overall level of opportunity beliefs in meritocracy for k 's observation with origin class i and destination class j . μ_{ii} and μ_{jj} respectively stand for the estimated average level of meritocratic beliefs for nonmobile individuals of class i and j , with p measuring the origin weight and q measuring destination weight. In particular, p and q lie in the interval $[0,1]$, and $p + q = 1$. In other words, for individuals whose class of origin is i while the current class position is j , their expected opportunity beliefs in meritocracy can be expressed as the weighted combination of the corresponding origin and destination effects. Moreover, we also control for a series of covariates explained in the previous section, with the vector X representing them and parameters β_m measuring their estimated effects.

Although Model 1 is able to measure the relative importance of social

¹⁰ The Chinese registration system (*hukou*) divides the country into two societies, where residents of rural areas are entitled to fewer rights and benefits than the urban population. The system requires people to register in the area where they reside, being classified as agricultural or non-agricultural.

origin and destination in determining individuals' opportunity beliefs, it cannot examine whether the origin and destination weights vary across mobility types. That is, as the aforementioned asymmetric approach predicted, upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals may differ in the extent to which they are affected by origin and destination. On the other hand, the experience of social mobility itself can have an independent effect aside from the influence of early socialization and current social condition. To test the interaction between origin/destination effect and mobility direction, and incorporate the independent effect of the change in class, the baseline function can be extended as follows:

$$Y_{ijk} = (p + \Delta_{upward})\mu_{ii} + (q - \Delta_{upward})\mu_{jj} + \sum \beta_m X + \varepsilon_{ijk}; \quad (2)$$

$$Y_{ijk} = p\mu_{ii} + q\mu_{jj} + \beta_1 Upward + \beta_2 Downward + \sum \beta_m X + \varepsilon_{ijk}; \quad (3)$$

$$Y_{ijk} = (p + \Delta_{upward})\mu_{ii} + (q - \Delta_{upward})\mu_{jj} + \beta_1 Upward + \beta_2 Downward + \sum \beta_m X + \varepsilon_{ijk}. \quad (4)$$

Model 2 is the asymmetry effect model, which allows the relative weights to change with two different types of mobility. While the weights of origin and destination for downwardly mobile people is still p and q , they change to $p + \Delta_{upward}$ and $q - \Delta_{upward}$ for upwardly mobile individuals instead. If Δ_{upward} is positive, we can infer that the influence of origin class is stronger for the upwardly mobile than that for the downwardly mobile. Model 3 is the extended mobility model, which adds two dummy variables of mobility types with parameters β_1 and β_2 indicating the corresponding effects of social mobility on the outcome of interest. Model 4 considers the interactive effects and independent mobility effects simultaneously. Thus, it is a synthesis model that examines the above hypotheses simultaneously but also has fewer degrees of freedom.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive analysis

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for dependent variables, independent variables, and background controls in the models. The mean level of beliefs in meritocracy is positive ($M = 0.30$), which implies that in our scale, beliefs in meritocratic factors overpass beliefs in non-meritocratic factors in terms of getting rewarded in the society. According to the marginal distributions of origin class, destination class, and class mobility, dramatic changes in class structure between generations exist. The proportion of farmers drops from 63.2% in social origin to 32.6% in social destination, with expansions in different degrees for other class positions. Relevant to this, almost half of the respondents (48.4%) experienced intergenerational upward mobility, and only a fraction flowed into a lower-class position (12.4%), indicating a prevalent upward mobility trend during China's industrialization and marketization processes.

Based on origin and destination class, respondents are cross-classified into a 4×4 contingency table with 16 categories of mobility types. Statistics in Table 2 show the average level of beliefs in meritocracy for each mobility type. Shaded diagonal cells represent class-immobile individuals who maintain the same class positions as their fathers'. In general, the beliefs in meritocracy for diagonal cells indicate a U-shaped curve, individuals who stayed as managerial-professional and farming class hold stronger beliefs in meritocratic rewards, while immobile intermediate class and manual workers have the weakest beliefs. Although without multivariate statistical examination, the descriptive results of immobile groups exhibit a nonlinear relationship between beliefs in meritocracy and class positions.

Cells below the diagonal represent upward mobility, while those above the diagonal represent downward mobility with a smaller proportion of respondents. Values of margins are different from those of diagonal cells, indicating that ignoring the intergenerational dimension

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for selective variables.

Variable	Categories	Mean/ Percentage	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Dependent variable					
Beliefs in meritocracy		0.297	1.21	-4	4
Class positions					
Origin class	Managerial-professional	11.3%			
	Intermediate class	4.3%			
	Manual workers	21.1%			
	Farmers	63.2%			
Destination class	Managerial-professional	18.3%			
	Intermediate class	15.2%			
	Manual workers	33.9%			
	Farmers	32.6%			
Mobility type	Immobility	39.2%			
	Upward mobility	48.4%			
	Downward mobility	12.4%			
Control variables					
Age		43.46			
Gender	Women	46.2%	10.97	25	64
	Men (=1)	53.8%			
Marital status	Single/divorce	15.7%			
	Married (=1)	84.3%			
Health condition	Not healthy	26.0%			
	Healthy (=1)	74.0%			
Migrant status	Local	94.1%			
	Migrant (=1)	5.9%			
Hukou status	Urban	27.5%			
	Rural	72.5%			
Education level	Primary and below	32.8%			
	Junior high	33.2%			
	Senior high	15.4%			
	College and above	18.6%			
Log per capita household income		9.88	0.94	5.01	15.55
Log value of property		3.34			
Party membership	No	89.9%			
	Yes (=1)	10.1%			
Public sector	No	84.5%			
	Yes (=1)	15.5%			

Note: Statistics are based on weighted analysis.

may mislead our judgment about how individuals' opinions on opportunities vary across classes. For instance, mean scores by current class positions are quite close to each other for non-agricultural classes. However, the results mix up the beliefs of immobile and mobile individuals. Thus, we are unable to untangle the heterogeneity within them or reveal the characteristics of a certain class in that regard.

4.2. Multivariate results

To examine how social mobility affects individuals' beliefs about opportunities in society, different forms of DRMs were applied, and results are shown in Table 3. As described above, the baseline model (M1) takes the assumption that opportunity beliefs are determined by both origin and destination class after accounting for other covariates,¹¹

¹¹ The reported model is consistent with the model only controlled for gender and age.

Table 2
Average level of opportunity beliefs in meritocracy by social origin and destination.

Origin \ Destination	Managerial-professional	Intermediate class	Manual workers	Farmers	Total
Managerial-professional	0.510 (362)	0.204 (218)	0.463 (383)	0.623 (427)	0.463 (1390)
Intermediate class	0.070 (168)	0.291 (130)	0.150 (153)	0.410 (85)	0.191 (536)
Manual worker	0.154 (548)	0.134 (512)	0.038 (968)	0.438 (401)	0.142 (2429)
Farmer	0.255 (996)	0.257 (889)	0.237 (2710)	0.437 (4567)	0.326 (9162)
Total	0.255 (2074)	0.214 (1749)	0.209 (4214)	0.451 (5480)	0.297 (13517)

Note: The average level of opportunity beliefs are weighted; values within parentheses are numbers of observations.

whereas the extended models consider the asymmetric weights for upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals (M2), the independent mobility effects (M3), or both at the same time (M4). Regarding the effects of the main diagonal cells, all the three lower classes exhibit lower levels of opportunity beliefs in comparison to the managerial-professional class. Nevertheless, although there is a positive effect of social class in general, the magnitude of difference varies across classes. All models show a U-shaped relationship between immobile classes and beliefs in meritocracy, supporting [Hypothesis 1.3](#). For instance, [Fig. 1](#) displays the estimated diagonal effects derived from Model 4, showing that individuals who remain in the managerial-professional class hold the strongest belief that rewards are allocated based on meritocratic factors, relative to the intermediate class ($B = -0.340$, $p < .001$) and, to a smaller extent, the immobile farming class ($B = -0.214$, $p < .001$). People within the two middle-class positions—i.e., manual workers—show relatively lower beliefs in meritocracy, which suggests a U-shape relationship. These effects are statistically different among them and substantial if we compare their effects size with the covariates.

When it comes to the effects of social mobility, the models reveal different information given the different model settings. Values of the Akaike information criterion (AIC) indicate that Model 4, which considers two types of mobility effects simultaneously, reports the best goodness of fit among all models ($AIC = 43190.88$). The significance of coefficients in Model 4 also suggests that there is a moderating effect of mobility direction on weights and independent effects of mobility on the outcome variable. Thus, we choose to trust the results of Model 4 and use them in the following interpretation of mobility effects. [Fig. 2](#) illustrates the asymmetric weights of origin and destination for upwardly and downwardly mobile groups. For individuals who moved upward in social position, their opportunity beliefs are predominantly influenced by social origin (82.2%) rather than social destination (17.8%), indicating a settled disposition that has been internalized through the process of socialization and enculturation. By contrast, destination class plays a more important role in forming the opportunity beliefs of downwardly mobile individuals (67.2%), which yields the active updating model. In general, as [Hypothesis 2.4](#) expects, negative entities are more salient for individuals' subjective propositions about getting ahead in society. Thus, they place greater weight on lower-class positions in either upward or downward mobility processes.

In addition, upward mobility accounts for the majority of social mobility in post-reform China, which also explains the greater weight of social origin in Model 1 (weight of origin = 0.767, $p < .001$) and 3

(weight of origin = 0.630, $p < .001$) where the interactive term is not taken into account. Moreover, considering the movement from the farming class to non-farming classes makes up the largest proportion of upward mobility, the farming class's relatively strong meritocratic belief has helped to maintain — if not increase — the population's confidence in meritocracy during China's industrialization. Regarding the independent effects of social mobility in Model 4, coefficients of mobility types imply that upward mobility has a negative effect on the outcome variable of interest ($B = -0.061$, $p < .05$), whereas the effect of downward mobility is positive ($B = 0.083$, $p < .05$). The tendency to justify the status quo by downwardly mobile individuals is largely consistent with findings in social psychology that suggest that low status individuals tend to legitimize inequalities as a psychological mechanism of defense ([Jost et al., 2003](#); [Jost & Hunyady, 2005](#); [Ledgerwood et al., 2011](#)). At the same time, upwardly mobile individuals are likely to have experienced the two sides of the social hierarchy, which impairs individuals' confidence in a merit-based system of rewards allocation. Thus, the individuals that have successfully achieved higher social destinations develop a more critical view of opportunity beliefs.

Based on the estimated parameters from Model 4, we made the prediction about the average level of opportunity beliefs in meritocracy given the covariates kept in their mean values to illustrate the effect described above. The results are shown graphically in [Fig. 3](#). The upper bars related to managerial-professional class origin or farming class destination present greater values for beliefs in meritocracy, suggesting a tendency of system-justification for downwardly mobile people.

When we focus on individuals who have achieved upward mobility (lower right bars represented by a darker grey color), two findings can be highlighted. First, mobile individuals who have reached the managerial-professional destination class exhibit lower levels of opportunity beliefs in most of the transitions than immobile or downwardly managerial class. It is evident for individuals moving from the intermediate and manual workers' origin class to the managerial-professional destination class (bottom-left). Their predicted opportunity belief is lower than the immobile managerial-professional class and mobile individuals from the same origin class but experiencing downward mobility (upper-right).

Second, those of farming class origin show relatively higher scores of beliefs than other upwardly mobile groups. In particular, those who are of farming class origin and reach the destination of the intermediate class or the manual worker class have scores that are even higher than immobile individuals of those class positions. Therefore, farming-to-

Table 3

Estimates from diagonal reference models on overall opportunity beliefs in meritocracy.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Diagonal effect (ref: Managerial-professional)				
Intermediate class	-0.267*** (0.069)	-0.360*** (0.081)	-0.215*** (0.068)	-0.340*** (0.082)
Manual workers	-0.308*** (0.05)	-0.365*** (0.064)	-0.268*** (0.054)	-0.332*** (0.065)
Farmers	-0.221*** (0.046)	-0.297*** (0.063)	-0.128* (0.057)	-0.214** (0.068)
Weight				
Original class (p)	0.767*** (0.086)	0.533*** (0.14)	0.630*** (0.095)	0.328* (0.16)
Destination class (q)	0.233** (0.086)	0.467*** (0.14)	0.370*** (0.095)	0.672*** (0.16)
Interactive term of weight				
Δ_{upward}		0.376* (0.173)		0.494* (0.194)
Mobility type (ref: Immobility)				
Upward mobility			-0.062* (0.024)	-0.061* (0.025)
Downward mobility			0.060 (0.042)	0.083* (0.042)
Covariates				
Age	0.006*** (0.001)	0.007*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)
Men	-0.064** (0.021)	-0.068** (0.021)	-0.057** (0.022)	-0.062** (0.021)
Marriage	-0.055 + (0.030)	-0.055 + (0.030)	-0.052 + (0.030)	-0.054 + (0.030)
Healthy	0.207*** (0.025)	0.207*** (0.025)	0.210*** (0.025)	0.209*** (0.025)
Migrants	-0.010 (0.045)	-0.008 (0.045)	-0.005 (0.045)	-0.003 (0.045)
Hukou status	-0.150*** (0.030)	-0.151*** (0.030)	-0.141*** (0.030)	-0.138*** (0.030)
Education level (ref: Primary and below)				
Junior high	-0.065* (0.027)	-0.066* (0.027)	-0.056* (0.027)	-0.057* (0.027)
Senior high	-0.145*** (0.036)	-0.143*** (0.036)	-0.135*** (0.036)	-0.131*** (0.036)
College and above	-0.060 (0.045)	-0.052 (0.045)	-0.054 (0.046)	-0.042 (0.045)
Log per capita household income	-0.008 (0.014)	-0.008 (0.014)	-0.002 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.014)
Log value of property	0.006 (0.010)	0.006 (0.010)	0.009 (0.010)	0.009 (0.010)
Party member	0.182*** (0.037)	0.185*** (0.037)	0.180*** (0.037)	0.183*** (0.037)
Work in public sector	-0.051 (0.033)	-0.055 (0.033)	-0.040 (0.034)	-0.045 (0.034)
Province fixed effect	YES	YES	YES	YES
Constant	0.187 (0.192)	0.263 (0.197)	0.097 (0.195)	0.187 (0.199)
AIC	43199.23	43198.24	43192.85	43190.88
N	13517	13517	13517	13517

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistics are based on weighted analysis. ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

nonfarming mobility may not maintain the movers' beliefs at the same level as their origin class. However, it still reproduces a moderately high level of beliefs, which remains higher than that of their destination class. Indeed, because the population of these upwardly mobile groups is so large, they can greatly influence the pattern of how social mobility affects opportunity beliefs as well as the overall level of beliefs of society.

4.3. Counterfactual analysis

To further determine the impacts of social mobility on the overall pattern of opportunity beliefs across classes and illustrate them

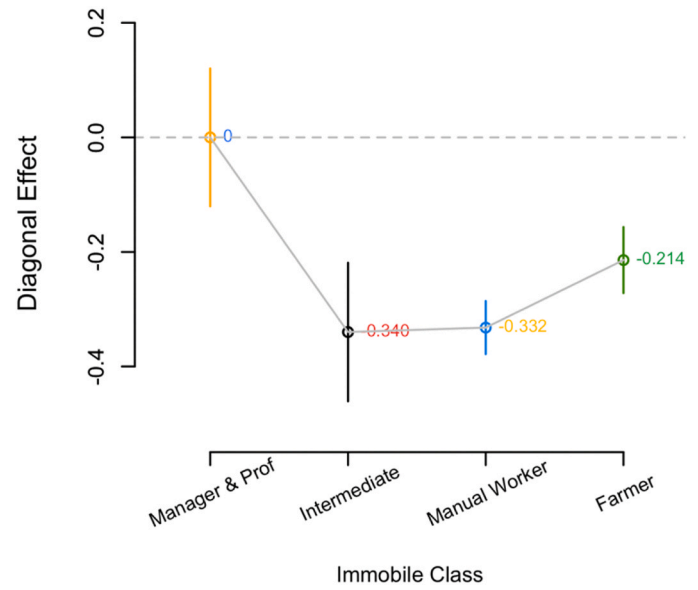


Fig. 1. Diagonal effects on opportunity beliefs in meritocracy, by immobile classes.

Note: Estimates are based on model 4 of Table 3. The bands show 95% confidence intervals estimated with quasi standard errors (Firth and De Menezes, 2004).

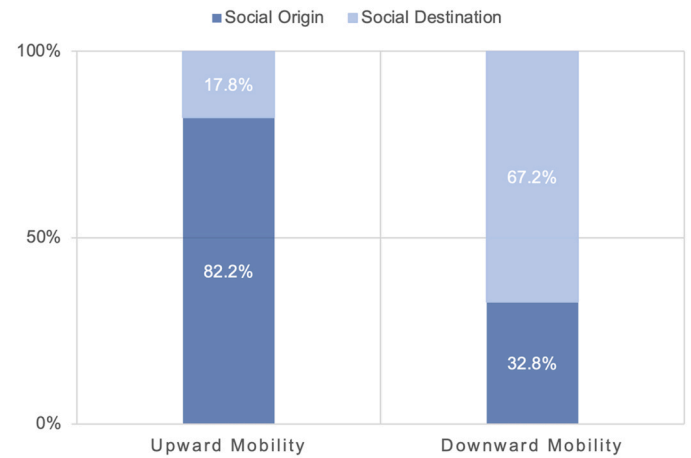


Fig. 2. Relative importance of social origin and social destination in determining overall opportunity beliefs in meritocracy, by mobility direction.

Note: Relative weights of origin and destination are based on model 4 of Table 3.

intuitively, we propose an application of the counterfactual approach to our DRMs, which compares individuals' opportunity beliefs before and after social mobility. First, we suppose a hypothetical situation where social mobility has no effect on beliefs in meritocracy for mobile individuals. In other words, socially mobile individuals' maintain the same beliefs as those of their origin class without any changes. The second set of hypothetical counterfactuals is the situation where mobile individuals are under the full impact of mobility. In this case, individuals follow the cultural propositions of their destination class and bear the influence from the experience of moving upwardly or downwardly as well. By comparing the three sets of values, the different consequences of (1) truly observed effects, (2) no mobility effects, and the (3) full mobility effects are easy to read.

Panels of Fig. 4 respectively show the comparison between actual observed mean values and counterfactual values for groups of upward and downward mobility. The left panel indicates that in general, the

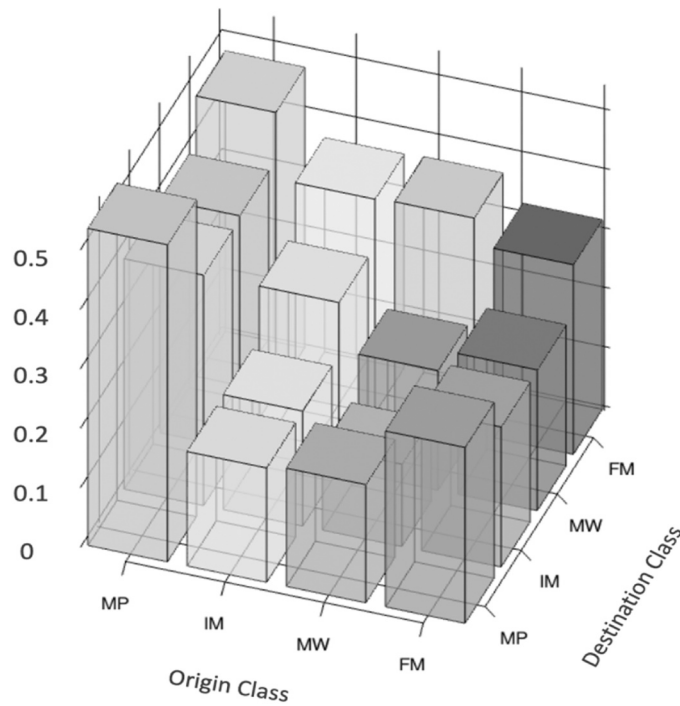


Fig. 3. Predicted overall opportunity beliefs in meritocracy by mobility types. *Note:* Predicted values are based on model 4 of Table 3. For the abbreviation of classes, MP=Managerial-professional Class, IM=Intermediate Class, MW=Manual Workers, FM=Farmers. The darkness of color represents the sample size of each mobility type. The darker the bar, the larger sample size of the mobility type.

mean values for upwardly mobile individuals do not change much before and after mobility (denoted by the dashed line with hollow triangle markers and the solid line with circle markers) but will change

to a large extent if they follow the beliefs of destination class (denoted by the short-dash line with hollow triangle markers). Those whose destination is the managerial-professional class would have the highest beliefs if they adopt the cultural propositions of their current class positions; while those whose destination class is the intermediate class or manual workers class would present considerably lower beliefs when receiving the full influence of social mobility. The counterfactual results show that if all upwardly mobile individuals were to adhere to the cultural propositions of the destination class, their overall meritocratic belief scores would decrease by 24%. In this sense, the greater importance of social origin suggested in the previous analyses (Fig. 2) prevents the substantial decline in meritocratic beliefs for upwardly mobile groups. As a result, the disparity of mean values between different destinations is smaller relative to the other two counterfactual situations. This finding suggests that upward mobility can maintain opportunity beliefs in meritocracy and decrease class differences, which may further mitigate the social volcano that could arise from frustrated middle classes.

Regarding downward mobility, mobility has a negative effect on the outcome when moving downward to intermediate and manual worker class, while the effect is marginally positive when the destination is farming class. There is less difference between the actual values and the situation of full mobility effects.

4.4. Sensitivity analyses

To ensure the robustness of our findings, we conducted sixth crucial sensitivity analyses pertaining to the (1) imputation of missing data, (2) separation of items of dependent variables, (3) additional dimensions of social mobility, (4) DRM's deviation from unconstrained linear models, (5) consideration of mother's class, (6) age restriction of respondents. Detailed results of these six sensitivity analyses as well as other tests are presented in the appendix tables. The results are highly consistent with the findings of our main analysis.

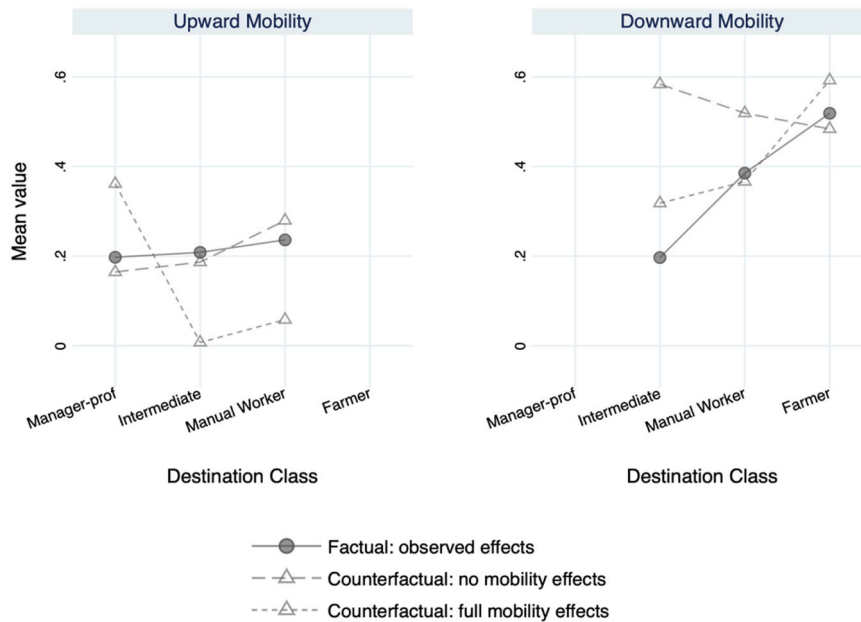


Fig. 4. Comparison between observed mean values from sample data and predicted mean values from counterfactual predictions by destination class, by mobility direction.

Note: The solid line with solid circle markers denotes the observed sample mean values of opportunity beliefs in meritocracy by destination class; the dash line with hollow triangle markers denotes the predicted values based on counterfactual situation that one's opportunity beliefs are not affected by social mobility, i.e. fully determined by his/her origin class; and the short-dash line with hollow triangle markers denotes the counterfactual situation that one's opportunity beliefs are under the full influence of social mobility.

5. Conclusion

This study has aimed to understand the relationship between intergenerational social mobility and subjective propositions about opportunities for being rewarded in society. Our findings indicate a U-shaped relationship between intergenerationally stable class positions and the level of beliefs in meritocracy. Recent studies have suggested that social groups are unable to see beyond their social milieu (Mijs, 2019) and tend to compare with relevant others who are similar or worse than them (Zang & de Graaf, 2016), which explains the high level of tolerance towards inequality among Chinese farmers (Han, 2009; Whyte, 2010; Whyte & Im, 2014). On the contrary, ordinary urban workers who have experienced the throes of economic structural adjustment, such as the “smashing of the iron rice bowl,” remain skeptical of the meritocratic distribution system. Our results are consistent with this hypothesis but also reveal that classes at the top of the social hierarchy also show high levels of support for meritocratic beliefs. As shown by social networks scholars (Otero et al., 2021), social classes at the top and at the bottom of the hierarchy exhibit more homogenous social networks, which encapsulate them in their social milieu. This constrain could explain why social classes in the middle of the social hierarchy are less supportive of mainstream opportunity beliefs, which is more consistent with what one might expect given the high levels of inequality in Chinese society.

Moreover, this study also examined how different patterns of intergenerational social mobility affect these beliefs. There are three central findings regarding mobility effects. First, our empirical evidence shows that opportunity beliefs are explained by both social origin and destination. However, the class origin has a stronger effect, suggesting early enculturation of dispositions. Second, the social destination is more salient for those who experienced downward mobility, whereas social origin is more salient for individuals that are better off than their parents. The importance of social origin for upwardly mobile individuals is such that it compensates for the independent negative effect of upward mobility. We suggest that it is one of the central reasons preventing the eruption of the social volcano in China, because the relative importance of settled dispositions reproduces meritocratic beliefs in adulthood. Finally, the predicted and counterfactual values of opportunity beliefs suggest a balancing effect of social mobility. Compared to their social origin, upwardly mobile individuals' belief in meritocracy changed little or even decreased. However, when the reference group is the social destination, the group who moved up from the farming class to the intermediate or manual worker classes presents greater confidence in meritocracy than immobile workers of those classes. Consequently, the average level of meritocratic beliefs shows a marginal difference for people of different non-farming classes of destination.

5.1. Implications for China's social volcano

These findings contribute to discussions about the tolerance of social inequality in China (Lei, 2020; Whyte, 2010; Whyte & Im, 2014). Existing literature emphasized that the abundance of opportunity for upward mobility and people's faithful beliefs in meritocracy have led to the tolerance (Whyte & Im, 2014; Xie, 2016). In this article, we go further to dig out the relationship between these two factors and have argued that upward mobility itself is not the backing force behind beliefs in meritocracy. The relative weight of social origin enables individuals to reproduce dispositions that justify and legitimize social inequalities in adulthood. Thus, the belief in a meritocratic reward system despite high levels of inequality is not maintained by a high rate of upward mobility per se. Rather, settled dispositions of upwardly mobile individuals prevent a dramatic decline in confidence in a merit-based distribution system, which can help explain why the social volcano has not erupted in China.

On the other hand, the negative effect of upward mobility, which may derive from disadvantages and unfair treatments experienced by individuals during the upward process, can even decrease their belief in

meritocracy compared with that of their origin class. These individuals who experience the “wear and tear” of upward social mobility acquire a more complete picture of social inequality and its driving forces. Therefore, soaring inequality can enhance feelings of relative deprivation and magnify the negative effect of upward mobility. It is also consistent with the frustrated achievers' hypothesis, which suggests lower levels of subjective well-being and higher frustration than non-upwardly mobile individuals (Zang and de Graaf, 2016). We have shown evidence that supports this hypothesis in the case of opportunity beliefs.

These findings of the pessimistic views of upwardly mobile individuals in China speak to the revival of research on the subjective implications of social mobility (Born, 2023). Sociologists have been divided between those reporting positive and negative effects of upward mobility on subjective outcomes (Born, 2023; Chan, 2018; Ellis & Lane, 1967; Friedman, 2013). Like our findings, most of the qualitative studies are consistent with what is called the “price of the ticket” hypothesis (Born, 2023; Friedman, 2013). According to the original argument proposed by Sorokin (1959), upwardly mobile individuals are unable to form satisfactory personal relationships in the new milieu, increasing isolation and loneliness. Therefore, the subjective experience of a large portion of the Chinese population who have experienced upward mobility cannot be assumed to be necessarily positive in terms of their stratification beliefs. We have presented evidence that supports this hypothesis in the case of China.

5.2. Implications for social stratification research

We have shown that how individuals perceive and explain society does not only vary by social class but also by the experience of class mobility. Here, we join recent calls to examine whether social mobility could also affect subjective processes (Chan and Turner, 2017; Wilson et al., 2022). From the Chinese case it can be seen that individuals mostly use their social origin as a heuristic to elaborate their subjective propositions, but there are important differences between upward and downward mobility patterns. That is, individuals rely on the social class where they rank lower, either from their social origin or destination. This finding echoes evidence suggesting that individuals give greater weight to negative entities, including events, objects, and personal traits, among others (Rozin & Royzman, 2001).

A burgeoning interdisciplinary body of literature also discusses changes in social inequality beliefs and preference for redistribution when individuals receive new information. Researchers have conducted a series of experiments in developed and developing societies to examine how objective information modifies stratification beliefs (e.g., Alesina et al., 2018; Kuziemko, Norton, Saez, & Stantcheva, 2015). In this line, only a few recent studies have examined the effect of objective information on opportunity beliefs, which are the root causes of broader attitudes and preferences (McCall et al., 2017; Mijs & Hoy, 2021). Thus, we have showed that the experience of social mobility itself is also a source of information to elaborate beliefs about opportunities. After accounting for the relative importance of social origin and destination, upward mobility itself negatively affects belief in meritocracy. And yet, its ground on social origin reproduces beliefs about society as meritocratic.

5.3. Implications for cultural sociology

Individuals' subjective propositions about distribution of rewards in society are elements of their personal culture (Lizardo, 2017). Therefore, the discussion of whether these beliefs are explained by social origin or destination engages with recent debates on cultural change (Bročić & Miles, 2021; Kiley & Vaisey, 2020; McDonnell et al., 2021; Vaisey & Lizardo, 2016). When individuals rely on their social origin as a heuristic to elaborate subjective propositions, they are consistent with a settled disposition model, which has been largely theorized and empirically

examined by sociologists (Bourdieu, 1990). This is what we found when individuals rely prominently on their social origin. However, the asymmetry of these effects between upward and downward mobility shows that individuals can strategically update or maintain their dispositions. The social origin is largely more dominant than the destination for upwardly mobile individuals. Thus, they maintain the belief that is also predominant in the origin class, as is shown by the main effects. Similarly, the lower social class is also more salient for downward mobile individuals—namely, their class destination. Therefore, despite the growing evidence against the updating argument, we shed lights on a particular situation where individuals acquire personal culture.

Dual models of culture in sociology could explain this situation (Vila-Henninger, 2021). Individuals are encultured in the socialization process or the culture acquired in the social destination, conditional on the social class where they rank lower. On average, individuals largely rely on settled disposition to reproduce their beliefs. Still, downwardly mobile individuals make sense of their mobility experience through their social destination lens for a predisposition to attribute higher relevance to the negative situations.

5.4. Further research

The insights from this study shed light on several pathways for further research on social stratification and cultural sociology. First, we have examined particular elements of personal belief systems. Scholars in cultural sociology have shown that these cultural elements occupy different positions in the belief system and their probability of updating is different (Boutyline & Vaisey, 2017; Kiley & Vaisey, 2020). Therefore, further studies could examine other cultural elements of the belief system with the dynamic approach and intergenerational perspective used here. Moreover, we have only considered guanxi as the only non-meritocratic factor of opportunity beliefs due to data limitations. Further studies may incorporate a wider array of non-meritocratic factors such as dishonesty, corruption, or social discrimination.

Second, we have focused on social class differences in opportunity beliefs. Although the literature on the Chinese case suggests that class may be a better indicator of socioeconomic status than other indicators such as income (Sun et al., 2021), social stratification is multidimensional and different mechanisms can operate on their cultural implications. Thus, further research may focus on other sources of stratification or subjective social position. For the latter, recent studies have made important progress on understanding the effect of subjective social mobility on opportunity beliefs (Mijs et al., 2022). Our study can be extended through the comparison between objective and subjective social mobilities or whether subjective social mobility operates as a mediator of the effect. While objective mobility includes a first-hand experience of different social positions in the life course, subjective

mobility is the mental representation of the mobility, which can or cannot coincide with the objective experience.

Third, the implications of our study for the discussion about the Chinese dormant social volcano discussion are hardly causal explanations. We assume that meritocratic belief of the immobile social class represents the belief of that class during individuals' socialization process. We know that social origin is more salient for upwardly mobile individuals, but we are not certain whether the beliefs of that origin class during the socialization endorsed or justified the rewards system. However, if the trajectory follows the fade-out of social class as a cleavage in modern societies, as is argued by individualization theories (Giddens, 1991), the distinctions in meritocratic beliefs could only have been sharper for earlier cohorts. There is no available data to test this hypothesis in the case of China. Researchers in stratification beliefs can rely on other case studies where there are long-time series of beliefs (Güveli et al., 2007) or utilize research methods from historical sociology.

Finally, we have studied the case of China, a fluid and unequal society that has undergone radical socioeconomic changes. Our findings pave the way to understand the relationship between intergenerational mobility and opportunity beliefs across contexts. Recent studies suggest that the more unequal a society is, the more likely its citizens will justify inequalities using meritocratic explanations (Mijs, 2019). Hence, there could be potential variations of the mobility effects on opportunity beliefs by levels of inequality. Understanding how economic reforms, economic growth, and structural features explain individuals' inequality-related beliefs requires cross-country analyses that go beyond the aims of this study and is limited by data availability.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial interests or personal relationships that could exert any influence on their perspective as presented in this manuscript.

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Appendix

As mentioned in the data and method section, to address missing data in fathers' occupation we replaced the missing values with father's current occupation to maximize our usage of information from the data. Besides, we did this because sociologists in mobility research often assume that a worker's job is quite steady and can last for a lifetime. Research in China also shows that intragenerational mobility mainly occurs among young workers (Zhou, 2019; Zhou, Moen, and Tuma, 1998). Nonetheless, considering that changes in fathers' occupation may lead to the biased estimation of mobility effect, we applied multiple imputation techniques to deal with the potential problem. Based on the information for fathers' age and education level, missing values of fathers' occupation were replaced by the predictions of regression imputation. The results in Table A1 show that findings are highly consistent between the two different imputation approaches.

In the analyses of the results section, the dependent variable is a combination of three items regarding opportunity beliefs, which can lead to a biased conclusion by omitting the heterogeneity among distinct factors for getting ahead in society. Therefore, we use the three indicators of opportunity beliefs as the dependent variable in three separated models to test whether our findings hold for separated items. As shown in Table A2, the results for two meritocratic elements reveal a consistent U-shaped relationship between immobile class positions and beliefs in meritocratic factors. The diagonal effects for the non-meritocratic element show diametrically the opposite. As for the relative weights of origin and destination, both the analyses on second and third elements present similar results of asymmetric effects and the predominant effect of origin class. The model on the first element cannot converge given the model constraint. However, it still suggests that origin class plays a more important role in forming opportunity

beliefs. Altogether, these findings are consistent with our main results using the overall level of meritocratic belief.

Though social class is recognized as one of the most influential independent variables in explaining various cultural outcomes, other dimensions of socioeconomic status, such as education and income, are also thought to exert influence on personal culture (Bročić and Miles, 2021; Chan and Turner, 2017). We only included them as controls in the main models, and did not check the mobility effects on the outcome of interest. Therefore, in the second robustness check reported in Table A3, effects of intergenerational education mobility are tested, with social class as a covariate rather than a critical independent variable in the models. The diagonal effects of education level show a U-shaped curve that is qualitatively similar to the one seen in our main models based on class mobility. Individuals with senior high school education hold the lowest score in meritocratic beliefs, whereas college graduates hold the highest. With respect to the weights of social origin and destination, the origin weight is higher than the destination weight, regardless of whether the individuals are upwardly or downwardly mobile. Despite no asymmetric effects in education mobility, the results still support the greater importance of social origin in influencing opportunity beliefs for the predominant upwardly mobile groups. The independent negative effect of upward mobility is also observed in the analysis.

Furthermore, the DRM approach relies on the constraint, which assumes the destination effects are positive linear transformations of the origin effects (Kaiser & Trinh, 2021). It is thus necessary to compare the results of DRM with OLS models to test if the main findings are consistent on the condition of the unconstrained model setting. Considering the collinearity and model non-identification in OLS, we compare in different ways (see Table A4). First, we run three OLS models respectively, including origin class, destination class, and both origin and destination class. Then we add mobility terms in the first and second OLS models to examine the mobility effects given that the class origin or destination is controlled for. One caveat to note is that the three effects can be mixed up in the above OLS models and are hard to discern from each other. Nevertheless, Table A4 suggests that though the coefficients vary between DRM and OLS, the results yielded from each method indicate similar conclusions in terms of (1) the relationship between class positions and opportunity beliefs, (2) the relative magnitude of origin and destination effects, and (3) the direction of the effects of social mobility itself.

Fifth, because the age range of our respondents was restricted to 25–64, the information on their fathers' occupation when they were 14 years old should be within the period of 1968–2007. This implies that a portion of fathers' occupation information is before the reform and the application of the class scheme could be conflictive for them. To ensure the robustness of our results, we test the sensitivity of our analyses by restricting the age range of respondents to 25–50, ensuring that all their fathers' occupational information is after the reform. The results are presented in Table A5, which are highly consistent with the findings of our main analysis.

In addition, although father's social class enables us to be consistent with most of the prior research and account for the situation of the persistence of patriarchy in pre- and post-reform China (Santos & Harrell, 2017), it is still important to test whether ignoring the mother's class position leads to biased results. Thus, two more sensitivity tests regarding the mother's class effect were conducted and results are documented in Table A6. On the one hand, we measured the social origin with the mother's class position rather than the father's. We replicated the analytical steps and findings drawn from the new analysis are consistent with what we have shown in the main analyses. The class origin outweighs the destination in affecting beliefs in meritocracy for upward-mobile children. Though the coefficients of mobility type are not significant, their direction are same as that in our main analysis. On the other hand, we measured social origin by using the parental highest class (Beller, 2009). If one parent's class information is missing, the class position of the other would be used as the proxy (Hout, 2018). The results using the new social origin measure show great consistency as well.

Moreover, two more robustness checks are conducted regarding (1) the cross-wave consistency of the findings, and (2) the results of excluding control variables. To increase the reliability of the results and investigate the changes in the relationship between social mobility and opportunity beliefs over time, we performed a sensitivity analysis using data from the CFPS 2010. This analysis followed the same methodological approach as our main analysis and the results, presented in Table A7, largely align with our primary findings. However, the independent effects of upward and downward mobility is significant for 2018 but not for 2010, which may be explained by the growing social inequality in the recent decade. Finally, as many covariates may be downstream of opportunity beliefs and class destination, to ensure that the inclusion of control variables did not bias the results, we conducted an additional analysis where only basic demographic information, such as age and gender, was considered. As presented in Table A8, the results remain consistent with our main findings, suggesting that control variables in our main analyses did not lead to the biased results.

Table A1
Estimates from diagonal reference models based on imputed data.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Diagonal effect (ref: College and above)				
Intermediate class	-0.099 + (0.059)	-0.261** (0.079)	-0.094 (0.066)	-0.289*** (0.083)
Manual workers	-0.229*** (0.05)	-0.337 (0.066)	-0.232*** (0.052)	-0.321*** (0.067)
Farmers	-0.190*** (0.045)	-0.301*** (0.065)	-0.131* (0.055)	-0.239*** (0.069)
Weight				
Original class (p)	0.980*** (0.14)	0.471** (0.16)	0.743*** (0.116)	0.250 (0.173)
Destination class (q)	0.020 (0.14)	0.529*** (0.16)	0.257* (0.116)	0.750*** (0.173)
Interactive term of weight				
Δ_{upward}		0.595** (0.185)		0.690*** (0.206)
Mobility type (ref: Immobility)				
Upward mobility			-0.084*** (0.023)	-0.073** (0.025)
Downward mobility			0.024 (0.040)	0.060 (0.039)
Covariates	YES	YES	YES	YES
Constant	-0.008 (0.168)	0.088 (0.174)	-0.054 (0.171)	0.030 (0.175)

(continued on next page)

Table A1 (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
AIC	47122.41	47120.54	47114.6	47113.07
N	14734	14734	14734	14734

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistics are based on weighted analysis. ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A2

Estimates from diagonal reference models on separate items of opportunity beliefs.

	Hard Work	Intelligence	Social Network
Diagonal effect (ref: Managerial-professional)			
Intermediate class	-0.104** (0.039)	-0.108* (0.054)	0.253*** (0.065)
Manual workers	-0.088** (0.031)	-0.124** (0.043)	0.238*** (0.054)
Farmers	-0.034 (0.034)	-0.066 (0.044)	0.170** (0.056)
Weight			
Original class (p)	1 —	0.621* (0.312)	0.029 (0.189)
Destination class (q)	0 —	0.379 (0.312)	0.971*** (0.189)
Interactive term of weight			
Δ_{upward}	0.180 (0.227)	0.311 (0.359)	0.701** (0.224)
Mobility type (ref: Immobility)			
Upward mobility	-0.083*** (0.019)	-0.045** (0.017)	0.002 (0.020)
Downward mobility	-0.026 (0.030)	-0.004 (0.029)	-0.117*** (0.035)
Covariates	YES	YES	YES
Constant	3.686*** (0.117)	3.596*** (0.124)	3.518*** (0.154)
N	13517	13517	13517

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistics are based on weighted analysis. ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A3

Estimates from diagonal reference models on overall opportunity beliefs in meritocracy, education mobility.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Diagonal effect (ref: College and above)				
Senior high	-0.361*** (0.081)	-0.336*** (0.091)	-0.345*** (0.081)	-0.310*** (0.092)
Junior high	-0.253*** (0.076)	-0.235** (0.08)	-0.208** (0.077)	-0.178* (0.08)
Primary and below	-0.276*** (0.075)	-0.263** (0.08)	-0.215** (0.078)	-0.190* (0.083)
Weight				
Original class (p)	0.790*** (0.1)	0.986* (0.392)	0.712*** (0.103)	0.966* (0.389)
Destination class (q)	0.210* (0.1)	0.014 (0.392)	0.288** (0.103)	0.034 (0.389)
Interactive term of weight				
Δ_{upward}		-0.210 (0.417)		-0.301 (0.433)
Mobility type (ref: Immobility)				
Upward mobility			-0.048* (0.024)	-0.050* (0.024)
Downward mobility			0.042 (0.047)	0.046 (0.051)
Covariates	YES	YES	YES	YES
Constant	0.023 (0.189)	0.009 (0.190)	-0.017 (0.189)	-0.039 (0.190)
AIC	42195.26	42197	42193.46	42194.9
N	13185	13185	13185	13185

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistics are based on weighted analysis. ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A4

Estimates from OLS models on overall opportunity beliefs in meritocracy.

	OLS_M1	OLS_M2	OLS_M3	OLS_M4	OLS_M5
Origin effect (ref: Managerial-professional)					
Intermediate class	-0.214*** (0.059)		-0.215*** (0.058)	-0.195** (0.060)	
Manual workers	-0.233*** (0.039)		-0.231*** (0.039)	-0.201*** (0.048)	
Farmers	-0.195*** (0.035)		-0.196*** (0.035)	-0.140** (0.053)	
Destination effect (ref: Managerial-professional)					
Intermediate class		-0.033 (0.037)	-0.030 (0.037)		-0.052 (0.037)
Manual workers		-0.063 + (0.035)	-0.058 + (0.035)		-0.095** (0.036)
Farmers		0.076 + (0.040)	0.081* (0.040)		0.008 (0.050)
Mobility type (ref: Immobility)					
Upward mobility				-0.062* (0.026)	-0.038 (0.032)
Downward mobility				0.012 (0.046)	0.104** (0.035)
Covariates	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Constant	0.055 (0.174)	-0.282 (0.176)	-0.013 (0.181)	0.002 (0.179)	-0.187 (0.180)
N	13517	13517	13517	13517	13517

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistics are based on weighted analysis. + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.**Table A5**

Estimates from diagonal reference models, respondents of age 25–50.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Diagonal effect (ref: College and above)				
Intermediate class	-0.292*** (0.081)	-0.427*** (0.094)	-0.262** (0.082)	-0.417*** (0.095)
Manual workers	-0.308*** (0.06)	-0.386*** (0.074)	-0.260*** (0.065)	-0.319*** (0.077)
Farmers	-0.240*** (0.055)	-0.336*** (0.073)	-0.125 + (0.07)	-0.210** (0.081)
Weight				
Original class (p)	0.864*** (0.105)	0.516*** (0.154)	0.718*** (0.11)	0.304 + (0.181)
Destination class (q)	0.136 (0.105)	0.484** (0.154)	0.282* (0.11)	0.696*** (0.181)
Interactive term of weight				
Δ_{upward}		0.467* (0.184)		0.584** (0.213)
Mobility type (ref: Immobility)				
Upward mobility			-0.109*** (0.030)	-0.105*** (0.032)
Downward mobility			0.027 (0.054)	0.076 (0.054)
Covariates	YES	YES	YES	YES
Constant	1.847* (0.889)	0.065 (0.617)	0.932 + (0.541)	-0.827 (0.853)
AIC	28581.55	28579.54	28571.89	28569.11
N	8900	8900	8900	8900

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistics are based on weighted analysis. + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.**Table A6**

Estimates from diagonal reference models, mother's class as social origin and parental highest class as social origin.

	Mother's class as social origin	Parental highest class as social origin
Diagonal effect (ref: Managerial-professional)		
Intermediate class	-0.612*** (0.102)	-0.429*** (0.073)
Manual workers	-0.452*** (0.091)	-0.350*** (0.06)
Farmers	-0.171 + (0.09)	-0.246*** (0.061)
Weight		
Original class (p)	0.271 + (0.153)	0.271* (0.129)

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Table A6 (continued)

	Mother's class as social origin	Parental highest class as social origin
Destination class (q)	0.729*** (0.153)	0.729*** (0.129)
Interactive term of weight		
Δ_{upward}	0.612*** (0.167)	0.672*** (0.158)
Mobility type (ref: Immobility)		
Upward mobility	-0.015 (0.028)	-0.030 (0.025)
Downward mobility	0.106 (0.071)	0.108** (0.040)
Covariates	YES	YES
Constant	0.029 (0.208)	0.112 (0.189)
N	12550	14250

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistics are based on weighted analysis. ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A7

Estimates from diagonal reference models, data of CFPS 2010.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Diagonal effect (ref: College and above)				
Intermediate class	-0.411*** (0.085)	-0.471*** (0.1)	-0.416*** (0.087)	-0.467*** (0.101)
Manual workers	-0.267*** (0.062)	-0.358*** (0.08)	-0.282*** (0.069)	-0.355*** (0.082)
Farmers	-0.151** (0.055)	-0.219** (0.076)	-0.175* (0.072)	-0.215** (0.082)
Weight				
Original class (p)	0.724*** (0.096)	0.482*** (0.143)	0.735*** (0.1)	0.481** (0.155)
Destination class (q)	0.276** (0.096)	0.518*** (0.143)	0.265** (0.1)	0.519*** (0.155)
Interactive term of weight				
Δ_{upward}		0.373* (0.185)		0.380 + (0.194)
Mobility type (ref: Immobility)				
Upward mobility			-0.001 (0.031)	-0.008 (0.032)
Downward mobility			-0.028 (0.052)	-0.001 (0.048)
Covariates	YES	YES	YES	YES
Constant	-0.124 (0.225)	-0.058 (0.230)	-0.105 (0.228)	-0.062 (0.231)
AIC	28562.78	28561.56	28566.49	28565.51
N	8952	8952	8952	8952

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistics are based on weighted analysis. ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A8

Estimates from diagonal reference models, with covariates of age and gender.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Diagonal effect (ref: College and above)				
Intermediate class	-0.288*** (0.066)	-0.349*** (0.076)	-0.238*** (0.066)	-0.354*** (0.079)
Manual workers	-0.349*** (0.048)	-0.390*** (0.059)	-0.290*** (0.05)	-0.361*** (0.06)
Farmers	-0.069* (0.042)	-0.128* (0.057)	0.005 (0.048)	-0.095 (0.06)
Weight				
Original class (p)	0.608*** (0.057)	0.527*** (0.12)	0.595*** (0.066)	0.346** (0.123)
Destination class (q)	0.392*** (0.057)	0.473*** (0.12)	0.405*** (0.066)	0.654*** (0.123)
Interactive term of weight				
Δ_{upward}		0.176 (0.151)		0.406** (0.154)
Mobility type (ref: Immobility)				
Upward mobility			-0.062* (0.026)	-0.082*** (0.025)
Downward mobility			0.111** (0.039)	0.107** (0.037)

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Table A8 (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Covariates				
Age	0.005*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)
Men	-0.042* (0.021)	-0.046* (0.021)	-0.034 (0.021)	-0.039 + (0.021)
Constant	0.265*** (0.057)	0.307*** (0.065)	0.285*** (0.063)	0.377*** (0.071)
AIC	43426.49	43427.56	43405.66	43402.66
N	13517	13517	13517	13517

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Statistics are based on weighted analysis. ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

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