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Chapter 1

Social Inequality in China: A Review of Theories and Evidence

Yaojun Li^{*,‡} and Yanjie Bian^{†,§}

**Department of Sociology and the Cathie Marsh Institute for Social
Research, Manchester University, Manchester, UK*

*†Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota,
Minneapolis, MN, USA*

‡yaojun.li@manchester.ac.uk

§bianx001@umn.edu

Abstract

This chapter reviews the status of scholarship on socio-economic inequality in reform-era China, describes the objectives and significance of this edited volume, and summarizes the contributions of each chapter. In doing so, this chapter provides readers with both an overview and a roadmap of the contents of the book, a collection of cutting-edge analyses of multiple dimensions of social inequality in 21st century China.

Keywords: socio-economic inequality; theory; research; China

1. Introduction

The last few decades have seen tremendous socio-economic changes in China, unparalleled in scale, intensity, complexity, and impact, affecting the lives of over one billion people in the most populous country of the world. In a time span of over 40 years, the country changed from an agricultural to an industrial society, from a centrally planned to an increasingly market-oriented economy, and from a relatively equal to a highly unequal society. Hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of poverty, around 280 million agricultural workers (“peasants” as commonly called in China) have moved to cities in search of jobs and a better life for themselves and their families, and the country has changed from being one of the poorest in the world to being the second-largest economic power house at the present time. All this happened so quickly that even many Chinese people feel bewildered and find it hard to keep abreast with the latest developments. Yet, amidst the rapid economic development and growing prosperity, social divisions have deepened, income inequalities have soared, and civic moralities have eroded.

Chinese and overseas researchers have been following China’s socio-economic development with keen interest and deep concern. Amazed by the scale and complexity of the socio-economic changes wrought out by the “open-up and reform” policies, scholars have made various efforts to understand the rapid socio-economic development, its causes, manifestations, and consequences. Existing theories have been tested and debated, and new theories proposed, examined, and contested. As most of the scholarly works are published in Chinese, English readers who do not read Chinese find it hard to access the findings. In addition, outputs are scattered in journals and books, making it time-consuming for scholars and students to search. In view of this, we have organized this volume that collects the latest research findings by a group of scholars with expertise in different subject areas, with the aim of providing a fairly comprehensive coverage of the socio-economic development in post-reform China. More specifically, our contributors examined the multifaceted structural factors for the emergence, development, and lived experience of some of the most salient socio-economic inequalities in China. Each chapter is aimed as a cutting-edge contribution to knowledge in a specific field of research, and the volume as a whole provides a thorough analysis of the key issues facing the contemporary Chinese society, including patterns and trends in social mobility, economic inequality, educational attainment, migration, urbanization, social capital, health and well-being, civic revival, and

migrant integration in urban life. We believe that this volume will be a useful guide to sociological research on China in the decades to come and serve as a key resource tool for scholars, students, and policymakers worldwide who are interested in China. Being a field of study which has rapidly developed in the last few decades and which is attracting increasing attention from scholars and policymakers around the world, this volume will hopefully serve as a timely and highly valuable resource for sociological scholars and students worldwide who are interested in China.

In the following part of this chapter, we give a brief account of why it is important to study social inequality in China and how our contributors have addressed the key research questions on socio-economic inequalities in China.

2. Theories on Economic Development and Social Inequality

While there are many discussions of specific socio-economic issues, it is difficult to find an overarching theory that provides a guiding principle for understanding the scale and complexity of socio-economic development and social division as has occurred in China in the last few decades. This notwithstanding, a general account is still possible, focusing on what is commonly termed the “modernization” theory, the “endogenous regime” theory, and their variants specifically designed for understanding the Chinese situation.

The modernization theory, also called “liberal theory” or “theory of industrialism,” refers to a set of theoretical propositions on an industrial society moving toward overall social equality in the process of economic and technological development. The ideas are developed by a group of US and European sociologists (Bell, 1972, 1973; Blau and Duncan, 1967; Ganzeboom *et al.*, 1989; Kerr *et al.*, 1960; Treiman, 1970). Briefly, as Bell (1972: 30) states, “the post-industrial society is, in its logic, a meritocracy,” and this logic is, as Bell (1973) further discusses, applicable to both capitalist and socialist societies. During a massive social change from agricultural to industrial and then to post-industrial (information and knowledge-based) economy, an increasing proportion of the economically active population will leave the farmland as peasants and become wage earners in factories, shops, or offices, some as manual and clerical workers, others as entrepreneurs, and still others as professionals and managers. There will be more mobility opportunities as socio-economic

development proceeds, with upward mobility predominating over downward mobility.

Not only will there be greater opportunities, the distribution of the opportunities will also be more equal according to the theories. The rationale and exigencies for economic and technological development will compel employers to recruit and select the best and most productive workers for the accomplishment of work tasks regardless of ascriptive factors, such as family origin, sex, or color of skin. Those with a “taste for discrimination” will be driven out of the market (Pager, 2016). Given the economic and technological development, there will be a diversification of occupations, with old jobs becoming obsolete and new jobs being created, resulting in a continuous upgrading of the occupational structure and upskilling of the workforce. To meet the needs of an ever-demanding knowledge-based economy, governments will extend compulsory education, by raising the school-leaving age for children, and carry out various “widening participation” programs for young adults. Various schemes of economic support will also become available to help those with financial difficulties, such as Free School Meal (FSM), fee waiver, and other subsidy programs for those from disadvantaged family backgrounds. The purpose of all this is to enhance the talent development in the wider population and to weaken the link between family economic situation and children’s educational attainment. Given the importance of education (or “human capital” as widely termed), it stands to reason to expect that parents will place increasing importance to and make greater investment in their children’s educational attainment, from primary to lower and higher secondary, and then to higher education. Indeed, there will be an incessant competition among families in investing in their children’s education by whatever means available to them, such as by sending the children to the “best” state or private schools (“grammar” or “public” (fee-paying) schools in Britain, or “key,” “experiment,” or international schools in China), paying for extra-curricular tuition or expensive tutors, and buying books, sports instruments, or whatever affordable to enhance the children’s educational development.

There has been extensive research which shows that the origin–education link at the lower levels of education has been weakened in many Western countries since the end of the Second World War (Breen *et al.*, 2009, 2010), yet the link has been strengthened at the tertiary level in some countries such as Britain (Blanden *et al.*, 2005; Heath and Li, 2021), the USA (Torche, 2011) and China (Li, 2021). Some researchers have suggested that for those with higher educational qualifications,

especially in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects, family influences on career development are reduced (Hout, 1988; Breen and Luijckx, 2005), and that employers are increasingly basing their selection criteria on achievement and performance, which are, in contemporary societies, often associated with higher levels of educational attainment. Thus, just as the origin–education link is assumed to weaken, the education–destination link is expected to strengthen, with a result the origin–destination link will also weaken. In short, socio-economic development and technological innovation will lead to an “education-based meritocracy” (Breen and Muller, 2020; Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2019; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Goldthorpe, 2007). There will not only be more opportunities but a more equal distribution of opportunities as well. To put it another way, both absolute and relative mobility will increase in industrial or post-industrial societies, a thesis which has received serious examination (Li and Devine, 2011).

The “liberal theory” sounds optimistic but has been challenged by the “endogenous mobility regime” theory (Featherman *et al.*, 1975). This latter theory states that at different stages of socio-economic development, there will be different and possibly increasing amounts of opportunities. Rates of absolute mobility are affected by national socio-historical contexts and levels of economic development. As national economies differ in the level of development, so will the rates of absolute mobility. Yet, what is important is that in spite of the differing “phenotypical” patterns of observed mobility, the underlying patterns of genotypical “regime” (or social fluidity) will be quite similar both over time and across space. This similarity in patterns of social inequality will hold as long as mobility proceeds within the framework of nuclear family, market system, and liberal democracy. Within the nuclear family, parents have a natural propensity to support their children with whatever socio-economic-cultural resources they have. As parents are equipped with different kinds and amounts of such resources, family differences in resource-related investments will inevitably manifest themselves. As families are constituent elements of society and as some types of family resources, such as social and cultural capital, cannot be easily made subject to redistributive measures (such as progressive taxes for more equal income distribution), inequalities in condition, opportunity, and outcome will exert themselves to a greater or lesser extent in developed as well as developing countries. What is more, those standing at the front of the queue tend to gain greater access to the emerging opportunities (Devine and Li, 2013; Heath *et al.*, 2018; Li and Heath, 2016). This suggests that even if socio-economic

opportunities are growing in a society, we might see not only a constant social inequality but more often than not a deepening social division between the advantaged and disadvantaged social classes. In short, this theory gives a less sanguine but more realistic (and pessimistic) profile on mobility.

The launch of the open-up and reform policies in 1978 and the subsequent rapid socio-economic development provided a unique opportunity to test existing theories and develop new ones. In the wake of the reform policies, foreign investments poured into China and local governments competed against each other for such investments. Factories emerged like mushrooms, requiring millions of workers. Over the course of time, around 280 million peasants left the countryside to migrate to cities to work as factory workers, construction workers, shop assistants, or whatever job they could find. Urbanites also compete against each other for higher social positions and better-paid jobs. In a sense, China was becoming a “meritocracy”: people with greater ability and willingness to work hard could make more money and become richer. The more productive, better-educated, and healthier workers are more likely to be successful in China’s market-oriented economy, a verdict pronounced by Victor Nee (1989, 1991, 1996) and Nee and Cao (1999). Redistributive power will weaken, giving way to the creative dynamics of the market. Like Western countries, China, it was believed, will embark upon an “education-based meritocracy” and will become a more open and more equal society in the course of development.

It is true that the Chinese society is becoming more competitive in the post-reform period, with efficiency and productivity greatly valued and rewarded, especially in the private sector. But will market transition necessarily lead to a weakening or loss of the redistributive power? In a series of papers, Bian and colleagues (Bian and Logan, 1996; Bian *et al.*, 2001) showed a more acute and maybe more accurate understanding of the complexities of the Chinese society and demonstrated the persistence of political power, however defined, in post-reform China. To properly understand China, Bian and colleagues hold that one must understand its political and institutional contexts. The socialist, market economy with Chinese characteristics means, first of all, that it is to uphold the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in all the important socio-economic-cultural decisions. Thus, the redistributive powers of the Party and Government organizations are only going to stay and are most likely to strengthen. There are, to be sure, many Chinese characteristics within the

reform policies, the most prominent of which is the role of social networks permeating all pores of socio-economic life. In China, personal ability may be a necessary condition but networks of ongoing social relations (locally termed *guanxi*) are the sufficient condition for finding a job and gaining career progress even in the private sector (Bian, 1997, 2002, 2008; Lin, 2001a, 2001b). In his most recent publications, Bian (2018, 2019) showed that China's urban jobs that were allocated through the networks of *guanxi* connections rose from 40% in 1978 to 90% in 2014, that *guanxi* connections played increasing roles in employment processes when competitions for work opportunities were under greater institutional uncertainty, and that the roles of *guanxi* connections significantly declined in professional and skill job markets in which merit-based screening reduced institutional uncertainty and socio-political influence. Thus, the combination of the persisting redistributive powers and the prevailing and increasing importance of social networks would cast serious doubts upon the thesis of inevitability of unfolding openness and social fluidity.

Apart from the persistence of redistributive powers and the pervasive influence of social networks, another powerful impediment to social equality is the institutional barrier, namely, the household registration system (*hukou* in Chinese), initiated in 1952 and fully implemented in 1958. For over half a century, the system has served as a barrier separating the rural and the urban sections of the Chinese people into two worlds. From the late 1950s to the early 1990s, urbanites enjoyed various kinds of state-sponsored benefits, such as employment, education, housing, transport, healthcare, pensions, and daily necessities, but the rural people could have none of these. In the earlier period of the reform, the basic structure remained unchanged except that the peasants were allowed to go to cities to find a job. In the more recent years, it is easier for rural people to move to and settle in small- and medium-sized cities as a result of the Government's urbanization drive. Yet, even now, migrants working in big cities and coastal areas still carry with them the identity label of "migrant peasant workers," suggesting that the rural people who had the misfortune of being born peasants have to remain so throughout their lives. There have been many studies on the nature and consequences of this unfair system (Cheng and Selden, 1994), a system that imposed a chasm "between heaven and earth" (Treiman, 2012) for the Chinese people.

Hukou was and, to a large extent, still is a paramount ascriptive factor for research on social inequality in China (Li, 2021; Li and Zhao, 2017; Li *et al.*, 2016; Xiao and Bian, 2018). This, together with parental class,

gender, CCP membership, and migration status, has predominantly shaped the life chances of Chinese people for many years. Parental socio-economic position has further deepened the social divide.

Finally, we must bear in mind that China is a very big country, with many differences not only between rural and urban areas, and between people in different class positions, but also between different regions and provinces. During the planning period, and even more so now, the living standard in a suburban area of Beijing or Shanghai is higher than that in a small town in the interior provinces. The impacts of uneven development between regions, together with other drivers of inequality, also need to be taken into account in assessing patterns and trends of social inequality in China, which our contributors have tried to do in the present volume.

3. Organization of the Book

The organizing principle of this volume aims to reflect the major sociological thinking we discussed above and to show the research findings on contemporary Chinese society that our contributors have explored. As indicated above, there is no single overarching theory that can fully capture the scale, depth, and complexity of China's socio-economic development or the growing inequality in the last few decades. The authors reflect this by engaging with theories that can shed light on understanding the socio-economic changes in China, such as Nee's (1989) market transition theory, Nee and Cao's (1999) path dependence theory, Bian and Logan's (1996) power persistence theory, Lin's (2001a) social capital theory, Walder's (2003) organized dependence theory, and Goldthorpe's (2007) rational action theory to name just a few. The focus of the volume is on determinants, manifestations, and consequences of socio-economic inequality in China. As the causal factors are manifold and as the manifestations and consequences are intertwined, we did not impose or even expect/request a single, overarching, conceptual or methodological framework for the analysis. Rather, we leave the specific theories and methods to the contributors to adopt, as they are experts in the specific subject areas.

The volume is organized around different themes. The first one focuses on class, education, and income inequalities, which is of enduring sociological significance as they bear closely on social justice. Given the rapid economic development as witnessed in China in the past few

decades, it is of particular importance to enquire whether the massive opportunities as engendered by the reform and open-up policies have been equally shared by citizens, making China a more fluid and meritocratic society where ascriptive factors, such as family origin, gender, or *hukou*, are losing importance in shaping people's educational and occupational attainment and their income. Here, research by Li (Chapters 2 and 4) shows that contrary to the optimistic views of the modernization theories and largely unpredicted by the "endogenous regimes" theory, social inequality in China has not ameliorated but rather has worsened, at least in terms of intergenerational class mobility and educational attainment. A possible explanation for this may be sought from the "loss aversion" theory by Kahneman and colleagues (Kahneman, 2011; Kahneman and Tversky, 1979) or the rational action theory proposed by Goldthorpe and colleagues (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1999; Goldthorpe, 2007) in the sense of an important asymmetry between gains and losses, with losses outweighing gains. "One dollar lost matters more than one dollar gained." Thus, parents will try their best to prevent intergenerational downward mobility. Along the same lines, research on the effects of social mobility has found asymmetric effects on people's well-being: on average, the psychological losses of sliding down are larger than the gains of moving up (Dolan and Lordan, 2013; Zhao and Li, 2019; Zhao *et al.*, 2017). In order to prevent downward mobility, people with superior resources will do what they can to help their children in their educational and occupational advancement in order not to fall behind their peers. As the market-driven inequalities of condition are increasing, the inequality in processes and outcomes could only be expected to increase. Even though the Chinese government has endeavored to curb the growing socio-economic inequalities, those in advantaged positions will seek to remain at the front of the queue or maneuver to position themselves even further ahead in the queue. Rising tides may thus not guarantee to lift all the boats together. It is noted in this regard that people's educational attainment is not only affected by parental socio-economic-cultural resources and their *hukou* status but also by the particular trajectory the country has undertaken, that is, the government policies and political events that occurred in the particular time periods. For instance, people born in the late 1950s and early 1960s were caught by the "Cultural Revolution" (1966–1976) when education was severely disrupted, particularly at the higher levels, with universities and colleges closed and around 20 million middle-school graduates from urban areas compelled to "go up to the mountains and

down to the valleys to receive re-education from the poor and lower-middle peasants” in response to Chairman Mao’s call. The dramatic effects are analyzed by Shu and her colleagues (Chapter 6).

China’s *hukou* system has had profound consequences on many aspects of people’s lives. In Chapter 3, Whyte and Tsang discuss an intriguing finding on the relationship between health insurance and well-being (both objective and subjective) among the rural and urban residents from three national surveys. Paradoxically, they found that the rural respondents reported better health than their urban peers in the 2004 survey, a surprise which disappeared in the two later surveys of 2009 and 2014. Why did the rural people who suffered more inequalities express better health when they received some meagre benefits which were in fact no match at all as compared with those enjoyed by the urbanites? Perhaps people who had long endured inequalities had not expected such benefits and would feel overwhelmed and hence report greater subjective well-being/health when such benefits did come. As the time went on, the rural residents gradually acquired a more “normal” perspective which was in keeping with that of the urbanites. Other aspects of *hukou* influence on people’s socio-economic lives were also carefully examined. For instance, as Hao and Wang show in Chapter 7, rural children found it more difficult to gain admission to key senior schools and were, as a result, less likely to be enrolled in top universities. The differences actually start from lower-middle schools or even earlier as Lin and Yeung in Chapter 8 and Zhu and colleagues in Chapter 9 show, not only in education but in subsequent work life as well.

China is led by the CCP which has over 90 million members. The CCP membership is a key indicator of political capital under the Chinese party-state, and its role in the changing system of social stratification during the reform era has been a focus of a heated debate. Have the market reforms reduced the significance of CCP membership and given way to human capital, or have CCP members gained more political power during the reform period despite the rise of market mechanisms? Capitalizing on several large-scale datasets obtained over three decades since the 1980s, Bian and Zhang in Chapter 5 provide a systematic analysis of the extent to which CCP membership, along with other indicators of political capital, has affected three important domains of social inequality: occupational status, wage levels, and in-kind income. Despite the increasing relevance and effect of higher education on CCP membership attainment from 1979 to 2012, during this 33-year span of the reform era, CCP members,

as compared to non-members of equal qualifications, had greater prospects for promotion to elite positions of political and administrative authority, obtained higher incomes, and lived in larger housing units. On all these outcome variables, elite administrators had a consistent advantage over elite professionals, a result of persistent political power in reforming state socialism under a communist party-state.

The role of social networks on outcomes of social stratification and mobility is examined by several authors. Son in Chapter 10 finds that an individual's inability to establish a local social network, both in terms of informal social ties and participation in social groups, leads to lower access to social support and higher likelihood of depression. Bian and Cheng in Chapter 11 show that, during a 50-year span from 1964 to 2014, there is a persistent effect of network social capital on income even though the influence of *guanxi* favoritism, a particular form of network social capital in China, has weakened since the country joined the WTO around 2001. On a positive note, Huang in Chapter 13 reveals a strong, direct effect of social networks, the net of personal attributes and family resources, on people's subjective social status in Chinese society, and Hao, Song and Chen in Chapter 14 develop an index of "social integration" merging personal ties with relatives, friends, and acquaintances, which is found to be a resilient factor on people's environmental consciousness. Among China's internal migrants, the use of social networks in job searches not only leads to lower risks of job change and greater job security than formal job search methods, as discussed by Lei and Liang in Chapter 16, but also higher upward mobility into occupations of higher earnings and higher prestige, as shown by Du *et al.* in Chapter 17. Interestingly, social networks have positive impacts not only on job hunting, income raise, and career advancement but also on prosocial behavior among the middle class in the urban sector as Chen and Zhang show (Chapter 22). As around 280 million people have moved from the countryside to urban sectors as "migrant peasant workers," the socio-economic integration poses a serious challenge, especially among the second-generation migrants. Zhu and Li (Chapter 24) explore the uprising radicalism among the young generation of migrants who have gradually lost actual and emotional links with their native place and at the same time continue to suffer from persistent social exclusion and identity crisis in the urban areas. Alienation from both sides tends to nurture their discontent and indignation, which lays the ground for further social and political unrest.

China's socio-economic inequality is manifested in many areas. One of the most salient inequalities is wealth and housing inequality. Keister and Lei in Chapter 12 show that household wealth as an important indicator of financial well-being is highly concentrated in China. The authors provide updated estimates of the degree to which wealth ownership is concentrated, including estimates for net worth, homes, and financial assets; they also document the portion of wealth that is held by top households, again including separate estimates for net worth, homes, and financial assets; and they explore the social and economic factors that are associated with wealth ownership and with membership in top wealth positions, including a focus on market and political capital. The findings underscore the importance of wealth for understanding inequality and highlight the degree to which top households are accumulating assets. More importantly, the results show that both market and political capital contribute to wealth ownership, but the relative importance of these influences varies for net worth, housing wealth, and financial assets.

Fang and Logan in Chapter 18 discuss the evolution of this inequality from the 1950s to the present time. The inequality arises in different forms under varying economic regimes and is passed on even when the mechanisms of allocation have changed. Public policy was the prime determinant of access to housing in the socialist period. The 1980s initiated two kinds of ruptures in this system. The first was the introduction of market mechanisms, highly subsidizing conversion of former urban renters into a new class of homeowners (excluding those who were disadvantaged in the allocation system) and introducing new market-priced housing for sale. Although the change was called "marketization," the state held a firm grip in the new system, especially through its control of land and development loans. The second was an accelerated urbanization drive promoted by the state that has led to a rapid inflation of house prices, an explosion of rural-urban migration, and a displacement from central areas by redevelopment and conversion of farmland into suburban housing, generating new conflicts over housing and property rights and the distribution of profits from these developments. These changes in housing are accompanied by shifts in urban spatial structure and segregation, which add to the disparities in residential quality. As the authors discuss, each aspect of housing change was implicated with changes in public policies.

The family-planning policy as legally enforced (from March 13, 1982 to January 1, 2016) was a hugely debated topic. While the restrictive policy has been replaced with the universal two-child policy (and the

government is encouraging a three-child policy which is in effect exercising no restrictions at all), the consequence of the one-child policy for individuals, families, and the whole society is being acutely felt and will be more so in the years to come. Highlighting its effect on the family, Yang in Chapter 15 discusses how the policy and its variations in terms of both rules (strict one-child policy, girl-exception policy, and two-or-more-child policy) and implementation strategies (strong campaign on giving birth to fewer children but giving them better care and education) affect family structure, function, relationships, and norms. Drawing on macro data and situating the relationships into the broad context of societal transformation, the author compares family changes over the past three decades and across regions and finds that the policy has simplified the family structure, weakened the traditional family function, and reshaped family relationships and values, with both positive and negative consequences for the family. Although the Chinese family proves to be resilient, we should not underestimate the tremendous impacts engendered by the one-child policy, which present a great challenge to the underdeveloped social welfare system in ensuring the quality of life for older and younger generations.

Apart from policy effects, *hukou* and migration statuses also have significant impacts on housing inequality. As Zhu *et al.* show in Chapter 19, the marketization of housing did not benefit all people in a similar way. *hukou* status was a primary source of housing inequality, with rural migrants benefiting less from marketization than urban residents. The level of marketization has differential effects on different forms of housing tenure too. Although rural migrants are better off in cities with higher marketization levels, their housing conditions were often poorer.

In addition to socio-economic inequalities in education, work, incomes, networks, housing, and wealth, subjective well-being has also received considerable attention in the book. Several contributors looked into the drivers of well-being from different perspectives. Fan and Chen in Chapter 20 examined well-being consequences (work–family conflict, psychological distress, and happiness) of work-time arrangements associated with gender roles and gender ideology in China. The authors show some important findings: longer work hours are associated with less happiness, having full schedule control mitigates negative well-being consequences associated with long work hours, but no significant gender differences are found between temporal work arrangements and well-being, albeit the intersection between gender and gender ideology matters.

Taken together, this study illuminates the importance of cultural and gender context in understanding the links between the workplace and well-being in China. Similarly, You *et al.* in Chapter 21 demonstrate a strong and positive link between subjective social status and self-rated health among the elderly population in China. Furthermore, subjective perception of status is associated with cultural tradition in affecting people's evaluation of public issues, such as distributive justice, as Zhao (Chapter 23) shows.

Overall, this collection presents a comprehensive account of drivers, manifestations, and consequences of socio-economic inequality in contemporary Chinese society by a group of scholars with expertise in the specific areas of research. We hope that the book will help students, researchers, and policymakers in gaining a better understanding of the socio-economic progress and entrenched challenges that face the Chinese people.

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