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# Education, Political Trust, and Perceptions of Distributive Justice - A Survey Study in China

Yali Jiang\*

School of Sociology and Law, Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing 400031, China

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ABSTRACT

Using data from the General Social Survey of Wuhan, China in 2014, this study designs three paths to analyze the direct and indirect relationships between education and perception of distributive justice of income. The first path explores whether education directly affects people's perception of distributive justice. The second path connects education to socioeconomic status to determine whether higher status results in a higher perception of distributive justice. The last path introduces political trust as a mediating variable to evaluate the relationship between political trust and justice perception. Results show that education is the significant factor that affects people's political trust and perception of distributive justice.

## 1. Introduction

The perception of distributive justice, especially income and distributive justice, is a focus of scholarly inquiry. According to the development of human cognition (Heather & Tom, 1996),<sup>[5]</sup> too large an inequality of income distribution leads to strong dissatisfaction and social instability. According to this theory, the distributive justice of income distribution in China, which is experiencing a critical period of transition, requires special attention. From the era of planned economy, when income and fortune were distributed equally, to the opening time, when some people were allowed to earn much wealth, the people of China underwent the transition from the egalitarianism (“food

prepared in a large canteen cauldron”) to the widening gap in wealth distribution. Both the Gini coefficient and the Theil index show that the Chinese income gap already surpasses international warning lines. We direct our attention to series of destabilizing factors generated by the discontent of groups whose benefits have been damaged by the reform.

The Chinese people are aware of the inequality of income distribution. However the social mainstream holds that the existence of inequality is acceptable (Whyte, 2009).<sup>[28]</sup> Surprisingly, the lower the class a person belongs to, the more they believe that the income distribution (in China) is equal. Xie (2010)<sup>[29]</sup> explores this problem, and finds that perception of inequality of income depends on acceptance of the rule of social

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\*Corresponding Author:

Yali Jiang, Associate Professor, School of Sociology and Law, Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing 400031, China; Email: wxnprxy@163.com.

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competition, in which most people firmly believe if they work hard, they can realize the goal of upward social mobility. Inequality of income allocation in China probably does not lead to strong dissatisfaction with the disadvantages of class and social instability (Whyte, 2009;<sup>[28]</sup> Xie, 2010).<sup>[29]</sup> By contrast, people who have more education express stronger perceptions that the income distribution is unfair (Whyte, 2009;<sup>[28]</sup> Li & Wu, 2012;<sup>[10]</sup> Meng, 2012).<sup>[19]</sup>

Literature on the relationship between education and the perception of distributive justice focuses on the following perspectives: theory of social structure status and relative deprivation theory (Xie, 2010;<sup>[29]</sup> Wang, 2010),<sup>[4]</sup> and the partial comparative perspective and expected income perspective (Ma & Liu, 2010;<sup>[18]</sup> Meng, 2012;<sup>[19]</sup> Xie, 2010).<sup>[29]</sup> The function of education is not only to provide income and social status (Liu, 2006;<sup>[14]</sup> Wang, 2010;<sup>[4]</sup> Xue & Gao, 2011;<sup>[31]</sup> Li & Wu, 2012),<sup>[10]</sup> but also to create variation in thinking and social perceptive ability (Whyte, 2009;<sup>[28]</sup> Li & Wu, 2012).<sup>[10]</sup> There are many paths through which education can influence the perception of fairness in the income distribution of people. However, few researchers have explored the cause-effect relationship between the highly educated people's political trust and the perception of fairness in income distribution. This paper uses education and political trust, especially procedural justice in the selection of party and government officials, into its analysis of the effect of education on the perception of fairness in income distribution. This is assessed in two tracks: the economic effect of education, which is represented by the social structure status model, and the non-economic effect of education, of the influence of education on political trust. Using the theory of group relative deprivation, this paper analyzes the relationship between education and perception of fairness in income distribution.

## 2. Literature Review and Hypothesis

### 2.1 Outcome Equality and Procedural Justice under Distributive Justice Theory

The perception of distributive justice actually is a subjective judgment of how to assign income (Li & Wu, 2012).<sup>[10]</sup> Distributive justice attracted the attention of scholars as early as the 1960s. Homans proposed a distributive justice theory in 1961, while Adams raised equity theory in 1965 (Karen & Karen, 1983).<sup>[9]</sup> Traditional distributive theory, which is based on the assumption that people expect to maximize personal interest in the social communication, holds that people prefer to follow

the rule of personal interest center when they measure whether the outcome distribution is fair or not (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1987).<sup>[22]</sup> Therefore, at the time of making a judgment about the income equality and fairness of wealth distribution, people prefer to calculate their costs and benefits (Adams 1965;<sup>[1]</sup> Walster et al. 1973).<sup>[26]</sup> In this view, the personal perception of fairness depends on the comparison with surrounding people, and the judgment of fairness is made by comparing costs and benefits with others. Groups compared are thus local people who share the same socioeconomic status (Norma & Duane, 1986).<sup>[21]</sup>

The perception of distributive justice usually implies an outcome assignment of labor product. Several Chinese scholars have examined distributive procedural justice. Procedural justice theory regards regulation as important as procedure and as the standard for measuring whether the assignment is equitable. It emphasizes that procedural equality and outcome equality are independent. Different from single criteria of outcome equality judgment, many factors can impact people's measurement of procedural equality, including equality of treatment, the rectitude of the distributor, and whether individuals can express personal preferences when the procedure is performed (Ellen, Susan & Joseph, 2000).<sup>[3]</sup> When people are satisfied with outcome distribution, they do not explore procedure equality. Conversely, if outcome distribution does not meet the requirements of the people, procedural equality becomes critical.

### 2.2 Three Interpretations of Income and Wealth Distributive Justice Affected by Education

People's perception of income and wealth distribution is affected by education via three routes: direct effect, and the two indirect effects of economic effect through socioeconomic status, and noneconomic effect through influence of education on political trust.

#### 2.2.1 Direct Effect of Education on Perception of Income and Wealth Distribution

The direct effect of education on the income and wealth distribution means that the influence comes from education itself. In China, people who have more education are more dissatisfied with the wealth distribution (Whyte, 2009;<sup>[28]</sup> Li & Wu, 2012).<sup>[10]</sup> Whyte (2009)<sup>[28]</sup> explains that although the principle factor in people's satisfaction is their own wealth, when people obtain more education, they engage in more critical thinking, which makes them aware of social prejudice and injustice. Li and Wu (2012)<sup>[10]</sup> find that more education means more knowledge accumulation

and promotion of cognitive competence, along with the formation of critical analytical habits, which leads to learning more about the inequities of society. By contrast, individuals with lower levels of education are inclined to underestimate the level of inequality in society. Thus, the first hypothesis proposes that

Hypothesis 1: Education itself directly affects income and wealth inequality perceptions. When people obtain more education, they deem distribution more unfair.

### **2.2.2 Indirect Effect of Education and Economic Effect on Perception of Income and Wealth Distribution**

The economic effect of education primarily manifests as education via advances in people's socioeconomic status and changes the perception of the wealth distribution. During the planned economy period, China implemented an even distribution policy. During the transformation period, rates of return to human capital were not decided totally by the market but by an array of social structural factors, such as industry and nature of unit (Liu, 2006).<sup>[14]</sup> In all departments, rates of return to human capital grew most rapidly in the public sector, the state-owned collective economy sector. Only the people with advanced education could gain a high rate of return to human capital. Though the rate of return to human capital deviates among sectors, the overall trend increases with schooling (Xue & Gao, 2012).<sup>[31]</sup> Personal income and occupational status create diversity in judgments of value and justice (Weng, 2010).<sup>[27]</sup> The more education people have, the more cultural and technological capital they have, and the greater the economic return they receive, an advantage of the new reforms (Liu, 2002).<sup>[15]</sup>

According to self-interest-centered theory, people at the social advantage level are apt to deem that the wealth distribution is impartial, and attempt to maintain the existing distribution system to maintain their superiority. Conversely, people from the bottom of the social structure, prefer to judge distribution system inequitable. When people's perception of wealth distributive justice polarizes on this issue, conflict between the advantaged social level and disadvantaged may occur (Cook and Hegtvedt, 1986;<sup>[2]</sup> Homans, 1961;<sup>[6]</sup> Kabanoff, 1991).<sup>[8]</sup>

Research shows that self-interest-centered theory applies equally to China. The more education people have, the more justice they will demand in the wealth distribution (Li & Wu, 2012;).<sup>[10]</sup> After learning more about social reality, the additional discontent will augment their perception of injustice (Li & Wu, 2012).<sup>[10]</sup> If considering a single factor, higher income promotes a

higher perception of fairness of wealth distribution (Meng, 2012).<sup>[19]</sup> People equipped with knowledge expect more return from education. When comparing the disparity of costs and benefits, they may easily perceive that the wealth distribution is unjust (Meng, 2012).<sup>[19]</sup> Thus, the second hypothesis proposes that

Hypothesis 2: Education affects people's perception of income and wealth inequality by the way of the intervening variable of socioeconomic status. People who have more education are more inclined to regard the wealth distribution as unfair.

The noneconomic effect of education on the perception of income and wealth distribution focuses on a mediating variable, political trust. This paper uses procedural justice theory to explore the education-political trust relationship.

Political trust is people's faith and confidence in the output of the political system being consistent with expected results. When people think of relationship between perception of fairness and political trust, they would like to choose their own political discourse as the reference point, ignoring if their suggestions are adopted or not (Lind, Kanfer, & Earley, 1990;<sup>[11]</sup> Lind et al., 1993;<sup>[12]</sup> Tyler, 1989;<sup>[23]</sup> Tyler and Lind, 1992).<sup>[24]</sup> Individuals concerning about procedural justice hope to acquire more information related to their own social status (Lind & Tyler, 1988;<sup>[13]</sup> Tyler, 1989;<sup>[23]</sup> Tyler & Lind, 1992).<sup>[24]</sup> People feel being respected and valued when they believe in procedural justice. If they lack this belief, they will feel their rights are infringed on and they are ostracized by the society (Tyler et al., 1994).<sup>[25]</sup>

In China, a country with a long history of authoritarian rule, public trust in the government depends not only on the performance of the government, but also on personal worship of authority (Ma, 2007).<sup>[17]</sup> That is why the public generally displays a high level of political trust in modern China. Social transformation has altered popular perceptions of political institutions. Citizens are given more trust to organizations and institutions than political actors (Meng, 2014).<sup>[20]</sup> The government, along with its agents - the officials who make policy, is responsible for public political trust. Inefficient government and high levels of corruption can result in low political trust (Zhang & Ma, 2015).<sup>[32]</sup> Research based on 19 years of datasets from China shows, compared to their high trust in governmental institutions, the public has low trust in civil servants, which may be the result of rampant corruption (Meng, 2014).<sup>[20]</sup> The market economy reforms opened new paths to corruption for power elites, who took advantage of their positions to seek benefits in order to maintain economic superiority (Liu, 2005).<sup>[16]</sup>

Education level is another factor that can affect the public's political trust. Highly educated people suffer less under traditional political authority, and they are more likely to identify with modern democracy, and exhibit high political attention (Zhang & Ma, 2005).<sup>[32]</sup> Public servant corruption adds to their perception of the unjust distribution of wealth. Thus, greater education leads to lower political trust (Meng, 2014).<sup>[20]</sup> A Chinese saying observes that 'being an official is the natural outlet for good scholars', which implies educated people seek to become officials (Xie, 2010).<sup>[29]</sup> Thus, educated people, after gaining high income, turn to seeking political resources to expand their political influence (Huang, 2008).<sup>[7]</sup> This implies that procedural justice in selecting officials is an important reference for judgment of political justice. Public corruption and action of fighting corruption both alter their perception of distributive justice. Thus, the third hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 3: Education affects people's income and perceptions of wealth inequality through the intervening variable of political trust. Political trust varies with education - a higher level of education leads to a lower level of political trust and a higher level of perception of unfair wealth distribution.

### 3. Data and Variables

#### 3.1 Data

Data comes from the General Social Survey of Wuhan, China in 2014. It involved a total of 13 districts, 32 sub-districts, and 63 neighborhood committees/village committees under the jurisdiction of Wuhan Municipality. A total of 1878 valid questionnaires (99.6%) were collected. As this paper mainly analyzes the direct and indirect effects of education on the above mentioned variables, a structural equation model is constructed using SPSS 17.0 and Amos 21.0.

#### 3.2 Variables

##### 3.2.1 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the perception of income, wealth, and distributive justice. In the questionnaire of the General Social Survey of Wuhan 2014, respondents were asked to evaluate the degree of equity of income and wealth distribution in China. The listed options are "very unjust", "a little unjust", "just", "very just", and "neutral". Answers are recorded as binary data. "Very just" and "just" are recoded "just", assigning 1, while "very unjust" and "a little unjust" are recorded "unjust", assigning 0. According

to the field investigation, most "neutral" answers are "don't know". If a further answer is given, "a little unjust" is probably chosen. Thus, "neutral" is recorded "unjust", assigning 0.

##### 3.2.2 Independent Variables

The core independent variable is education. Taking into account the requirements of the structural equation model for variables, the education level is operationalized as the number of years of schooling: no schooling = 0, primary school = 6, junior high school = 9, high school/secondary school/ vocational high school = 12, 2-year college degree = 15, 4-year university degree = 16, and graduate degree = 19.

The economic effect of education, which is represented by the socioeconomic status, is defined as income, occupation, and unit nature. Income means the 2013 annual income of a respondent, including the salary bonus, as well as various types of investment profits and dividends, including the implicit income of the respondents, which can well represent the overall income level of a respondent. The occupational stratum divides occupations into two major strata according to the classification of national occupational classifications and code lists. 1 = "senior management staff and senior technical staff", 0 = "other practitioners". In the nature of the unit, 1 = "Party and government organs, people's groups, and the army", 2 = "State-owned enterprises and state-owned holding companies," and 3 = "State-owned/collective institutions," all are recoded as 1 = "State-owned enterprises and institutions." The remaining (including collective enterprises, private enterprises, foreign-funded enterprises, individual industrial and commercial households) is coded as 0 = "private enterprises."

The non-economic effects of education represent impact of education on political trust. Political trust is a very broad concept. It contains many levels, including both macro-organization trust and micro-individual trust. From the macroscopic to the microscopic level, political trust can be divided into three dimensions, including trust in the political system, trust in the political institution, and trust in government officials and civil servants (Xie, 2011).<sup>[30]</sup> Based on the design of questionnaire questions and the limitations of the topic of this study, this paper selects three variables: the fairness of party and government cadres selecting, the corruption phenomenon of government officials, and the effect of anti-corruption work. These variables represent institutional trust, government officials and civil servants trust, and political systems trust, respectively. Party and

government cadres trust is itemized in the questionnaire by “What do you think is the fairness of the selection of party and government cadres in our country?” The options are divided into “very unfair”, “not so fair”, “fair”, and “very fair”, and “neutral”. In the process of recoding, the three options of “very unfair”, “not so fair”, and “neutral” are treated as 0 = “unfair,” while “ fair” and “very fair” were recoded as 1= “fair.” The issue of corruption among government officials is represented by the item “Do you think that the current corruption in our society is serious?” and the options are “very serious,” “serious,” “less serious,” “no corruption,” and “neutral”. In the recoding, 0 = “very serious,” “ serious,” and “neutral” were recoded as 0 =”serious”, and “less serious”, and “no corruption” as 1= “not serious”. The item on the effectiveness of anti-corruption work is “Do you think that the current anti-corruption work of the party and the government is effective?” and the options are “very obvious”, “pretty obvious,” “obvious”, “less obvious”, “very inconspicuous”, and “neutral”. These are recoded as “very obvious”, and “pretty obvious” = 1, while “obvious”, “less obvious”, “very inconspicuous”, “neutral” = 0 “ are “not obvious”.

**3.2.3 Analysis Path**

This paper primarily examines how education affects people’s perception of fairness of wealth and income distribution. The intermediary variables are socioeconomic status and political trust. Therefore, a structural equation model is used to design the three analysis paths. The first path analyzes the direct effect of education on the fairness of wealth and income distribution. The second path is education → socioeconomic status → wealth and income distribution fairness. The third path is education → political trust → wealth and income distribution equity. The hidden variable of socio-economic status is derived from three obvious variables: income, occupation, and the nature of the work unit. The hidden variable of political trust is represented by three variables: the perception of fairness of the selection of party and government cadres, the corruption of officials, and the effectiveness of party and government anti-corruption work. The proportion of missing values for all variables was below 2%, and missing values were replaced before inclusion in the structural equation model. The educational years and income variables are continuous variables, and other categorical variables are recoded as dummy variables to meet the basic requirements for a structural equation model. A preliminary analysis of the binary logistic regression model shows that demographic variables

have a significant effect on the perception of fairness in the distribution of wealth, but only explain less than 2% of the variance. To make the analysis clearer, the basic demographic variables are not included in the structural equation model.

**4. Data Analysis Results**

**4.1 Basic Descriptive Analysis of Variables**

**Table 1.** Descriptive Analysis of Variables

Variables	Features
Core Dependent Variables	
Years of education	[0,19], Mean=10.84, SD=4.15
Indirect Effect - Economic Effect Independent Variables	
Income	[250, 2200000], Mean=39682
Profession	1= Managers and senior technical staff (18.2%), 0= Other practitioners (81.8%)
Nature of the work unit	1= State-owned enterprises and institutions (28.6%), 0= Private units (71.4%)
Indirect Effect - Political Trust Independent Variables	
The fairness of party and government cadre selection	Very unfair (14.8%), Not so fair (37.8%), Fair (28.7%), Very fair (2%), Neutral (16.7%)
The corruption of government officials	Very serious (39.5%), More serious (41.9%), Less serious (12.2%), No corruption (0.1%), Neutral (6.3%)
The effect of anti-corruption work	Very obvious (45.1%), More obvious (17.7%), Less obvious (1.6%), Neutral (5.8%)
Independent Variables	
Perception of income and wealth distributive justice	Very unjust (18.8%), A little unjust (44.3%), Just (27%), Very just (1.9%), Neutral (8%)

As seen from Table 1, among occupational variables, the average years of education for Wuhan residents is 10.84 years, which is equivalent to the second grade of senior high school. The span of income is also relatively large. With clean data, the high-income earners are not excluded because as a provincial capital, people of both low- and high-income people are found, while the highest income is 2.2 million, which is not too large a singular value. Among the occupational variables, less than one-fifth (18.2%) of the people are engaged in management and high-tech work, a proportion that is larger (28.6%) in state-owned enterprises and public institutions. These are basically regarded as the middle and upper classes, while other practitioners occupy most of the medium and

low-level occupations. The occupational structure can basically be described as a pyramid.

On the three variables of political trust (the fairness of party and government cadre selection, the corruption phenomenon of government officials, and the effect of anti-corruption work), more than half (52.6%) of the respondents believe that the selection of party and government cadres is unfair. 28.7% of the residents think that it is fairer and only 2% think it is very fair. In addition, 16.7% of people chose “Neutral”. Through further communicating with respondents, we found that these individuals believe that the selection of party and government cadres were more prudent about politics. Therefore, when dealing with the variables, “neutral” is classified as “unfair.” When asked about the problem of corruption in the society, 40% of people said that corruption phenomenon is very serious, and another

41.9% said it is more serious. On the whole, about 81.9% of people said that corruption is a serious problem in China, while 12.3% people said corruption was not a problem. Although corruption in China is regarded very serious, the party and the government’s anti-corruption policies have also made people believe the country’s determination and effectiveness in fighting corruption. Nearly half (45.1%) of the respondents said that the anti-corruption work is very effective, 17.7% said it is not so obvious and the government must continue to work hard. 7.4% of the respondents said that the anti-corruption work was not effective.

When asked whether the distribution of wealth and income of the entire society is fair, 18.8% respondents chose very unfair, 44.3% said it was not fair, and only 28.9% thought that was fair, and their pay out has a fair return.

**Table 2.** Cross-analysis of Education Variables<sup>1</sup> and Variables of Political Trust and Wealth Distribution

Education Degree	The fairness of party and government cadre selection		The corruption of government officials		The effect of anti-corruption work		Perception of income and wealth distributive justice	
	Very unfair	Unfair	Very serious	Less serious	Very obvious	More obvious	Very unjust	A little unjust
Primary school and below	12.7%	14.6%	13.4%	14.3%	18.3%	14%	11.6%	14.4%
Junior high school	27.9%	24.4%	31.6%	25.3%	34.8%	25.5%	26.4%	25.5%
Senior high school/ vocational high school	29%	29.7%	29.5%	29.3%	26.7%	30.8%	28.4%	31.4%
College and above	30.4%	31.3%	25.5%	31.1%	20.3%	29.7%	33.5%	28.7%
Total	100%							

Table 2 shows that the higher the educational level, the more unfair the perception of the wealth distribution, especially in the very unfair dimension. The same applies to the issue of fairness in the selection of party and government cadres. For education level of college and above, 30% have a perception of very unfair or unfair, and they are the highest among the four education levels. For the evaluation of corruption among government officials, the highest proportion of respondents who think it is very

serious is junior high school graduates, accounting for 31.6%, followed by high school graduates accounting for 29.5%. The proportion of respondents who believe that corruption is less serious is positively correlated with the level of education level, with 31.1% from the education group of college and above. 30.8% of people who believe that the effect of governmental anti-corruption work is more obvious are senior high school graduates while college and above account for 29.7%.

<sup>1</sup> According to the analysis needs, education variables are divided into four levels, they are primary school and below, junior high school, senior high school/ vocational high school, 2-year colleges and above, among which college and above includes 2-year college, 4-year college, and graduate students.

### 4.2 Structural Equation Model of Education, Wealth, and Income Distribution Equity

**Table 3.** Correlation Analysis of Variables in Structural Equation Model

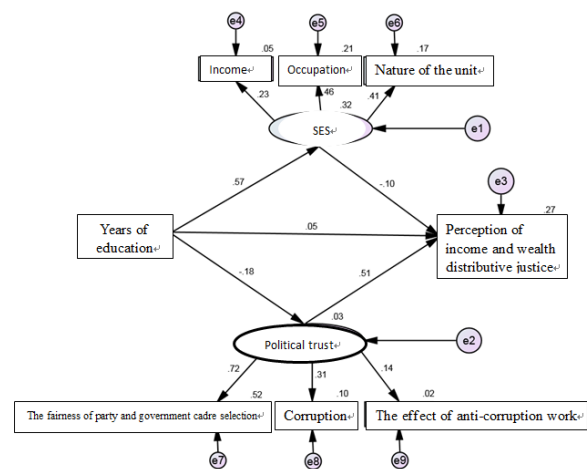
	Years of education	Income	Occupation	Nature of the unit	The fairness of party and government cadre selection	Perception of income and wealth distributive justice	The effect of anti-corruption work
Years of education	1						
Income	.170**	1					
Occupation	.211**	.116**	1				
Nature of the unit	.231**	.031	.252**	1			
The fairness of party and government cadre selection	-.123**	-.085**	-.026	.006	1		
Perception of income and wealth distributive justice	-.099**	-.050*	-.006	-.082**	.373**	1	
The effect of anti-corruption work	.055*	-.008	.000	.026	.105**	.086**	1
Corruption	-.132**	-.052*	-.005	-.024	.225**	.147**	.029

A double correlation analysis on all variables was done before structural model was constructed, which is showed in table 3. The results show that the number of years of education is significantly associated with all variables, except that the anti-corruption effect variable is slightly lower ( $p < 0.05$ ). The rest are all significantly correlated on the  $p < 0.01$  level. For the three variables of socio-economic status, income, occupation, and nature of the unit, all pairs are significantly related at the  $p < 0.01$  level except that the correlation between income and the nature of the work unit is not significant. The correlation between the three variables and the years of education is also significant. It is the same with the situation of political trust variables, except that the linear correlation between corruption and anti-corruption effects is somewhat weak.

**Table 4.** Fitting Index of Structural Equation Model

Fitting Index	X2	df	X2/df	GFI	AGFI	NFI	RFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Value	64.19	17	3.78	0.99	0.98	0.92	0.88	0.94	0.91	0.94	0.038

Table 4 shows that fitting index of the structural equation model is good. Although  $X^2/df$  is only 3.78,  $p < 0.000$ , and did not meet the model requirements, the indexes of GFI, AGFI, NFI, IFI, TLI, and CFI are all above 0.9, and RMSEA is also within the range of 0.3-0.8. Based on the above indexes, it can be concluded that the model has a good degree of goodness of fit and can be used as a structural equation model.



**Figure 1.** Equity Structure Equation Model for Years of Education and Wealth Distribution

Figure 1 illustrates three paths of years of education and fairness of the perception of the distribution of wealth and income. The coefficients shown in the figure are normalized coefficients. The coefficient of regression of the years of education on the fairness of wealth and income distribution is only 0.05. The effect of years of education on socio-economic status is positively correlated, but socio-economic status has a negative influence on the perception of the fairness of the wealth distribution. The number of years of education was negatively correlated with political trust, while political trust was positively correlated with the perception of the fairness of the distribution of wealth.

**Table 5.** Results of the Structural Equation Model Regression

Variables			Non-standardized coefficient	S.E.	C.R.	P
SES	<---	Years of Education	2091.145	344.786	6.065	***
Political trust	<---	Years of Education	-.003	.001	-3.654	***
Income	<---	SES	1.000			
Occupation	<---	SES	.000	.000	5.922	***
Nature of Unit	<---	SES	.000	.000	5.661	***
The effect of anti-corruption work	<---	Political Trust	1.000			
Corruption	<---	Political Trust	1.725	.404	4.267	***
The fairness of party and government cadre selection	<---	Political Trust	5.312	1.208	4.397	***
Perception of income and wealth distributive justice	<---	SES	.000	.000	-1.844	.065
Perception of income and wealth distributive justice	<---	Years of Education	.006	.004	1.333	.183
Perception of income and wealth distributive justice	<---	Political Trust	3.907	.877	4.456	***

The regression results of the structural equation model illustrate that the years of education has a significant determinant effect on socio-economic status and political trust, which are named implicit variables, but the cause and effect relationship between the years of education and the perception of fairness of wealth and income distribution is not demonstrated. Variables of income, occupation, and the nature of the work unit can represent the hidden variables of socioeconomic status. The effects of anti-corruption work, corruption, and selection of party and government cadres also reflect many hidden variables of political trust.

Figure 1 and Table 5 show that the first path of the structural equation model, the effect of years of education on the perception of fairness of the wealth distribution is not verified. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is not supported.

The second path of the structural equation model, the effect of years of education on the perception of fairness of the wealth distribution, is not verified. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is not supported. Educated people can obtain higher socioeconomic status. However, the higher socioeconomic status does not mean that when people evaluate social fairness, they will use their self-interest as the judging criteria to maintain the existing wealth distribution system which is beneficial to themselves. Higher levels of education have enabled people to acquire knowledge and skills and break through the limits of their socio-economic status and be more critical (Whyte, 2009,<sup>[28]</sup> Li & Wu, 2012).<sup>[10]</sup> Thus, hypothesis 2 was not supported.

The third path, the effect of years of education on the perception of fairness in the wealth distribution ( $p < 0.001$ ) affects people's political trust. For each additional year

of education, people's political trust fell by 0.18 units. The trust in politics also influences people's perception of fairness of the wealth distribution. The regression coefficient reached 0.51, which means that the higher the people's level of political trust, the more they agree with the existing system of social wealth distribution. The variable that contributes most to the political trust variable is the fairness of party and government cadre selection, with a regression coefficient of 0.72. This implies that the perception of the fairness of government agent selection procedures for civil servants has a great influence on people's level of political trust. This also implies that if people believe in the fairness of the selection process of cadres, they will believe that the government will create a fair social development order in which every person has the potential to achieve upward social mobility through their own efforts. Under this condition, even if there is a gradually widening gap between the rich and the poor, people regard it as fair (Xie, 2010).<sup>[29]</sup> Thus, hypothesis 3 is verified.

**Table 6.** Analysis of the Ways of Education and the Perception of Fairness of the Wealth Distribution

Independent variable	Causal effect	Path	Significant or not	Path effect value
Education	Direct effect	Education & perception of fairness of the wealth distribution	No	—
Education	Indirect effect	Education & perception of fairness of the wealth distribution	No	—
Education	Indirect effect	Education & perception of fairness of the wealth distribution	Yes	$-0.18 * 0.51 = -0.092$



Table 6 is the summary of the three paths of the structural equation model. The direct impact of education on the perception of fairness of the wealth distribution is not significant. Therefore, the improvement of education level does not improve people's evaluation of perception of fairness of the wealth distribution. The indirect effect of education on the perception of the fairness of the wealth distribution through the intermediary variables of socio-economic status is not supported. Only through the promotion of people's political trust does education have an indirect effect on improving people's perception of the fairness of the wealth distribution, and the path coefficient is  $-0.092$ . That means for each additional year of schooling, the perception of the fairness of the wealth distribution is reduced 0.092 units.

The widening of the gap between the rich and the poor in China and the appearance of the Matthew effect of wealth accumulation have all aroused scholarly interest in the public's perception of the fairness of the wealth distribution. Whether the distribution of wealth is equal is a subjective judgment which plays a decisive role in social stability (Li & Wu, 2012).<sup>[10]</sup> The previous experience of social development has led to the formation of a psychological presupposition that people living in the lower classes are more likely dissatisfied with the existing institution of wealth distribution, while the classes that enjoy the benefits of the existing distribution institution support the existing distribution rules. This survey study has reached the exact opposite conclusion. Even though the gap between the rich and the poor after the reform and opening up has widened and the Gini coefficient exceeds the international warning line, the middle and lower classes do not have much disagreement with the existing distribution institution. The negative evaluation of fairness of the wealth distribution comes largely from people who are well educated and living in abundance.

## 5. Conclusion

Using data from the General Social Survey of Wuhan in 2014, this study designed three paths to analyze the direct and indirect effects of education on perception of distributive justice of income. The indirect effects of education are divided into economic effects and non-economic effects. The economic effects of education are manifested in the mediators of socioeconomic status, while the non-economic effects focus on the impact of education on people's political trust.

The structural equation model shows that people with more education are more likely to achieve higher socioeconomic status, but higher socioeconomic status does not result in a fairer or more unfair perception of the

existing distribution institutions. Therefore, the way in which education influences the perception of fairness of the wealth distribution through the intermediary variables of socio-economic status is not supported. The results of previous studies show that the people's acceptance of the existing distribution institutions is built on their belief that they could move into a higher social class as long as they make the effort. The third route analysis, which examines the role of education in the perception of the fairness of the wealth distribution, with political trust as the intermediary variable, found that the higher the level of education, the lower the level of political trust, and the lower the trust in the fairness of party and government cadre selection. People's trust in party and government cadres, who are government agents, directly affects their perception of the fairness of the wealth distribution.

It is likely that highly educated people have a deeper understanding of the current social situation and find it easier to perceive its shortcomings and defects. Although the returns given by society to highly educated persons enable them to enjoy economic advantages, they are more eloquent in expressing their dissatisfaction with the social order and promoting the process of social justice. In countries where people have high political expectations and reliance, the level of the fairness of party and government cadre selection and political trust influences people's perception of the fairness of the wealth distribution. Because of Chinese cultural traditions, ancient intellectuals are concerned about the destiny of the country and the people, and a good scholar will likely become an official. Therefore, highly-educated intellectuals in modern China have expressed more concern about political fairness and have expected more will be done about it. Only when the procedures for selecting a political party and government officials are perceived as fair, can the government win more political trust. Only when the political institutions are uncorrupted, can people believe working hard will lead to a better future.

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