

Does Housing Inequality Affect Residents' Social Status Perceptions? Evidence from CGSS in China

Erhang Mo^{1,*}, Lijun Wu¹

¹ School of Economics & China-ASEAN Institute of Financial Cooperation, Guangxi University, Nanning 530004, China

* Corresponding Author

Abstract: This paper measures housing inequality from two dimensions: housing quantity and living space. Using CGSS data and an ordered probit model, it empirically examines the causal relationship between housing inequality and residents' subjective social status. The research indicates that housing inequality significantly influences residents' social status perception. The greater the quantity of housing and the larger the living space, the higher the residents' subjective social status. This conclusion remains robust after conducting sensitivity tests. Mechanistic analyses show that the wealth effect is the transmission pathway through which housing inequality affects individuals' social status perceptions. Heterogeneity analyses showed that housing inequality significantly exacerbated social stratification, which was particularly evident in age. Further analysis reveals that housing assets not only have significant impacts on the present but also serve as a key factor in enhancing intergenerational mobility in the future. This study explains the drivers of residents' social status perceptions from the perspective of housing inequality, and provides empirical evidence and policy insights for China to improve the long-term mechanism of real estate, and to prevent the risk of social status perceptions divergence due to housing allocation.

Keywords: CGSS, housing inequality, social status perceptions.

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening up, with the acceleration of China's economic system change and social transformation, social inequalities represented by social rich-poor and stratification have gradually emerged. Especially after the housing market reform in 1998, China completed the transition from a welfare-based housing allocation system to a market-oriented housing system, leading to the increasing influence of housing assets in the social stratification order. This transformation has to some extent facilitated social mobility and reshaping of social class structure.

Housing, as a special commodity, embodies both social and economic attributes. In terms of its social attributes, it provides individuals with spaces for living and productive activities, enhancing residents' sense of security, happiness, and accomplishment. Additionally, it materially and spiritually influences subjective perceptions of social strata among community members. In its economic aspect, it serves as a representation of social resource allocation, reflecting differences among society members in areas such as power, economy, culture, etc., and embodies the social status and identity of various individuals and groups. Over the past few decades, with the prosperity of the economy and the significant development of infrastructure, the housing conditions of Chinese residents have improved noticeably. However, not every family has benefited from the housing reform. Especially with the rapid rise in housing prices in Chinese cities, housing has transcended its physical significance in China, becoming a symbol of personal wealth and social status [1]. From the above perspective, housing inequality indirectly reflects disparities in housing wealth and economic status, thereby influencing residents' social standing perceptions.

The issue of housing inequality is crucial to people's well-being and social development. At the 20th National Congress, the Party proposed to accelerate the establishment of a

housing system characterized by diverse suppliers, multiple channels for security, and a combination of renting and ownership, aiming to ensure that all citizens have access to adequate housing. Therefore, studying the impact and mechanisms of housing inequality on residents' social status holds significant practical significance in this context.

The marginal contribution of this article manifests in three aspects: Firstly, by combining the three periods of CGSS microdata, we delve into the causal relationship between housing inequality and residents' social status perception in the context of China, thus enriching the relevant research on housing inequality and social status perception. Secondly, we reveal that the wealth effect serves as a potential channel through which housing inequality influences residents' perception of social status, and we predict that housing assets will gradually become a driving mechanism for stratifying Chinese society. Thirdly, the research findings of this article hold certain reference value for enhancing the long-term mechanisms of the Chinese real estate market, improving the housing market system in our country, and mitigating the risk of differentiation in residents' perception of social status.

2. Literature Review

The research closely related to the theme of this article mainly unfolds from three aspects: housing inequality, social status perception, and how housing inequality affects social status perception.

Generally speaking, housing inequality refers to the distribution of various levels of housing attributes, such as property rights, quantity, and size, among members of society. Tan et al. (2015) argue that the causes of housing inequality in China are closely related to three factors: socialist legacy issues, market logic, and the imbalance between supply and demand for affordable housing [2]. As this explanation has gained widespread acceptance among scholars, many studies have analyzed the impact of these three factors on housing

inequality from two main perspectives. On the one hand, housing inequality is explained on the basis of housing disparities that have arisen in the course of historical and institutional arrangements. It has been shown that market transformation and housing reforms accelerate the evolution of housing inequality [3]. On the other hand, housing inequality is attributed to different characteristics among groups. Family features such as political identity, educational level, family support, and demographic characteristics like age, gender, occupational status, and income situation serve as factors influencing housing inequality [4].

Social status cognition is determined by individuals or groups based on a universally recognized social evaluation, thereby establishing the subjective positioning of individuals in society [5]. Its formation is not only influenced at the macro level by economic, political, social development, and living standards but also closely related to micro-level factors such as political identity, educational level, and subjective well-being [6]. Additionally, Chen et al. (2019) found that after the housing market reform in China, the factors influencing individual social status shifted from early education and income to housing assets [7].

Housing is the ultimate market of class differentiation. Since Rex and Moore proposed the "House Class" theory in 1967, housing has gradually become a crucial indicator for classifying society within nations. Existing research treats housing inequality as a mechanism and dimension for explaining social stratification, arguing that housing stratification is a visual reflection of the unequal distribution of social resources and social differentiation. This has concentrated on the United States and Western European countries [8]. In studies on housing inequality and social status cognition in China, Chen et al. (2019) empirically found, using data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), that the presence of housing enhances the perceived social status of residents in developed regions [7]. Wang et al. (2020), utilizing data from the China Labor Dynamics Survey (CLDS), discovered that housing differentiation measured by housing conditions, housing wealth, and neighborhood environment can to some extent enhance homeowners' class identification [9]. Similarly using CLDS data, Pan et al. (2023) noted that homeowners are happier than those who are floating without stable housing, and the quantity of housing can alleviate the pain caused by rising house prices for residents [10].

Through literature review, existing research has provided rich insights into the analysis of housing inequality and social status cognition, offering valuable references for the selection of research methods and the development of research ideas in this study. However, existing research still has the following shortcomings: First, current studies have not fully considered the influence of housing attributes such as the quantity of housing and living space on social status cognition. Second, there is still a lack of explanatory power regarding how housing inequality affects the mechanisms of social status cognition. Third, whether housing assets will become a driving force for future social inequality remains to be further verified. Based on this, this paper utilizes data from the China General Social Survey (CGSS), taking the quantity of housing and residential living space as measures of housing inequality, to examine the impact of housing inequality on residents' social status cognition.

3. Research Hypothesis

The social status-seeking theory posits that individuals and families have motivations to pursue higher social status [11]. Social status is typically considered a component of utility functions in the field of economics, where the abundance of resources contributes to increased utility and enhances social status cognition [12]. In China, people buy houses not only as an important part of the family's assets but also to enjoy the allocation of resources for public services. This is because of the "different rights for renting and purchasing" that have long existed in Chinese cities, linking social resources such as education, healthcare and social security to housing ownership. It is difficult for the homeless to qualify for urban citizenship and have limited access to public service resources, and they also have to bear the pain of rising house prices driving up rents. The more housing a family owns, the more members of society tend to believe that they have enough social resources, and thus subjectively tend to have a higher social status. This allocation of housing as a resource undoubtedly has a significant impact on residents' perception of social status. Therefore, this article proposes Hypothesis 1:

Hypothesis 1: Compared to those without housing, homeowners have a higher perceived social status, and the perceived social status of multiple homeowners is higher than that of single homeowners.

Residential area, as a key indicator reflecting basic housing conditions and housing quality, is commonly used in studies of housing inequality [2]. With the increasing living standards of the people and the mature development of the real estate market, residents, within their economic capabilities, tend to choose better living conditions and larger residences. The elite class, possessing political power and more social resources, also has the capability and inclination to acquire larger housing. In reality, owning spacious and comfortable housing not only provides families with greater comfort but also generates a sense of superiority in the comparative context of "conspicuous consumption." This is also one of the important reasons why the average residential area of Chinese families has been continuously expanding in recent years [13]. Therefore, this article proposes Hypothesis 2:

Hypothesis 2: The larger the residential area, the higher the residents' perceived social status.

4. Data Sources and Indicator Selection

4.1. Data Sources

This paper uses data from the China General Social Survey (CGSS) in 2013, 2015 and 2017 to examine the relationship between housing inequality and residents' social status. The CGSS database system collects information about respondents' social status, housing status and household situation, and provides other socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, with a wide range of surveys and a more representative sample, which is a better reflection of China's social situation.

4.2. Indicator Selection

4.2.1. Dependent Variable—Class

Social status perception is an ordinal variable with values ranging from 1 to 10, with larger values indicating a higher level of society. It is measured by the question "On balance, where do you stand in society today?".

4.2.2. Independent Variable—Houseproperty & Lnarea

In this paper, housing inequality is measured by the number of properties, "how many properties are in your household", and by the size of the house, "the size of the house you are living in now". To facilitate the quantification, we control the range of values of the number of houses between 0 and 2 and design it into three categories: renters, homeowners and multi-homeowners. At the same time, we take into account the large variation in housing size and its right-skewed distribution, and treat it logarithmically.

4.2.3. Control Variables

Based on previous studies in the literature, age, age squared, whether female, whether Han Chinese, education (set illiteracy as 1, primary schools as 2, junior high school level as 3, high school and its equivalent as 4, college diploma as 5, and bachelor's degree level or above as 6), logarithm of

income, whether one is a member of the Communist Party (CPM), whether having a spouse (Marry), health status (Health, unhealthy as 1, average health as 2, relative health as 3, and very healthy as 4), whether one has a car (Car), and whether one is working (Emp) as controlling for individual-level variables, with mother's education level (Edu_mother, set the same as personal education), parents' political identity (FCPM and MCPM) and whether the father works in the government sector (Funit) as variables to measure family characteristics. In addition to this, this paper also includes social-level variables of perceived social fairness (Fairness, 1 for unfairness, 2 for neutrality, and 3 for fairness), frequency of social interactions (Social), and whether or not one participates in voting (Vote). The study retains samples from urban families. After excluding missing values and outliers, a total of 14,624 valid samples were obtained. Descriptive statistics for each variable are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Class	14624	4.450	1.620	1	10
Houseproperty	14624	1.070	0.510	0	2
Lnarea	14624	4.380	0.610	1.610	7.530
Car	14624	0.270	0.450	0	1
Female	14624	0.520	0.500	0	1
Han	14624	0.950	0.220	0	1
Age	14624	48.61	16.62	17	103
Edu	14624	3.660	1.440	1	6
Emp	14624	0.560	0.500	0	1
CPM	14624	0.150	0.360	0	1
Lninc	14624	9.040	3.450	0	13.82
FCPM	14624	0.160	0.360	0	1
MCPM	14624	0.0300	0.180	0	1
Funit	14624	0.150	0.350	0	1
Edu_mother	14624	1.900	1.130	1	6
Fairness	14624	2.080	0.880	1	3
Health	14624	2.760	0.960	1	4
Social	14624	1.780	0.790	1	3
Vote	14624	0.380	0.490	0	1
Marry	14624	0.760	0.430	0	1
Finance	14624	0.150	0.350	0	1
F_size	14624	2.830	1.410	1	50
Poss_Class	14624	0.540	0.500	0	1
Pre Class	14624	0.520	0.500	0	1

5. Econometric model and empirical analysis

5.1. Model Setting

In order to examine the impact of housing inequality on residents' social status perceptions, this paper develops the following econometric model:

$$Class_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Houseinequality_i + \alpha_2 Controls_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Where $Class_i$ is the subjective social status of an individual, $Houseinequality_i$ represents a measure of housing inequality, $Controls_i$ is a series of control variables including individual, household, and social characteristics, and ε_i is a random error term. Since social status Class is an ordered variable taking values of 1-10 and basically following a normal distribution. Therefore, this paper uses ordered

probit to estimate the effect of housing inequality on residents' social status.

5.2. Benchmark Regression Results

Table 2 reports the results of housing inequality on the subjective social status of residents. The results show that the greater the number of dwellings, the higher the residents' evaluation of their social status compared to renters, thus testing hypothesis 1. The quantity of housing may affect residents' perceived social status in two ways. One is that housing can determine the allocation of residents' access to other scarce resources, such as education, health care, social security and other public services. The more rights residents have to enjoy public resources, the higher their perception of their social status. Another is that housing also has the effect of value preservation and appreciation. Especially in the context of rising house prices, the more housing a family owns, the more the family's wealth accumulates, and the

higher the subjective sense of well-being that residents obtain from material and spiritual. Of course, the more spacious the living area, the higher the residents' perceived social status. The probable reason for this is that the increase in housing

size gives residents a sense of comfort and achievement, leading to more positive emotions from their surroundings and space, thus validating Hypothesis 2.

Table 2. The results of housing inequality on individual social status perception

Variable	(1) Class	(2) Class	(3) Class
1.House_property	0.193*** (0.031)		0.148*** (0.031)
2.House_property	0.404*** (0.037)		0.354*** (0.038)
Lnarea		0.172*** (0.016)	0.154*** (0.017)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Distric effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year effect	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	14624	14624	14624
r2 p	0.0497	0.0493	0.0513

Robust standard errors in parentheses,*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

5.3. Robustness Check

To verify the robustness of the results, we perform a series of variable transformations. First, we substituted the number of dwellings in the form of property rights (setting the property rights of dwellings owned by oneself, one's spouse and one's children to 1 and the rest to 0). Second, we replace

housing size with housing size per capita, again with a logarithmic treatment (LnPerarea). Finally, we social status perceptions are transformed on a scale of 1-6 (RClass). The estimation results, as shown in Table 3, show that, after controlling for other variables, the holding of housing title and the degree of living space per capita in housing positively affects residents' social status perceptions.

Table 3. Robustness testing

Variable	(1) Class	(2) Class	(3) RClass	(4) RClass	(5) RClass
Chan	0.150*** (0.021)			0.159*** (0.026)	
LnPerarea		0.113*** (0.014)			0.125*** (0.017)
1.House_property			0.187*** (0.037)		
2.House_property			0.401*** (0.044)		
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Distric effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	14624	14624	10160	10160	10160
r2 p	0.0481	0.0484	0.0580	0.0565	0.0570

Robust standard errors in parentheses,*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

5.4. Heterogeneity Analysis

In the Chinese context, men and women have different ideas about housing. For men, owning a home is a reflection of economic strength and a basic requirement for the pursuit of love and the formation of a marital family. For a woman, owning a house implies that she has higher economic strength and social status. In addition, different age groups also limit homeownership due to constraints such as money and desire. Therefore, this paper analyses the impact of housing inequality on residents' perceived social status from the perspectives of gender, relationship status and age.

We first group the full sample by gender and then further split it into household subsamples (husband and wife) to examine the effect of housing inequality on social status perceptions. Table 4 reports regressions on the grouping of housing inequality on social status perceptions by gender and relationship status. The results show that although men and women have different housing preferences, improvements in the quality and condition of housing help to set off their status in society. In addition, a house is the "love nest" in which a husband and wife live together. The quality of housing properties indirectly reflects the quality and happiness of their lives.

Table 4: Heterogeneity analysis of gender and relationship status

Variable	(1) male	(2) female	(3) Husband	(4) Wife
1.House_property	0.173*** (0.046)	0.132*** (0.043)	0.215*** (0.054)	0.163*** (0.052)
2.House_property	0.359*** (0.055)	0.358*** (0.052)	0.400*** (0.064)	0.402*** (0.062)
Lnarea	0.150*** (0.024)	0.160*** (0.024)	0.121*** (0.027)	0.166*** (0.028)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Distric effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	7044	7580	5442	5721
r2 p	0.0552	0.0509	0.0599	0.0525

Robust standard errors in parentheses,*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Secondly, this paper refers to Li and Feng (2021) who divided the sample into four subintervals of 17-30 years old, 31-44 years old, 45-64 years old and 65+ years old for group regression by age level [14]. Table 5 reports the results of the heterogeneous analyses of housing inequality on residents' social status perceptions across age groups. The study shows that the young and middle-aged groups have a greater claim to a house than the older groups compared to renters. For

young people, having a flat in town is a prerequisite for starting a family, getting married and having children. For the middle-aged group, owning a townhouse is their livelihood security in the process of facing the pressure of unemployment, and raising parents and children. And a larger home significantly improves the perceived social status of all age groups.

Table 5. Heterogeneity analysis by age group

Variable	(1) young	(2) midy	(3) mid	(4) old
1.House_property	0.111* (0.065)	0.184*** (0.062)	0.218*** (0.058)	0.067 (0.072)
2.House_property	0.210*** (0.080)	0.441*** (0.074)	0.428*** (0.067)	0.309*** (0.094)
Lnarea	0.149*** (0.040)	0.189*** (0.034)	0.116*** (0.027)	0.206*** (0.039)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Distric effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	2477	3777	5563	2807
r2 p	0.0400	0.0628	0.0618	0.0438

Robust standard errors in parentheses,*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

5.5. Mechanical Check

When resources are unevenly distributed, individuals and groups that do not own such resources are prone to a sense of relative deprivation, i.e., a subjective negative emotion. Housing, as an unevenly distributed resource in society, as the property market prospers and matures, the wealth effect in the form of rising house prices significantly enhances the sense of well-being of homeowners, which in turn raises the subjective social status of residents. The homeless are more likely to experience "relative deprivation" than the homeowners. So, does this mean that wealth effects are the mechanism by which housing inequality affects individuals'

perceptions of social status? This awaits further research. Due to the limited number of variables in the CGSS database, this paper refers to Pan et al. (2023), and adopts "What is the economic status of your family in the locality" as a proxy for the wealth effect, so as to examine the mediating mechanism through which housing inequality affects individuals' social status [10]. By referring to the mediation effect model proposed by Wen et al. (2014) [15], we estimated Bootstrap for bootstrap sampling 1000 times for the number of housing units and living space, respectively, and the results are shown in Table 6. None of the 95% confidence intervals constituting ab in Table 6 contains 0, indicating that the mediation effect is significant.

Table 6. Bootstrap test for mediation effect

Med variable	Estimation effect	Estimation value	Bias	Confidence interval[95%]
Med(F_eco)	Indirect effect	0.161***	0.010	[0.141,0.181]
Iv(Houseproperty)	direct effect	0.135***	0.024	[0.088,0.181]
Med(F_eco)	Indirect effect	0.145***	0.009	[0.127,0.164]
Iv(Lnarea)	direct effect	0.101***	0.022	[0.057,0.145]

Then, regression estimation is carried out based on the mediation test. The results in Table 7 show that after the inclusion of the proxy variable for the wealth effect, the number of housing units and living spaces remains significant

for individual social status perceptions, but their coefficients decline. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the wealth effect is a mediating channel of influence between housing inequality and residents' social status perceptions.

Table 7. Estimated results of intermediation effects

Variable	(1) Class	(2) F_eco	(3) Class
F_eco			0.658*** (0.016)
1.House_property	0.148*** (0.031)	0.256*** (0.034)	0.067** (0.031)
2.House_property	0.354*** (0.038)	0.573*** (0.042)	0.173*** (0.038)
Lnarea	0.154*** (0.017)	0.261*** (0.019)	0.070*** (0.017)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Distric effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year effect	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	14624	14558	14558
r2_p	0.0513	0.111	0.0914

Robust standard errors in parentheses,*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

5.6. Further analysis

In order to further verify whether the housing attribute will be a path for upward mobility of

residents, this paper defines the social status after ten years (Pree_Class) and the social status before ten years (Poss_Class) by the questions "What level do you think you will be in ten years" and "What level do you think you will be in ten years ago" respectively. They are also compared with the current social status (Class) to detect class mobility. Set to 1 when Pree_Class is higher than Class, and 0 otherwise. Set to 1 when Poss_Class is less than or equal to Class, and 0 otherwise. Table 8 reports the relevant results of housing inequality on class mobility.

The results show that it was only ten years ago that the social stratification structure was reshaped by those who had

more housing than those who did not. Owning a flat and the size of housing alone does not enhance their social mobility. This may be because ten years ago (1993-1997), China did not reform the housing market on a commercial basis, and most people received welfare housing, with only the political elite having access to more housing. Under the circumstances, housing embodied more of a residential function. With the reform of China's economic system and the improvement of people's living standards, people show their desire for a quality life and realize the value and importance of housing, so that both the size and quantity of housing can enhance the social status of individuals in the future. Therefore, this paper predicts that housing assets may become one of the most important avenues for upward mobility for residents in the future.

Table 8. Impact of housing inequality on class mobility

Variable	(1) Poss Class	(2) Pree Class
1.House_property	0.046 (0.039)	0.197*** (0.037)
2.House_property	0.116** (0.047)	0.206*** (0.045)
Lnarea	-0.032 (0.021)	0.051** (0.020)
Controls	Yes	Yes
Distric effects	Yes	Yes
Year effect	Yes	Yes
N	14624	14624
r2_p	0.128	0.0506

Robust standard errors in parentheses,*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

6. Conclusions and policy recommendations

The housing problem is related to people's well-being and social development. In this paper, we constructed housing inequality indicators from the number of housing units and

housing areas using CGSS data and the ordered-probit model, to verify whether housing inequality affects individual social status perceptions. We find that housing inequality significantly affects residents' social status perceptions. Improvements in housing quantity and residents' conditions promote individual social status perceptions. This result

remains consistent even after a series of robustness tests. Then, housing inequality affects residents' social status perceptions through wealth effects. In addition, the effect of housing inequality on social status perceptions is significantly heterogeneous across different age groups. Finally, we find that housing attributes are one of the most important pathways for upward mobility of residents and may still have a significant impact on social class mobility in the future.

Based on the above conclusions, we make the following recommendations: The Government should attach great importance to the impact of housing inequality on residents' perception of their social status, and accelerate the reform of the housing system. On the one hand, it should increase the construction of guaranteed housing and increase housing support for low- and middle-income groups. On the other hand, the development of the rental market should be accelerated, and more attention and implementation should be paid to the equal rights of renters and purchasers while implementing the equal rights of renters and purchasers, so as to ensure that the tenant groups can enjoy the right to urban public resources on an equal footing. Furthermore, it is necessary to adhere to the position that houses are for housing rather than for speculation, not to argue about heroes and status based on houses, to resolutely curb real estate speculation, to regulate the imbalance in the distribution of housing, and to guard against and resolve the risk of cognitive differentiation of social status brought about by the inequality in the distribution of housing.

Acknowledgment

National Social Sciences Foundation of China (Award Number: 20BJL091).

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