

Figure I.1 shows that references to inequality are not themselves new. Indeed, from the 1940s to 1960, they easily surpassed the other terms, none of which generated much interest at all. This all changed around 1960. This was the period in which “modernization” and “development,” driven by the United States and burgeoning international development bodies (such as the World Bank and the International Development Fund), was promoted as the panacea for ills of all kinds. This was the same period when the social sciences were refocused on concerns promoting growth (see, for example, Wallerstein 2000). “Economic growth” accordingly came to eclipse “inequality” in usage.

But this has changed in recent years. “Economic growth” plateaued in its significance by the 1980s and subsequently dropped off. From the 1970s, “racism” and “sexism” also became much more prominent, especially the former term, which by the later 1990s had overtaken both “inequality” and “economic growth” in its currency. From the mid-1980s, “climate change” also began its steady march to prominence. In recent years, “inequality” had resumed its appeal—and at a much higher proportional level than fifty years ago. It has become increasingly prominent at a time when racism, climate change, and (to a lesser extent) sexism have also become more marked concerns. A set of gloomy, indeed scary terms have come to the fore at the same time that economic growth has become a less dominant theme.

But the situation differs around the globe. The world’s most common language, Chinese, reveals a different picture. After a brief time in the late 1960s, when inequality was much discussed, interest in it fell considerably, and concerns with economic growth were paramount. Racism and sexism hardly figure anywhere in Chinese-language discourse. Even climate change operates in a very subdued way. This is ostensibly a much more positive outlook focused on the value of economic growth—which has indeed been such a marked feature of the Chinese experience in recent decades.

Inequality and economic growth operate as mirrors of each other: where the latter dominates, the former is subdued, and vice versa. The Chinese concentration on economic growth has been at the expense of the sensitivity to inequality, which has proliferated in anglophone sources. If we compare the situation in the Spanish language, the second-most popular language in the world, we find something of a hybrid between the English and Chinese situations. Inequality did not figure as an issue at all until the 1970s, but since that time, it has dramatically increased in significance (with a dip in the early 1980s). In this respect, the theme of inequality is clearly shared with the an-