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# CHINESE SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

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**Key Words** China class, inequality, mobility

■ **Abstract** This essay reviews post-1980 research on class stratification, socioeconomic inequalities, and social mobility in the People's Republic of China. Chinese class stratification has transformed from a rigid status hierarchy under Mao to an open, evolving class system in the post-Mao period. Socioeconomic inequalities have also been altered. State redistributive inequalities are giving way to patterns increasingly generated by how individuals and groups succeed in a growing market-oriented economy; rigorous empirical studies have been conducted on occupational prestige, income distribution, housing and consumption, and gender inequality. Finally, occupational mobility, a rare opportunity under Mao, is becoming a living experience for many Chinese in light of emerging labor markets. Scholarly works on status attainment, career mobility, and employment processes show both stability and change in the once politicized social mobility regime. There is relatively richer research output on urban than on rural China, despite the greater and more profound transformations that occurred in rural China.

## INTRODUCTION

Chinese social stratification and social mobility is a fast growing and exciting area of sociological research. It is fast growing because China's post-1978 economic reforms and consequent large-scale transformations have provided an unusual, long-lasting opportunity for sociologists who are inherently interested in social change and social differentiation. To prepare this review I built a bibliography of more than 300 relevant English-language publications since 1980, and a greater collection of Chinese-language research literature. This research area is also immensely exciting to scholars, not only because it progressively accumulates sociological knowledge about a highly dynamic country increasingly engaged in the global economy (Solinger 2001), but also because researchers have examined questions of fundamental interest to both China specialists and comparative/general sociologists.

This excitement can be felt in an impressive accumulation of major journal publications on China since 1988,<sup>1</sup> in a growing number of active sociologists who have conducted original research in the country,<sup>2</sup> and in two most recent and highly relevant review essays in this journal. One essay was about China's social change and included a review of research on social stratification and social mobility up to the mid-1980s (Walder 1989a). The second review focused more on evaluating theoretical developments and research findings for an ongoing "market transition debate" (Nee & Matthews 1996), for which China has been a focal point of observation. Anticipating that future researchers and classroom instructors would use the present essay either alone or with the previous ones, I defined my tasks as synthesizing post-1980 research achievements in three interrelated areas of China's (a) class stratification, (b) socioeconomic inequalities, and (c) social mobility. The main body of research literature under review is English-language publications by sociologists and other social scientists; I also included a few of the more interesting Chinese-language publications.

## CLASS STRATIFICATION

### Overall Trend

China underwent extensive change in the wake of the death of Chairman Mao in 1976. Under Mao, a rigid status hierarchy grew out of a state socialist economy in which private ownership of productive assets was gradually eliminated between 1952 and 1958 by collectivization of farming and state consolidation of urban economy, diminishing pre-revolution social classes in a Communist regime (Whyte 1975, Kraus 1981). Ironically, the post-1978 regime under the new paramount leader Deng Xiaoping began what now is known to be a remarkable reform policy that has decollectivized and commodified both rural and urban economies, eroding the institutional bases of the pre-reform status hierarchy. Since then, an open, evolving class system has been in the making (Davis 1995).

### The Pre-Reform Status Hierarchy

Four structural and behavioral dimensions classified the Chinese into qualitatively different status groups under Mao: (a) a rural-urban divide in residential status, (b) a state-collective dualism in economic structure, (c) a cadre-worker dichotomy

<sup>1</sup>My library search indicates that *ASR*, *AJS*, and *Social Forces* published 19 articles on China from 1949 to 1987 and 45 articles and commentaries in the most recent 14 years since 1988.

<sup>2</sup>In addition to China specialists, well-known sociologists, but not otherwise known as having expertise on China, include Peter Blau, Craig Calhoun, Randall Collins, Glen Elder, Barbara Entwisle, Alex Inkeles, John R. Logan, Phyllis Moen, Ivan Szelenyi, Donald Treiman, and Nancy Tuma. Many more researchers are currently engaged in China-related research projects.

in occupational classification, and (d) a “revolution-antirevolution” split in political characterization.

Key to the rural-urban divide was a rigid household registration institution, or *hukou*, that restricted all Chinese to their place of birth for their lifetime (Cheng & Selden 1994, Solinger 1999). Bound to collective farming, peasants were completely cut off from many urban privileges—compulsory education, quality schools, health care, public housing, varieties of foodstuffs, to name only a few—and they largely lived in poverty (Parish 1975, Parish & Whyte 1978, Unger 1984, Chan et al. 1992). Only a tiny fraction of the rural-born had the chance to move up to cities or towns through military mobilization, marriage, or attainment of higher education and subsequent job assignments (Kirkby 1985:114). Organized transfers, or “sent-down” campaigns, of city-born youths to rural areas between 1958 and 1977 (more so after 1966) caused severe anxieties to the affected households (Bernstein 1977). Such an experience had lasting impact on the life trajectories of these youths even after they returned to the cities (Zhou & Hou 1999).

The state-collective dualism characterized Chinese economic structure, but in addition it created a status distinction between privileged state workers and their deprived collective counterparts—its Western analogy is labor market dualism in capitalist economies (Hodson & Kaufman 1982). While all peasants were confined to the rural collective sector, a working urbanite was assigned a state- or a collective-sector job. State workers, accounting for 78% of the urban labor force by 1978 (SSB 1989:101), were provided with “iron rice bowls” of lifelong employment and an impressive array of insurance and welfare benefits, unavailable to collective workers (Walder 1986:44–45). This contrast was devastating because under the “work-unit (or *danwei*) ownership of labor” (Davis 1990), only half the workers could change jobs in lifetime (Walder 1992:526) or 1%–2% per year (Davis 1992a), and 85% of inter-firm mobility was within economic sectors (Bian 1994:116). Such a regime of labor-control reinforced state-collective segmentation (Lin & Bian 1991) and gave rise to the unique Chinese phenomena of “organized dependence” (Walder 1986), “work-unit status” (Bian 1994), and “*danwei* society” (Butterfield 1982, Lü & Perry 1997).

While “cadre” and “worker” were crude job categories in the official coding system, they were considered two status groups as well. State cadre (*guojia ganbu*) referred to a minority group—around 5% of the total workforce or 20% of the urban labor force—of those individuals who occupied prestigious managerial and professional jobs. These individuals were provided with above-average compensation packages (Walder 1995) and were kept in reserve for training and promotion into leadership positions (about 2%) in party and government offices (Zhou 2001). In doing so, Mao’s managers and professionals became fundamentally dependent on the Communist party-state (Davis 2000a). In contrast, those classified as workers (*gong ren*) most likely stayed in the group throughout their lifetime; a worker’s promotion into a cadre position was very rare (Bian 1994:140–41). In the countryside, salaried government employees were recognized as state cadres, and village cadres, although unsalaried, were screened by the Communist party and exercised

political and managerial authority over ordinary peasants (Oi 1989, Chan et al. 1992).

Finally, all individuals and households were politically evaluated into revolutionary ("red") or antirevolutionary ("black") "classes" (Unger 1982). Reds were the forces of Leninist party dictatorship, while blacks were the party-made "class enemies" (*jie ji di ren*) of the regime. But these were not fixed categories. Primarily, the deciding criterion was a person's family class origin before the land reform of 1948 to 1950; a property-less class origin made a person intrinsically red, and a property-class origin put a person in one of the few black categories (Whyte & Parish 1984). In addition, and more important, a person's political performance (*biaoxian*) in numerous party-led campaigns and activities could reverse a given class label, and that person could consequently receive different political treatment (Walder 1986). Each party-led campaign wave was the new moment of political re-labeling, recharacterization, and regrouping; many had to be reconfirmed for their "redness" or "blackness" through political engagement, but new class enemies would surely be in the making for the time (Kraus 1981). This political-labeling culture reached its highest intensity during the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976), the eve of a new era of depoliticization and development-oriented reforms to modernize China.

## Emerging Social Classes in Rural China

Post-Mao reforms started in rural areas by peasants themselves in 1978 (Wang & Zhou 1994). A household responsibility system, which recognizes a rural household as the basic unit of production, distribution, and consumption, took property rights from People's Communes back to individual families (Oi 1989, Nee 1991, Chan et al. 1992). By 1983, collective farming became history (Lu 2001). As autonomous producers, peasant households had residual income rights over their crops, as well as the rights to specialize in farming or to free themselves from land to work locally or elsewhere for higher income from a nonagricultural job (Nee 1989, Unger 1994). Both of these opportunities increased tremendously through the 1980s and especially after 1992 (Parish et al. 1995). For instance, migrant peasant labor flooded towns and cities (Ma 2001). By 1995, an estimated 80 million peasant laborers worked and lived in the cities (Lu 2001:20). The once homogeneous "peasant class" (Parish 1975, Chan et al. 1992) differentiated in many ways.

A focused attention has been given to the faith of rural cadres. Nee & Lian (1994) were the first to argue that cadres, rural and urban, would gradually give up their political commitments to the Communist party while turning attention to market opportunities. Their opportunism model was a serious and constructive effort to formalize a theory about the declining political commitment in reforming state socialism. Fieldwork in Chen Village (Chan et al. 1992), Daqiu Zhuang Village (Lin 1995, Lin & Chen 1999), and Zuoping County (Cook 1998), for instance, indicate that during the reforms rural cadres gained control and income rights over collective industry, exerted influence for salaried positions for family

members in village enterprises, capitalized on information and influence networks with private entrepreneurs, and even started “insider privatization” to strip off collective assets (Nee & Su 1998). Other studies concentrated on developmental and distributive issues (Parish 1985, Nee 1989, 1991, Knight & Song 1993, Rozelle 1994, Lyons 1997, Oi 2000, Kung & Lee 2001). Synthesizing these and other published findings, So (2001:6) argues that decentralization split Mao’s peasant stratum into a rich peasant class and a poor peasant class and that the rich peasant class “capitalizes on the abundant supply of surplus laborers in the countryside.” Class conflicts arise, observes So, in the form of numerous protests from poor peasants complaining about high and irregular taxes, state-imposed low prices of their agricultural products, and encroachment on their land and houses, among other problems.

For two decades, sociologists inside China have worked as a team to study emerging rural classes. A thematic statement of the result of this teamwork can be found in Lu (1989, 2001). Not restricted by any specific theory, Lu’s view mixes neo-Marxist concepts of ownership and control, Weberian concept of authority, and Bourdieu’s concept of expertise in defining eight emerging rural classes. These classes and estimated percentages in the registered rural population as of 1999 are (a) rural cadres are political elites who control, one way or another, collective economy at all levels, 7%; (b) private entrepreneurs are the new capitalist class, less than 1%; (c) managers of township and village enterprises are the rising managerial class, 1.5%; (d) household business owners and individual industrialists and commercialists are the petty bourgeoisie, 6% to 7%; (e) professionals are the new middle class, 2.5%; (f) employees in collective industry and migrant peasant-workers in cities are “peasant laborers” (*nong min gong*) whose household registration in home villages makes them “floating population,” 16% to 18%; (g) wage labor in local private sector is considered the “new working class,” 16% to 17%; and (h) peasants work and live on income from agricultural products, 48% to 50%. Although informative, this classification is sketchy at best; both the defining criteria and the assessments of the distribution of emerging rural classes are subject to the ongoing transformations.

## Urban Social Classes in the Making

Urban reforms were implemented later than rural reforms and have been closely guided and adjusted by the state (Wang 1996). First, the influx of peasant peddlers to cities ignited the rise of household businesses (*getihu*) among otherwise hopeless urbanites (Gold 1990, Shi 1993, Davis 1999). Then there was a move to decentralize state industry and the fiscal system, giving financial incentives to local governments, factory managers, and individual workers (Naughton 1995). However, the redistribution-oriented polity and macro-economic structure were coupled with a paternal factory culture, which presented resistance to reform directives (Walder 1987, 1989b, Shirk 1993). The emergence of labor and capital markets after 1992 finally put the urban economy under a market allocation of

resources, although the new policy of “grasp the big, release the small” created a state monopoly sector containing strategically vital industries and firms and sent the rest of state firms to an “open” sector to compete with nonstate entities (Lin et al. 1998:203–8). Massive layoffs and organized transfers of state-sector workers paralleled the flooding of migrant peasants who work in the informal, expanding labor market in the cities (Solinger 1999). Mao’s protected working class of state-sector workers became differentiated and de-empowered (Whyte 1999), while state officials and managers gained executive control and income rights over state properties and became capitalized (So 2001). Private entrepreneurs rose in the growing market economy but lacked any political interest or autonomy (Pearson 1997). Intellectual class status remained ambiguous (Zhang 2000).

**THE DIFFERENTIATION AND DE-EMPOWERMENT OF THE WORKING CLASS** Mao’s working class was officially and politically recognized as a “leading class” (*ling dao jie ji*). Post-1978 market reforms eroded this status recognition and differentiated the working class into wage labor in the private sector (12 million as of 1998), unprotected labor in the state sector (70 million), layoff labor wandering in search for a job (30 million), and deprived migrant peasant-labor (60 million) (Zhang 2000:30). There were also large numbers of collective-sector labor and retired labor. The de-empowerment of the working class has drawn public attention, and stories about it have appeared in local newspapers. One vivid description is the “3-no world” of private-sector wage labor: no definite working hours, no medical insurance, and no labor contract [*“wu ri ye, wu yi lao, wu shou xu,”* (Lu 1989:418–19)]. While state properties are becoming productive assets for officials’ and managers’ private gains (Lin & Zhang 1999, Lin 2000), the unprotected state labor has begun to feel that they are truly proletarians (*wu chan zhe*). A new urban poverty stratum is emerging from layoff labor and retired labor (Zhang 2000), and labor opposition became a sensitive and serious issue in a changing structure of state and society (Chan 1996).

**THE EMBOURGEOISEMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND MANAGERIAL CADRES** Nee & Lian’s (1994) opportunism model points to an *embourgeoisement* process in which Communist cadres give up political commitments in order to catch opportunities in a growing marketplace. So (2001) argues that the statist society is the trademark of China’s reforms, and only the cadres are in a historically strategic position to develop a capitalist economy. Thus, the first decade of reforms saw the rise of “local state corporatism” (Oi 1992), under which local governments became industrial firms while local officials either make capitalism “from within” (Walder 1994) or create “network capitalism” (Boisot & Child 1996) by taking advantage of their political and social capitals (Goodman 1996). During the second decade of reform, assets and profits of state enterprises were massively diverted into the private hands of cadres through “informal privatization,” organizational proliferation, consortium building, and “one manager, two businesses” (Nee 1992, Nee & Su 1998, Ding 2000a,b, Duckett 2001). The most recent move is a

state-imposed property rights reform, letting administrative and managerial cadres be the shareholders of the transformed state enterprises (Zhang 2000).

**THE PATRONIZATION OF CAPITALIST ENTREPRENEURS** This theme is implied in the image of a statist society with a bourgeois cadre class (So 2001). Patron-client ties with state officials were the hallmark of private entrepreneurs in Xiamen (Wank 1999) and elsewhere (Li 1995). Nationally, registered private entrepreneurs reached more than 2 million in 1997 and hired 12 million workers (SSB 1998:49). These “business elites” are understandably weak politically, having no interest, no autonomy, and no class capacity to work for the cause of a democratic state and politics (Pearson 1997). Despite the conflict between Communist ideology and capitalist ownership, Party Secretary General Jiang Zemin announced in his First of July of 2001 speech a call to recruit party members from all social strata including private entrepreneurs. Patronization may quickly change to a model of political incorporation.

**THE AMBIGUOUS CLASS STATUS OF INTELLECTUALS** “Intellectuals”—professionals, cultural elites, and technocrats—have always had an ambiguous class status throughout post-revolution history (Kraus 1981). Intellectuals lost their slight autonomy in the early 1950s when they were totally organized to work and live within the confines of the party-state (Davis 2000a). Politically, intellectuals were Mao’s “stinky old ninths” (“*chou lao jiu*”), ranking last among all nine “black” categories. They were flattered and cheerful in 1979 when given a “working class” status by Deng Xiaoping, for that status meant that intellectuals finally had become a “revolutionary” class in the reform era (Huang 1993). But this did not matter much; while intellectuals’ educational credentials keep them in a professional elite of high prestige, they still have to pass political screening to gain material incentives and especially political authority (Walder 1995). Huang (1993) sees Chinese intellectuals divided between “in-institution” and “out-institution” groups, depending on whether they work primarily within the state sector or outside it. This institutional boundary implies no anticipation that “out-institution” intellectuals are “autonomous humanists” (*zi you wen hua ren*) who might otherwise work in an independent sphere of civil society.

**THE MIDDLE CLASSES** State factory workers, because of their lifelong employment and a high level of benefits, were seen to be Mao’s “quasi middle class” (Li 2001), and this once politically and economically protected group has become differentiated in the reform era (Whyte 1999). Mao’s middle classes—managers and professionals—were incorporated into the Communist order from the early 1950s onward (Davis 2000a), but in the reform era these two groups, along with private entrepreneurs, appear to have become the central players in the rising market economies in rural and urban China (Qin 1999:29–48). But China’s middle classes today do not yet share a commonly recognized image of their counterparts in an advanced capitalist society—a stable lifestyle, mainstream values, and active

political participation (Wright 1997:23–26). Instead, China's middle classes live on unstable sources of income (Qin 1999:65), have not yet developed a middle-class identity or value system (So 2001), and lack political motivations to fight for the birth of a civil society (Pearson 1997).

## Looking Ahead

Insufficient research attention has been given to emerging social classes in rural and urban China, and existing analyses are hampered by the still evolving nature of social and economic structures in which social classes are in the making. Thus, insightful analysis and reliable assessments are to be called for from future researchers. An important starting step is to get a clear picture about the complex and, oftentimes, ambiguous property rights structures. While information about property structures is essential for any class analysis (Wright 1997), getting it is not easy. Walder & Oi (1999) have suggested a local approach and have sketched a road map about the kinds of work needed. The next step is perhaps to research labor-management-capital relations in the production system. One example is Lee's (1995, 1998, 2000) expanded case studies on gender and women in south China, a work that extends from Burawoy's (1985) analytic framework of socialist working class in Russia and Eastern Europe. These initial steps of original research should lead to theoretical syntheses about how class differentiation results in class conflict, class movements, or class politics in a new era. Such efforts have already begun (Chan 1995, So 2001).

## SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITIES

### Overall Trend

Mao's egalitarianism reduced socioeconomic inequalities (Parish 1981, 1984), making China one of the most equalized among developing countries of the time (Whyte & Parish 1984:44). Existing variations in income and income-in-kind were redistributive in nature: They were explained by rural/urban identity, work unit sector and rank, job category and scale, political power, and age and seniority—a set of variables that measure the main dimensions of a socialist status hierarchy. The introduction of market mechanisms inside work units and the rise of product, labor, and capital markets outside work units both redefined these dimensions and created new sources of inequality in post-Mao period. The system of socioeconomic stratification remains mixed—continuation and change are the parallel stories about an emerging new order. This can be seen in several areas of research: occupational prestige, income distribution, housing and consumption, and gender inequality.

### Occupational Prestige

The term occupational prestige was totally ignored in Maoist class theory in which all occupations were said to be of equal status under state socialism (Kraus 1981). This was, of course, not true. Data from Shanghai showed that despite a strong

ideological influence, high school seniors held strong preferences for nonmanual jobs over manual jobs (Lan & Chang 1982). Working adults, whether in China's capital, Beijing (Lin & Xie 1988), or an industrial city like Tianjin (Bian 1996), had no problem rating job titles into a prestige scale, even when income variation among occupations was small. When income variation grew substantially in the 1990s, a quasi-national sample showed similar scaling results (Zhe & Chen 1995). Overall, variations in constructed prestige scales were attributable more to variation in education than in income, a pattern that was also observed in the more industrialized, more globalized, capitalist Taiwan (Tsai & Chiu 1991).

Constructed prestige scales from these studies provided helpful measurement tools for examining Chinese occupational hierarchies, making it possible for comparative analysis with the United States (Blau & Ruan 1990) and elsewhere. Chinese prestige scales are comparable to those from the United States and to an international scale (Treiman 1977), seemingly confirming theories of modernization and societal convergence (Treiman 1970, Treiman & Yip 1989). These interpretations, however, may have overlooked an important Chinese characteristic: state allocation of resources led to the identification of work units, rather than occupations, as the primary measure of social status (Lin & Bian 1991). Because prestige scales are stable cross-nationally and over time, they are insensitive to the political dimensions of social mobility peculiar to Communism (Walder 1985) and to changes brought about by shifting state policies (Whyte & Parish 1984, Zhou et al. 1996, 1997). In current research, both prestige scales and occupational categories are utilized in empirical studies of Chinese social stratification and social mobility.

## Income Distribution

From 1978 to 2000, the Chinese economy grew from one of the poorest to the seventh largest in the world (World Bank, cited from *New China Monthly* 2001 [4]:141), per capita GDP grew by 5.2 times, and per-capita income had a net increase of 4.7 times for rural residents and 3.6 times for urbanites (SSB 2000:56, 312). Much of this growth was generated in coastal areas, where a reoriented central policy to prioritize developments there retained local savings and attracted inflows of domestic and foreign investments. This resulted in increasing income gaps between coastal and inland regions (Wang & Hu 1999). New riches grew in coastal regions, but poverties persisted in inland areas (Lyons 1997). Overall, income inequality grew considerably (Hauser & Xie 2001).

Scholarly research has been guided by an interest in changing mechanisms of income distribution. This interest is intrinsically sociological, carrying Djilas's (1957) and Szelényi's (1978) questions about the social structure of power and inequality in state socialism to a changing system of social stratification under reforms. Nee (1989, 1991, 1992, 1996) has made a bold statement about the direction of change, and his theory of market transition has spurred a lively and fruitful debate about the social consequences of economic transformation. More elaborate reviews of this debate are available in this journal (Nee & Matthews 1996) and elsewhere (Szelényi & Kostello 1996, Nee & Cao 1999). The main theoretical

differences lie in how to conceptualize the nature and characters of economic transformation. Is the transformation to be found in the shift of resource allocation from state redistribution to market domination that leads to the decline of political power and the rise of human capital and entrepreneurial abilities (Nee 1989)? Or is it a result of dual transformation of economic and political institutions in which both human capital and political power are rewarded (Bian & Logan 1996, Parish & Michelson 1996, Zhou 2000)? Or is it ultimately a process of property rights rearrangements that will have clear implications on income distribution (Walder 1994, 1996, Walder & Oi 1999)?

Accumulated research findings show that income returns for human capital and entrepreneurship increase in rural and urban settings (see reviews by Nee & Cao 1999, Cao & Nee 2000), although these increases are small as compared to those in advanced capitalist societies (Parish & Michelson 1996). Zhou (2000) notes an interpretable difficulty of determining whether or not increasing returns to human capital are uniformly attributable to market forces. In his view, both markets and bureaucracies reward human capital and, empirically, the Chinese government has in actuality made a continuous effort to raise pay for state officials and professionals during market reforms.

More serious controversial results are about returns to political power (Cao & Nee 2000). The concept, however defined, is operationalized in one or all of the following three ways: (a) party membership, (b) cadre position, past and present, and (c) jobs with redistributive power. Limited by feasibility designs and sample sizes, researchers have not been able to partition cadre position into party officials, government bureaucrats, and state enterprise managers; this makes it difficult to test hypotheses about whether “redistributors” gain or lose, relative to “direct producers” or entrepreneurs and professionals, with market reforms. Because old-fashioned redistributors are increasingly irrelevant with time, such a test is becoming practically unimportant. On the whole, income returns for rural and urban cadres decline in the initial years of reform (Nee 1989, Walder 1990). However, in regions of “local state corporatism” (Oi 1992) rural cadres reap income from profitable township and village industry (Peng 1992, Lin 1995, Cook 1998, Lin & Chen 1999), while in the urban sector from the mid-1980s, cadres and party members continue to gain rather than lose (Walder 1992, Bian & Logan 1996, Zhou 2000). This persistent effect of power, along with increasing returns to education, is also the case among Chinese elderly (Raymo & Xie 2000). These results are largely reconfirmed with analyses of two national sampling surveys—Chinese Household Income Project in 1988 and 1995 (Griffin & Zhao 1992, Khan et al. 1992, Zhao 1993, Khan & Riskin 1998, Parish & Michelson 1996, Xie & Hannum 1996, Tang & Parish 2000, Hauser & Xie 2001).

## Housing and Consumption

Rural housing and consumption have not been given much scholarly attention. Urban housing, however, has been both a serious problem and a focal point of

observation about “socialist inequalities” (Szélenyi 1983). Although basic low-rent housing (1% to 2% of household income) was available to virtually all urbanites under Mao, public housing, which dominated the urban housing market long before housing commodification of the mid-1990s, was constructed, owned, or allocated by work units (Whyte & Parish 1984:77–79, Logan & Bian 1993, Bian et al. 1997). People working in rich work units could easily get a comfortably spacious apartment, while those in poor work units remained in near-slum conditions (Lee 1988). Work units’ ability to provide housing varied between state and collective sectors and with bureaucratic rank (Walder 1986, 1992, Bian 1994). While work unit housing was allocated to satisfy needs (large or multigeneration families were allocated first and got more total living space), spacious and quality units were a work unit’s resources and served as incentives to reward political and managerial authority, seniority, professional expertise, and social connections (Logan et al. 1999, Tang & Parish 2000:89, Zhou & Suhomlinova 2001). In addition, cadres, professionals, and employees from high-ranking work units tended to live in neighborhoods with proximity to leading public schools, piped gas fuel, street parks, and other community resources (Logan & Bian 1993, Logan 2001).

This redistributive system had many unanticipated consequences, concisely described in Tang & Parish (2000:37), and since 1988 these ignited several waves of reforms to raise rents, to detach housing from work units, and finally to commodify and privatize housing (Bian et al. 1997, Davis 2000c). While central and local governments continue to be the main investor and constructor, a decisive State Council’s Housing Reform Directive in 1998 required all new housing units to be sold and purchased at market prices, terminating a 50-year system in which housing was allocated basically as collective welfare (Jiang 2000). The newly rich have no problem buying a home. As of 2000, a home of 100 square meters in an apartment building in Beijing or Shanghai can cost 600,000 to 800,000 RMB easily, or 30 to 40 years of average income. There has been a trend to build luxurious homes in a globalized Shanghai, as can be observed in real estate advertisements (Fraser 2000). Homes in city outskirts, smaller cities, and less developed inland cities are considerably less expensive (Logan 2001).

Buyers with no cash ability can take mortgage loans from a designated state bank to pay for a new home, but a prerequisite is that their work units or private employers have deposited a proportion of employee income as housing reserve funds in the bank on behalf of their employees. While government offices and nonprofit organizations (containing 10% of state jobs) can secure such funds in state budgetary allocations, state-owned firms (90% of state jobs) must do so on their own and many, ironically, cannot—they are struggling to survive and keep a payroll operating in an economy in which state-owned enterprises are increasingly likely to lose any competitive edge to private ventures and foreign corporations (Solinger 1999). A great many private firms and virtually all household businesses probably do not invest such funds, either because they are unwilling to do so or because their employees live in a “two-system family”—one spouse works in a private sector job for high income and the other keeps his/her state job to secure

housing and medical benefits (Davis 1999). Predictably large numbers of families may still live in old housing units built before the 1988 housing reform and are under the old redistributive system, although such an estimate is not readily available.

Research interest in urban consumption before reforms largely lay in economic egalitarianism (Parish 1981, 1984), workers' dependence on distribution of consumer goods and services by bureaucratic fiat (Walder 1986), and variation by work-unit hierarchy and political power (Bian 1994:Chap. 8). More recent scholarship is oriented to how reforms eroded these "redistributive" patterns (Tang & Parish 2000). Yet there are new interest and observations about the ongoing consumer revolution (Davis 2000b). Davis's volume documents a decade of rising consumerism and material culture (Table 1.1), which gave urban households great autonomy in choosing how adults and children want to live in a consumer society. Albeit preferences are diverse, inequalities remain primarily because of income and social class (Yan 2000). Political power is coupled with entrepreneur's money in the pursuit of a luxurious leisure life, such as going bowling in nightclubs in Shenzhen (Wang 2000).

## Gender Inequality

Research on gender inequality has proliferated since 1980, but results remain mixed and inconclusive (Entwisle & Henderson 2000). Recognizing significant improvements in rural and urban women's employment and income in Mao's era (Whyte 1984) and especially women's gains in basic education (Hannum & Xie 1994), researchers also find such progress fell short of a promised revolution for gender equalization due to the state's limited capacities, shifting government policies, and a persistent patriarchal culture (Croll 1978, 1983, Stacey 1983, Wolf 1985). When evaluating the impact of post-1978 reforms on gender inequality, their observations led to different conclusions about the direction of change.

One observation is that the growth of market economies created off-farm employment opportunities for rural women, narrowed the gender gap in household income contribution, and enhanced women's status relative to men's (Entwisle et al. 1995, Matthews & Nee 2000, Michelson & Parish 2000). Another observation, mostly from the cities, is that as the market developed, it eroded the power of the state both as employer and advocate of women's rights, leading to labor market discrimination against female workers in hiring and layoffs, job placement, and wage determination in both state and nonstate sectors, thus lowering the economic status of women relative to men (Honig & Hershatter 1988). Rising factory despotism in the private sector is worsening the working conditions for south China women, who are kept in heavy labor activities with long hours (Lee 1995). Similar depressing stories from rural China are that men are leading the expansion of family businesses while women are left behind to specialize in agricultural jobs (Entwisle et al. 1995). Yet a third observation is that in urban China gender gaps in earnings and other work statuses have remained stable from the 1950s to the

1990s (Bian et al. 2000). Intercity variation in labor market gender inequalities is largely uncorrelated with measures of marketization (Shu & Bian 2001).

Inconsistent research findings may be explained at least on two levels, as proposed by Whyte (2000). Substantively, they reflect the complexities of political, social, and historical processes that show that conflicting and contradictory forces can be in effect at the same time, producing such observable inconsistent patterns. Methodologically, inconsistent findings reflect diverse research designs, data collection methods, and measurements and indicators used from early studies to the most recent. Lacking reliable data is probably the most serious problem, for data are too often cross-sectional and gathered in one or two localities, thus preventing any reliable assessments at the national level. Whyte's suggestion is constructive: Serious scholarly work that assesses the impact of reforms on gender inequality must carefully identify a realm of research, must utilize a well-defined set of indicators and measures, and must rely on comparable and systematic data.

Aside from "objective" analyses is an approach to exploring the subjective world of women—what do women think about their gender roles and their relative status to men in the workplace and at home? Revisiting Mao's female labor models and "Iron Girls," Hershatter (2000) and Honig (2000) found their stories far more complicated than a party-state described line that women broke gender boundaries in work; in fact traditional gender roles were accepted by many of these women. Other interview data indicate that traditional gender roles might be rising in the reform era; some women fantasize about fleeing work and seeing women's place as being primarily in the family (Parish & Busse 2000:212, Lee 1998:34–35). Married couples in Beijing feel that both household work and paid work contribute to a collectivized family, and exchange between these two spheres is a fair trade even if one spouse has to specialize in one of the spheres (Zuo & Bian 2001).

## Looking Ahead

Occupational prestige is not sensitive to institutional change but remains a scholarly tool for research of comparative social stratification of industrial societies. In light of growing prosperity and rising consumerism in China, housing and consumption are increasingly important aspects of socioeconomic inequality. However, reliable and systematic information is unavailable about either housing or consumption. The research field of gender inequality is muddy, as diagnosed by Whyte (2000). All these research areas—housing, consumption, and gender inequality—also demand theoretical perspectives and analytic frameworks to guide future studies.

Research on changing mechanisms of income distribution has been a rigorous and fruitful program, making Chinese social stratification the subject of one of the leading and lively debates in top sociological forums in the United States and elsewhere. This program has been hampered badly, however. The key dependent variable, income, is vulnerable to serious—probably systematic—measurement errors, for conflicting institutional rules in a transitional economy make rural and urban wage earners deliberately, and rationally, hide many sources of income that

are regularly not included in employee paychecks (pay slips), not to mention that the newly rich conceivably want to lie about their unbelievable high income from “gray” and “black” sources (Lin 2000) in any questionnaire survey. Income-in-kind is still relevant, but even the three main items of income-in-kind—medical insurance, pension, and labor insurance—have not been given sufficient research yet. Equally problematic are the theoretical construct of redistributor, its operating concept of cadre, and the measurement instruments of self-identified or researcher-imposed categories of office authority, job duties, or political affiliation. These research tools are problematic because the fast-changing economy makes “socialist redistributors” increasingly irrelevant. One interesting line of analysis is about the changing decision-making structure in firms in which local party apparatuses are increasingly less likely to play a decisive role (Opper et al. 2001). On the individual level, insightful studies should pay attention to the changing sources of power of political, economic, and professional elites as well as of nonelite social groups.

## SOCIAL MOBILITY

### Overall Trend

It was rare to change an individual’s social position in Mao’s status hierarchy because of the rigid institutional walls—the rural-urban divide, work unit boundary, cadre-worker dichotomy, and political classification. Post-1978 market reforms and the rise of labor markets eroded these institutional divides, making social mobility a living experience for almost everyone. Millions of peasants now work (in an informal sector) and live in towns and cities (Keister & Nee 2000), while many of them had returned home to work in the cause of rural industrialization (Ma 2001). Urbanites also searched for opportunities of economic prosperity by migrating to developmental zones in coastal areas (Solinger 1999). Inter-firm and inter-sector mobility, which was extremely difficult before reforms (Walder 1986, Davis 1990), is now very common; job change is either voluntary with the purpose of career advancement or coercive because of massive layoffs or organized transfers by state-owned enterprises (Solinger 2000). While these evolving trends call for rigorous research, serious scholarly works have been published in three well-defined areas of social mobility research: status attainment, career mobility, and social networks in occupational processes.

### Status Attainment

Standard status attainment models attribute a person’s attained status in society to two theoretically distinctive causes: inheritance and achievement. In capitalist societies, attained status is operationalized by the occupation of a wage job, status inheritance is examined with reference to the effects of parental education and occupation, and personal achievement is usually measured by education. When these models are applied to China, three significant modifications are made, and

all bring attention to the characters of the political economy of Communism. First, legacies of the 1949 Communist revolution defined status inheritance in a political perspective, making family class origin an important dimension of inheritance in addition to parental education and occupation (Parish 1981, 1984, Whyte & Parish 1984). Second, in a social structure of “principled particularism” (Walder 1986), personal achievement is politically evaluated by party authority; membership in and loyalty to the Party are qualitatively different credentials than education (Walder 1985, 1995). Third, in a centrally planned economy, state redistributive resources are differentially allocated through a hierarchy of state and collective organizations (Walder 1992), thus workplace identification becomes a more primary criterion of social status than the occupation of wage work (Lin & Bian 1991, Bian 1994).

Estimating these status attainment models requires census or survey data that are extremely difficult to obtain in China even today. Earlier efforts by Parish (1981, 1984) and Whyte & Parish (1984) were based on a “sample of neighboring households” (581 families and 2865 members), established through interviewing 133 Chinese emigrants in Hong Kong. This sample found strong status inheritance in educational attainment; children achieved higher education when their fathers had higher education or high-income jobs. Family class origin was found to significantly affect occupational attainment; one obtained a high-income job when his/her father was a capitalist, merchant, or staff, rather than a worker or peasant before the 1949 revolution. Finally, one’s education led to a high-income job, but being a female was a disadvantage in both educational and occupational attainments. All of these effects, however, became nil for the cohort of the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976), a pattern that resulted from Mao’s policies of destratification of the decade (Parish 1984). Davis (1992a), based on occupational histories of over 1,000 individuals from 200 families in Shanghai and Wuhan, found that as of the late 1980s the Cultural Revolution policies had reduced middle-class reproduction, and more generally the bureaucratic allocation of labor and rewards favored older birth cohorts or “first comers” (Davis-Friedmann 1985), into the post-1949 Communist era.

Large-scale, representative sampling surveys began to be conducted by United States-based sociologists in Chinese cities from 1985 onward, and they have enriched our understanding about Chinese status attainment processes. A 1986 survey of Tianjin showed that a decade after the Cultural Revolution neither father’s education nor father’s occupation affected child’s job status and that occupational attainment was a result of one’s own education, which seemingly implies an opportunity structure in which status inheritance was eliminated (Blau & Ruan 1990). When work-unit sector was used instead as an indicator of attained status in a 1985 survey of the same city, Lin & Bian (1991) found a strong father-son link in work-unit sector and a strong sector-to-occupation link within the generation. This brought attention to the institution of state job assignments, examined in detail with a 1988 Tianjin survey by Bian (1994): Upon graduation from school, youths were assigned employment by state labor bureaus to hierarchically

organized workplaces, where specific jobs were finally assigned. All of these three Tianjin surveys showed that education and membership in the Communist party increased a person's chance of getting assigned to a state sector job and that women were more likely to be allocated to collective-sector jobs with less pay and less welfare benefits than their male counterparts.

A multicity sample by Zhou et al. (1996, 1997) broadened research scope beyond the city of Tianjin. Their event history analyses show that a "distrusted" family class origin significantly lowered one's chance of getting a state-sector job in all periods through 1993. A superior education increased one's chance of working in public or government organizations, where desirable jobs were located, in all periods, but a college education was becoming important for one's attainment of a party membership in the first decade of post-1978 reforms. A clear pattern showed by Zhou et al. is that stratification dynamics were greatly altered by shifting state policies at all times. This reconfirms what Davis's (1992a, 1992b) life history analysis had earlier shown about the centrality of shifting state policies to patterns of intergenerational as well as career mobility.

## Career Mobility

Survey findings that education and party membership both affect status attainments have been carefully attended in a growing research program about paths of mobility into administrative and professional careers (Walder 1995). Much theoretical tension originates from earlier studies of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe about the relationship between political loyalty and educational credential; rising educational credentialism alters the political character of a Communist regime and was seen as a cause for intellectuals "on the road to class power" (Konrad & Szelenyi 1979). Market reforms in China were seen by some as the hope for change from virtuocracy to meritocracy (Shirk 1984, Lee 1991).

Arguing that Communist party membership and education are qualitatively different credentials, Walder (1995) advanced a dual path model and examined it with two sampling surveys. The 1986 Tianjin survey shows that individuals with superior education move into a professional elite of high social prestige, while individuals with both educational credential and party membership enter an administrative elite with social prestige, authority, and material privileges (Walder 1995). The 1996 national survey of China provides more forceful results from an event history analysis: professional and administrative careers have always been separated from Mao's era onward, party membership has never been a criterion for the attainment of professional positions, and a college education did not become a criterion for administrative position until the post-Mao period (Walder et al. 2000). Party organization preferentially sponsors young members for adult education and eventually promotes them into leadership positions (Li & Walder 2001).

Other studies along this line of inquiry point to both stability and change in China's politicized social mobility regime. Zang (2001) used scattered sources to compile a unique profile of 757 (in 1988) and 906 (in 1994) central and

local government officials. His models show that in both years college education promotes a cadre to climb ladders in both party and state apparatuses, whereas one's seniority in the party "pushes" the person into the party hierarchy rather than to state bureaucracy. Bian et al. (2001) argue that membership loyalty is an organizational imperative and survival strategy of any Communist party and show that in Tianjin and Shanghai political screening persisted from 1949 to 1993 in the attainment of Party membership and in the promotion into positions of political and managerial authority. Zhou (2001) argues that the political dynamics induced by shifting state policies cause bureaucratic career patterns to vary over time, and his 1994 multicity survey shows that Mao's and post-Mao's cohorts of Chinese bureaucrats have distinctive characteristics. Cao's (2001) comparative analysis of Shanghai and Guangzhou shows a pattern of change within the state sector: While in less marketized Shanghai human capital's effects on career mobility are constant between profit-oriented firms and nonprofit organizations, increased market competition in Guangzhou leads to a finding that human capital is a stronger determinant of the success of career mobility in profit-oriented firms than in nonprofit organizations.

## Social Networks in Occupational Processes

Status attainment models and career mobility models attribute persons' opportunities for upward mobility to their positional power and qualifications. A network perspective differs; it considers mobility opportunities as a function of information and influence that are embedded in and mobilized from one's social networks (Granovetter 1973, Lin 1982). This network perspective fits well a relational Chinese culture of *guanxi*, or interpersonal connections of sentiments and obligations that dictate social interaction and facilitate favor exchanges in Chinese society, past and present (Liang [1949] 1986, Fei [1949] 1992, King 1985). In post-revolution China, *guanxi* became more instrumentally oriented in order for someone to secure opportunities under party clientelism in the workplace (Walder 1986) or to break free of bureaucratic boundaries to obtain state redistributive resources (Gold 1985, Yang 1994), such as jobs. Indeed, *guanxi* networks were found to promote job and career opportunities for *guanxi* users, while constraining those who are poorly positioned in the networks of social relationships (Bian 1997).

*Guanxi* networks have been found to facilitate all three aspects of occupational process: entry into the labor force, inter-firm mobility, and reemployment after being laid off. On entry into the labor force, data from two Tianjin surveys show that use of *guanxi* networks increased from 40% in the 1960s and 1970s to 55% in the 1980s (Bian 1994:102), and to 75% in the 1990s when labor markets finally emerged (Bian & Zhang 2001). On inter-firm mobility, the same Tianjin surveys show a similar but sharper trend: Only half the workers had changed jobs prior to 1988, and half of them used *guanxi* networks to do so; by 1999 around 80% of current employees had changed jobs, and only a slight fraction did not use *guanxi* networks (Bian & Zhang 2001). Another Tianjin study shows that laid-off workers

in textile factories changed jobs through inter-industry ties to get reemployed in a nontextile entity (Johnson 2001). Laid-off workers in Wuhan were reemployed more quickly and matched to jobs with higher income when they had broader and more resourceful networks (Zhao 2001:68).

All of these studies show that *guanxi* contacts are predominantly relatives and friends of high intimacy to *guanxi* users, but when they are acquaintances or distant friends, connections are made through intermediaries to whom both *guanxi* users and contacts are strongly tied (Bian 1997). This is in sharp contrast to western countries, where weak ties of infrequent interaction and low intimacy are more frequently used than stronger ties (see reviews by Granovetter 1995, Lin 1999). This cross-national difference is due, argues Bian (1997), to different resources being mobilized through networks: Weak ties in western countries are used to learn information about job openings, whereas strong ties in China are meant to secure influence from authorities that was more difficult to obtain. In a rising labor market, *guanxi* ties of varying strengths may be aimed at both information and influence, and ties that provide both influence and information, rather than either, may allow someone to complete a successful search, a hypothesis that waits for empirical testing.

## Looking Ahead

The three lines of scholarly work—status attainment, career mobility, and roles of social networks in occupational processes—are all guided by theoretical agendas in comparative social mobility, promoting our understanding about the social and political characters of a durable Communist regime. Understandably, research findings are constructed or patterned to a scholarly flavor in order to test hypotheses derived from existing theories. China is an evolving world where tremendous transformations surface in many directions. Massive migration from rural to urban areas and between economic sectors opens opportunities of mobility in an economy of growing inter-region variation. Large layoffs and organized transfers of state-sector workers are a social experiment of institutional change and industrial restructuring, providing unique data about downward and upward mobility. Because paths to economic prosperity or to socially determined poverty in a society of growing differentiation and uncertainty are not always in a predictable pattern, more research, requiring a grounded approach and creative minds, is called for.

## CONCLUSION

Chinese social stratification and social mobility will remain one of the most interesting areas of sociological research in the decades ahead. China presents an unusual research field of sociological experiments for many questions about class stratification, socioeconomic inequalities, and social mobility. A great amount of original research has promoted our understanding about status groups before post-1978 reforms, but significantly less attention has been paid to emerging social

classes in rural and urban China today. This is partly because property rights arrangements in the production system, which are key to any rigorous assessment about class stratification, are highly complicated and ambiguous, partly because social classes are in the making and do not yet show clear class boundaries. Theoretically exciting research has instead been conducted about human and political mechanisms of income distribution, housing acquisition, and gender inequality in the reform era. There is equally impressive research output about status attainment, career mobility into elite groups, and social network approaches to occupational processes. Despite these achievements, China's evolving political and economic institutions conceivably create uncertainties and unpredictable patterns, calling for grounded research from which to generate new theoretical perspectives that will help us understand and explain agents, sources, and mechanisms of change in the system of social stratification and social mobility.

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