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Author(s): Francis L. K. Hsu

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SOCIAL MOBILITY IN CHINA*

FRANCIS L. K. HSU

Northwestern University

I. THE PROBLEM

NOT much is scientifically known about social mobility in China. Most people who discuss the subject, including some serious students, have been impressed by the great imperial examination system which has functioned in China for over a thousand years, which was a model for the development of the civil service examination systems in the West,¹ and which served to build a great empire the administrators of which were chosen by ability and talent.²

A number of scholars adhere to a more or less opposite view. This group, though comparatively small, is gaining in importance. The outstanding student among this camp is K. A. Wittfogel, who has up to date presented the only body of quantitative data on the subject. The major observation of this student is that the imperial examination system, far from encouraging vertical mobility, was very much undercut by the *Yin* privilege, through which the son of an official could enter the bureaucracy without having

anything to do with the examination system.³

The purpose of this paper is to show that the *Yin* privilege notwithstanding, there is substantial evidence in support of the former view, namely that a fairly high degree of social mobility existed in Chinese society during the last thousand years. This will be done by showing that (1) in the majority of cases prominence (chiefly bureaucratic, but also social, economic or literary, as will be made clear below) did not last over one generation; and (2) that of the families which did maintain themselves a little longer, the vast majority did not last over two generation. These facts have led me to the tentative conclusion that there was a considerable degree of vertical social mobility in China, since with no evidence for any drastic reduction of the opportunities of prominence, the families which fell would in the normal course of events be replaced by others which rose.

II. ANALYSIS OF MATERIAL FROM DISTRICT HISTORIES

The material to be presented here represents a partial report of a wider study which is still in progress.⁴ The basic data are taken

³ K. A. Wittfogel, "Public Office in the Liao Dynasty and the Chinese Examination System," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1947, pp. 13-40.

⁴ This work is under the sponsorship of The Committee on Research of the the Graduate School

* Paper read at the first annual meeting of The Far Eastern Association held at Yale University on April 6, 1949.

¹ Ssu-yu, Teng, "China's Examination System and the West," in H. F. MacNair, *China*, Berkeley, 1946, pp. 441-451.

² E. R. Hughes, *The Invasion of China by the Western World*, London, 1937, p. 132, and S. W. Williams, *The Middle Kingdom*, New York, 1899, Vol. I, pp. 562-565.

from the biographies contained in Chinese district histories. District histories (sometimes called District Gazetteers) are a well-known documentary source to students on China. The vast majority of the nearly two thousand districts in China have such histories. Some of these documents consist of five to ten volumes; others run into thirty, or fifty, or more. Each set of district histories, amongst other things, contains a large or small number of biographies of male natives of the district who have, for one reason or another, achieved some prominence. These histories have been in existence for various lengths of time. Some, like those for Changsha, were first composed in 1871; others, like those for Nan Pi of Hopei province, were made only less than twenty years ago. The ones which began many centuries ago have as a rule been rewritten or re-composed several times by effort of natives of the districts who had reached some social and political height. Many additions of material, including many new biographies, have usually been made with each fresh effort at rewriting or recomposing the district history.

In connection with the local biographies I am first of all concerned with two things: (1) Some men rated individual biographies, others did not; and (2) some men, though not biographees,⁵ were mentioned in the biographies of their fathers, brothers, uncles, patrilineal cousins, or other family members, while others were not. For purpose of this study those men who were mentioned in other people's biographies are regarded as having achieved some degree of *prominence* over those whose names were not mentioned in any biography; and those men who rated individual biographies themselves are regarded as having achieved a higher degree of

prominence over those who were merely mentioned in some biographies. Since the composers of most district histories appear to spare little effort in identifying the ancestry or progeny of all their biographees, particularly the more prominent ones, the assumption is not absurd that those immediate ancestors and descendants of biographees who were in any way notable would rate separate biographies or be mentioned in their kinsmen's biographies; and that, conversely, those immediate ancestors or descendants who did not rate as individual biographees, nor were mentioned in their kinsmen's biographies, were probably not prominent at all.

Data from four major district histories will be presented here. These are: Chang Sha (Hunan); T'ai An (Shantung); Wu Hsien (Kiangsu); and Sian (Shensi). These four are chosen for presentation here because they represent four widely separated areas and also because of their relative importance in different periods of Chinese history. The data are analyzed in the following ways:

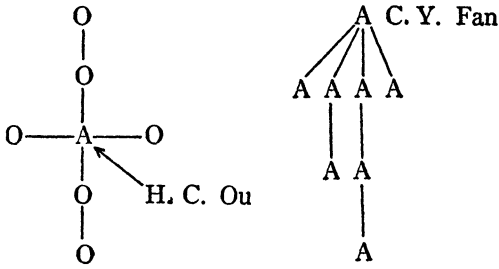
1. First the data are arranged to reveal the proportion of those in each of which only the prominent man himself is mentioned as compared to those biographies which are related to one another by lineal relationship or in each of which other lineal ancestors (such as father) or descendants (such as son) are also mentioned by name. For example, the biography of H. C. Ou of Changsha made no mention of anyone except himself and his achievements; on the other hand the biography of C. Y. Fan of Wu Hsien, Kiangsu, contained some references to his sons, his grandsons and his great-grandsons by name and by achievements. Furthermore, each of Fan's four sons and one of his grandsons rated a separate biography in the same district history. (See Diagram I)

2. Secondly, those biographies which contain references to the biographee's lineal ancestors or descendants by name and by achievements, or which are tied up to each other by lineal relationship, are then analyzed to reveal the number of generations

of Northwestern University. The basic data used in the present analysis were extracted from the district histories by Mr. Yuan Liang, of the University of Chicago.

⁵The term "biographee" signifies in this paper the person whom the biographer writes about in any given biography.

DIAGRAM I

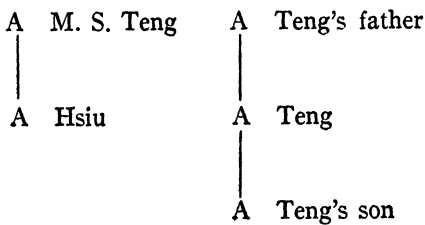


A—a biographee or his kinsmen who has been mentioned in his biography, or who rated separate biographies.

O—a person whose existence is assumed but who is not a biographee nor mentioned in any biography.

through which prominence lasted. For example, in the biography of M. S. Teng of Wu Hsien, Kiangsu, only his son Hsiu, is mentioned. This is then entered into the results as *one instance* in which family prominence lasted two generations. The same would be true if the son is a separate biographee. If the sons of Mr. Teng's son were mentioned, or if Mr. Teng's father were mentioned in the same biography or in a different biography, the case will then be entered into the results as *one instance* in which family prominence lasted three generations. (See Diagram II)

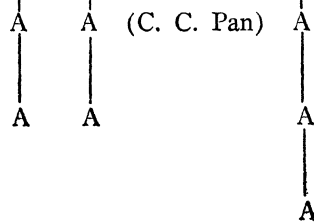
DIAGRAM II



However, three other circumstances are of importance here. For example, Mr. C. C. Pan of Wu Hsien, Kiangsu, not only has a son who is a separate biographee but also two brothers, C. D. and C. T., who are also separate biographees. Furthermore C. T. has one son who is named in C. T.'s biography, while C. D. has a son and a grandson who are also separate biographees. In this case we have three separate lines of continued prominence and accordingly the

data are entered in the results as two instances in which family prominence continued for two generations and one in which it continued for three generations. (See Diagram III a)

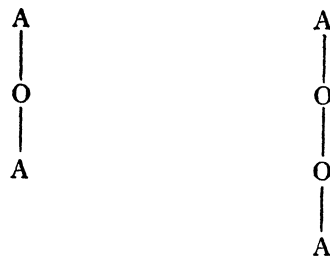
DIAGRAM III a



A different condition prevails in the aforementioned case of C. Y. Fan of Wu Hsien, Kiangsu. The biographies mentioned that Fan had one "seventh generation grandson," named Pang Cheh who had a son Wen Ying. In addition the biographies also mentioned two other groups of Fan's descendants: 1. a "seventeenth generation descendant," Yun Lin and his son P. Ying; and 2. a "twenty-third generation" descendant Lai Chung and his son Hwa. All three cases are entered into the results as three instances in which family prominence was continued for two generations.

The third condition concerns a rule of thumb. If a father is a biographee or mentioned in a biography, the son is not but the grandson again is, then the case is entered as an instance of continued prominence lasting *two generations*. But if the prominence is interrupted by more than one generation the prominence is considered discontinued. (See Diagram III b)

DIAGRAM III b

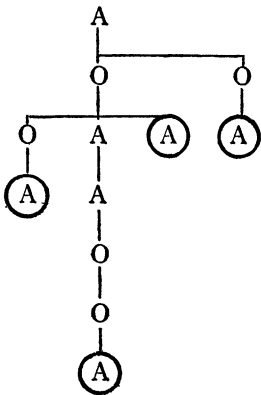


Prominence lasting two generations

Prominence is discontinued

3. When the prominence is interrupted by more than one generation the classification of the prominent descendants who came later on will depend upon whether the sons and grandsons of the later continued the prominence or not. If the descendants mentioned after an interruption of more than one generation had no prominent sons or grandsons they are merely noted in a separate category. In this category are also included prominent brothers, nephews or patrilineal cousins, whose children are not biographees or mentioned in the biographies. (See Diagram IV)

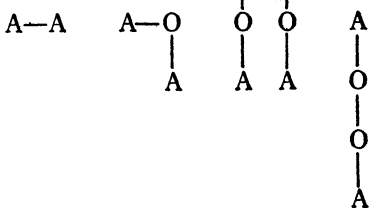
DIAGRAM IV



The individuals in circles are grouped together and are then added to the total number of individuals among whom Prominence continued for two or more generations.

4. Fourthly the data are arranged to reveal the number of individuals who are related to each other (brothers, cousins, uncles and nephews, great-grandfathers and great-grandchildren) but among whom no continued prominence according to the above rules is found. (See Diagram V)

DIAGRAM V



5. Lastly the data are analyzed to show the kinds of achievements by the biographees and others who are mentioned in the biographies. Five kinds of achievements are found: (1) being a member of the bureaucracy; (2) having received one or more imperial degrees; (3) being locally known for exemplary conduct, according to Confucian and other traditional ethics, such as filial piety, harmony among brothers, charity toward the public, etc.; (4) having become wealthy through commerce; and (5) being well-known for distinctions in art, poetry, literature or knowledge of sacred scriptures.

The results of the analysis are given in the following table. (See table).

A number of observations may be made on this table. First, the number of biographees among whom prominence continued for two or more generations is consistently lower in every district than the number of biographees among whom prominence did not continue after one generation. (The percentages in Column III are always smaller than those in Column IV). This result agrees substantially with my previous study of three district histories from Chekiang Province. (Chin Hsien was the exception, in which case Column III would have been 62 per cent and Column IV, 38 per cent).⁶ This would seem to suggest that in these districts those who became prominent were more likely to be of unknown origin than to have come from prominent kin groups.

When we employ "being mentioned in a biography" as a criterion of prominence we find the picture slightly changes. The order is reversed so that the number of prominents in some districts "among whom prominence continued for two or more generations" became larger than those among whom prominence failed to so continue. (Some percentages in Column V are larger than those in Column VI.) The tendency for the former to increase is consistent, although the rate of increase, governed by some unknown factors, is not. The general reversal of the numerical

⁶F. L. K. Hsu, *Under the Ancestor's Shadow*, New York, 1948, p. 308.

TABLE

Locality		Chang Sha	Sian	Tai An	Wu Hsien	
Analysis						
I. Total No. of Biographies		1,382	1,214	1,855	880	
II. Total No. of Prominent Individuals		2,364	1,789	1,910	1,296	
III. No. of Biographies among whom prominence continued for two or more generations		609 or 43%	361 or 28.8%	324 or 17.4%	365 or 41.5%	
IV. No. of Biographies among whom prominence did not continue after one generation		773 or 57%	851 or 71.2%	1,531 or 82.6%	515 or 58.5%	
V. No. of all prominent individuals among whom prominence continued for two or more generations		1,553 or 65%	883 or 49%	376 or 20%	755 or 58.0%	
VI. No. of all prominent individuals among whom prominence did not continue after one generation		811 or 35%	906 or 51%	1,535 or 80%	541 or 42%	
VII. Total number of instances of continued prominence		511	273	142	217	
VIII. Number of generations through which prominence lasted among all		Two generations	237 or 46%	197 or 72%	94 or 66%	142 or 65%
		Three generations	176 or 34%	46 or 16%	36 or 25%	45 or 21%
		Four generations	88 or 17%	17 or 6%	9 or 6.3%	16 or 7%
		Five and over	3%	6%	2.7%	7%
IX. Number of Prominent individuals who are related to the prominent lineages singly (included in V.)		(²⁰ about 1.2% of V or 2.4% of VI)	(⁴¹ 4.6% of V or 4.2% of VI)	(⁷ 1.0% of V or 0.4% of VI)	(²⁰³ 26.8% of V or 39% of VI)	
X. No. of prominent individuals who are not related to prominent lineages but also are related to each other singly (included in VI)		(⁷⁰ 4.2% of V or 8.5% of VI)	(¹⁰⁷ 12.1% of V or 11.8% of VI)	(¹⁸ 4.8% of V or 11.6% of VI)	(⁵⁸ 7.6% of V or 10.7% of VI)	

		Chang Sha (Total XI 1553) (Total XII 811)		Sian (XI 883) (XII 906)		Tai An (XI 376) (XII 1535)		Wu Hsien (XI 755) (XII 541)		
XI. Kinds of distinction achieved by all among whom prominence lasted for two or more generations	Biographies	Total 613	A*	507 or 83%	Total 361	311 or 86%	Total 324	267 or 82%	Total 305	252 or 69%
			B	9 or 1.5%		None		14 or 4.6%		10 or 3%
			C	61 or 11.9%		23 or 6.3%		19 or 5.8%		45 or 13%
			D	None		None		None		None
			E	4 or 0.7%		13 or 3.7%		9 or 2.7%		38 or 10%
			F	28 or 2.9%		14 or 4%		15 or 4.9%		20 or 5%
	Non-biographies	Total 940	A	777 or 83%	422 or 81%	19 or 37%	228 or 58%			
			B	81 or 8.7%	18 or 3%	18 or 35%	22 or 6%			
			C	72 or 7.6%	70 or 13.8%	10 or 19%	94 or 24%			
			D	None	None	None	1 or 0.2%			
			E	7 or 0.5%	10 or 2%	4 or 7%	43 or 11%			
			F	3 or 0.2%	2 or 0.2%	1 or 2%	2 or 0.8%			
Biographies	Total 773	A	312 or 40%	494 or 58%	622 or 41%	221 or 43%				
		B	72 or 9%	15 or 2%	646 or 42%	16 or 3%				
		C	270 or 35%	277 or 27%	189 or 12%	171 or 33%				
		D	None	None	None	None				
		E	20 or 2%	68 or 8%	19 or 1.2%	88 or 17%				
		F	99 or 14%	47 or 5%	59 or 3.8%	19 or 4%				
Non-biographies	Total 38	A	15 or 39%	30 or 54%	None	8 or 30%				
		B	17 or 44%	2 or 3.6%	None	None				
		F	6 or 17%	23 or 42%	4 or 100%	18 or 17%				

* Key to letters:

- A.—Being member of the bureaucracy, or holder of any official title.
- B.—Holders of imperial degrees.
- C.—Exemplary conduct.

- D.—Wealth through commerce.
- E.—Distinctions in art, literature, calligraphy, poetry or sacred scriptures.
- F.—Combinations of the above.

strength of the two groups indicates that, within the frame of reference of the present paper, more descendants of prominent individuals achieved moderate prominence. Expressing the same thing differently, it means that, if we lower the criterion of prominence we find a higher incidence of inbreeding among prominents. However, in every district, even with the lowered standard of prominence, "fresh blood" seems apparently to appear to the extent of 35 to 80 per cent of all cases involved in the various districts.

Next let us consider the length of continued prominence. As explained in the beginning of the paper, in each district, the number of instances of continued prominence is registered. The instances are then arranged in sequences to show through how many generations they lasted. In this section of the analysis no distinction is made between biographees and those who are merely mentioned in biographies. Two things emerge at once: (1) In all districts the incidence of prominence lasting two generations is much higher than that lasting three or more generations; and (2) in all districts the incidence of prominence lasting two or three generations constitutes 80 per cent or more of the whole. This again agrees very well with my previously obtained results in three districts of Chekiang Province. In the three Chekiang districts analyzed, the incidence of prominence lasting two to three generations constituted 75 to 94 per cent of the whole.⁷

Two questions must be answered here. One question is, granted that prominence did not last along lineal family lines, what about individuals who became prominent because they had prominent cousins, uncles, nephews, or great-great-grandfathers? If the number of such individual is large, does it then not mean a high degree of inbreeding among prominents?

In answering the question we must look for two kinds of facts. First, the number of prominent individuals who are related to members of prominent lineages (i.e., lineages in which prominence was continued for two

or more generations) as cousins, great-great-grandfathers, nephews, etc. In three of the four district histories the number of such individuals is so small (ranging from 7 to 20) that they would be of no significant consequence to the main observations, however they are handled. Only Wu Hsien of Kiangsu province has a much larger number (203) which would make a quarter of all Wu Hsien prominents among whom prominence continued for two or more generations. However, all of these numbers, large or small, were included in the computation of the percentage of individuals among whom prominence continued for two or more generations. (That is to say, the numbers for each district contained in Column V include the numbers contained in Column IX for that district.) The addition of these numbers made no difference in our major conclusion. For example, in the case of Wu Hsien, even after adding the very large number of 230 to the total of "prominent individuals among whom prominence continued for two or more generations" (Column V), the size of the latter category is still well within the range set by districts.

A second kind of facts consist of the number of prominent individuals whose prominence was not continued lineally, but whose cousins, uncles, or brothers were prominent; the prominence of the latter was also not continued lineally. (See Diagram V). The percentages occupied by these prominents in each district are again so small (ranging in number from 18 to 107) that they would not have made any difference, one way or the other, to the major thesis of this paper.

To sum up: the purpose of this paper is to elucidate by quantitative data the extent of vertical social mobility in Chinese society. With specifically defined criteria for the term prominence and a particular set of documentary material, it has been demonstrated that roughly 50 per cent of the local prominents in any district studied came from unknown origin and that roughly 80 per cent of the descendants beyond the grandson generation of the local prominents also became unknown.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

This picture of rapid change of family fortune within a few generations is very striking, especially where class is usually determined by position in the bureaucracy, and where the position in bureaucracy depended very much upon family influence. The latter being the case, one would expect family prominence to continue, for obvious reasons. Even from the present analysis, the strength of family influence in bureaucracy is evident. For example, if we examine the biographees among whom prominence lasted for two or more generations, we find in three out of four districts over 80 per cent of them distinguished themselves by position in bureaucracy. (See Table, Column XI). On the other hand, of the biographees among whom prominence did not last more than one generation, only about 50 per cent were bureaucrats. (See Table, Column XII). These facts suggest that distinctions in bureaucracy had better chances of being continued along kinship lines than others. Nevertheless, taking the data as a whole, the singular thing is that, in spite of the importance of family influence, the picture of discontinued prominence emerges more vividly through this analysis than otherwise.

But here a further question arises. There is an American saying, "From shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves in three generations." Would such a saying not suggest that prominence also fails to last along lineal lines in the United States as well? While one cannot at present express a definite opinion on the subject, one must reject any close comparison between the two societies in this respect due to a basic reason. In American life an individual may achieve social prominence in a variety of ways. It has been said that the diaper service, which is now a nation-wide American industry, was started by a group of enterprising University of Chicago students during the depression. In China, on the other hand, the path of social ascension has been very narrow. Of 7,359 prominent individuals involved in 5,331 histories from four widely separated districts, only one individual was marked as distinguished due to "wealth through commerce." (See Table, Column XI, Wu Hsien). Practically all cases

of prominence in all districts were based upon (1) position in bureaucracy; (2) imperial degrees or honors; (3) distinction in literature poetry, art, etc.; and (4) exemplary conduct following Confucian principles. The largest percentage of any group of prominents was based upon position in bureaucracy.

This being the case, the term prominence may be defined for China as we have done it here with some actual correspondence to the class structure of the society, but it becomes much more complicated if applied to the United States. Is the machine tool shop owner son of an American small town politician less prominent than his father? Where vertical mobility is complicated by so much horizontal mobility, there are as yet neither the necessary criteria nor the relevant data for drawing definite conclusions on comparative social mobility in the United States and in China.

III. FURTHER OBSERVATIONS

This picture of a fairly frequent vertical social mobility also agrees with my observations in several communities as well as in the wider Chinese national scene in general. For example, whether it is the North China village in which I was born, the Manchurian town in which I spent the latter part of my youth, or the two Southwest communities at which I stopped as a field worker, I found it easy to acquire knowledge about the present downcast conditions of members of families which only a few years ago, or one or two generations back, had still been prosperous.

This fall of many prosperous families does not seem to have much to do with the argument advanced by H. T. Fei in an article on *Peasant and Gentry*⁸ namely, that powerful families have a tendency to lower their fertility, so that they die out. The only evidence that Fei gave was his own family. Yet even *a priori*, the fact that concubinage and better nutrition are the prerogatives of the well-to-do will deprive Fei's

⁸ H. T. Fei, "Peasant and Gentry," *American Journal of Sociology*, July, 1946.

argument of plausibility. Also when we look at the numerous descendants of such well known men as Yuan Shih-Kai, Li Yuan-Hung, Chang Cho-lin, Li Hung-Chang, Cheng Kuo-Fan, and many others, we shall find fertility has rather little to do with the fall of families. The rich and well situated do reproduce, but their descendants tend to fail of the standards set by their forebears.

The rather drastic difference between the conclusion offered here and that of Dr. Wittfogel, which was referred to at the beginning of this paper, is obvious. In Dr. Wittfogel's article already mentioned, he presented a quantitative statement on the social origin of "111 leading officials" (mostly prime ministers) of T'ang dynasty and "153 biographies of officials of different rank who lived during the dynasty's middle period when T'ang institutions were in full flower."⁹ Upon analysis he found 77.5 per cent of the 111 leading officials reached their rank by way of examinations; 16.2 per cent no record; while only 6.3 per cent by way of their father's position. Among the 153 officials of different rank the picture is much less clear. Here 27.4 per cent reached officialdom by way of examination; 60.8 per cent no record; while 11.8 per cent by way of *Yin*, that is, their father's position. Dr. Wittfogel's observation is:¹⁰

"The number of officials in the second category who benefited from the *Yin* privilege is impressive; it is even more impressive when seen in relation to the number of degrees recorded: 18 to 42."

It is hard to see how data such as these convey any impressiveness of the *Yin* privilege. No information is given as to how the 153 officials were selected; nor what proportion of the 153 formed of the total number from which the smaller number were selected. Lastly, it is also hard to see any scientific value in any quantitative statement of which 60 per cent of the data is unknown.

Of course, Dr. Wittfogel was discussing an early period of Chinese society and the material presented here from the district histories refer mainly to later periods, especially Ming and Ching dynasties. Secondly, it is probable that, with more of his monumental work coming to light, some of the present difficulties will be resolved.

After completion of this paper I discovered, to my surprise and satisfaction, that a conclusion similar to mine was reached by Dr. E. A. Kracke, Jr. in an article entitled "Family vs. Merit in Chinese Civil Service Examinations Under the Empire."¹¹ Dr. Kracke's sources—two lists of civil service graduates dated 1148 and 1256—were entirely different from mine, but he came to the same general conclusion.

⁹ K. A. Wittfogel, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹¹ *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Sept. 1947, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 103-123.