[The Comparative Study of Social Mobility]: Reply
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REPLY

Comparative studies in the field of social mobility bristle with difficulties, the greatest of which is that of getting truly comparable data from different societies. Comparison was peripheral to the purpose of my article on Ming-Ch'ing China, which dealt mainly with various imperfectly known aspects of institutional history. In making some comparison between my data and Dr. Natalie Rogoff's, the point in my article on which Mr. Dibble's criticism turns, I did not, as he has done, work from her raw data. But Mr. Dibble's criticism is relevant chiefly because the two types of data are not comparable. My type of data refers to the mobility of traditional China's national elite, which happened to be bureaucratic and administrative, and Dr. Rogoff's data deal with general social mobility in a modern urban area.

Mr. Dibble has nevertheless repeated the error of comparing two incomparable things. He says:

> ... in Indianapolis and its environs in 1910, 5 % of the sons of semi-skilled workers, unskilled workers and the like were members of the highest (local) stratum. In 1940 the corresponding figure was 7 %. It seems unlikely that the corresponding figures for any period in traditional China come anywhere near the American figures, low as they are.

This generalization is untenable not only because of the fundamental difference in the nature of these two types of data—one on national elite and one on general mobility of a locality—but also because of a confusion of criteria used for his comparison. The highest stratum in 20th-century Indianapolis is the so-called "upper white collar" group, or the local elite. The Chinese *chin-shih* were unquestionably members of the national elite whose names were inscribed on stone tablets in front of the Imperial Academy. They were assured of official positions and enjoyed all the prestige and privilege that went with their degree. Actually they formed a special body which was more exclusive than membership in a modern *Who's Who*. It is true that elites of different societies may not be based on the same criteria. The criteria for membership in the national elite in traditional China were based on academic achievement and official position and those for a modern American elite are largely based on income and occupation. But we would like to know what

percentage of Indianapolis's "upper white collar" people who are of lower class origin have been included in *Who's Who in America*. The percentage is likely to be very small. Not until we know this percentage are we entitled to make any comparison or derive broader generalizations. In comparing two different types of data and in equating two different statuses a statistical illusion is created.

Mr. Dibble's discussion of the basic principles of quantification, exemplified by his two imaginary tables for two simple societies of vastly different sizes of population, has a value transcending that of criticism of my article. Ideally, as he points out, I should present numbers or percentages for various social classes before I can generalize on mobility rates. These data do not exist in ideal form, but I will make an attempt, for the purposes of a rough demonstration in quantitative form, to estimate the proportions of the three major status categories in China's total population and to compare their mobility rates with those of two modern European countries.

The detailed study of Ming Ch'ing population has been made elsewhere.[1] Suffice it here to suggest in round numbers that the mean population of Ming (1368–1644) China was probably in the neighborhood of 100,000,000 and that of Ch'ing China somewhere near 250,000,000. Supposing that the adult males constituted 20% of the total population at all times, we get the total adult male population of 20,000,000 for the Ming period and 50,000,000 for the Ch'ing period. Let us further presume that during the Ming period the aggregate number in an average generation of active, retired, expectant civil officials and army officers, higher and intermediate degree-holders, those who purchased minor offices and official titles, and the vast and growing body of unclassed officials and sub-officials which altogether constituted my Category C (the highest status group), was 1,500,000. We know further that the bureaucracy in the broad sense underwent considerable expansion in Ch'ing times, partly because of the necessity for the Manchu dynasty to accomodate the Manchu, Mongol, and Chinese Bannermen and largely due to the fact that sub-officials became more and more numerous. Moreover, the sale of offices and official titles became more common. A conservative estimate would put the aggregate number of people under Category C at 2,000,000 during an average generation. Thus we find that Category C accounts for 7.5 per cent of the total adult male population in the Ming and 4 per cent in the Ch'ing.

We know more about the size of the *sheng-yüan* (holders of the elementary degree who had no opportunity for government employment) group, which constitutes our Category B (the intermediate status group). In the first half

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[1] Cf. my *Studies on the Population of China, 1368-1953* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), *passim,* and Chapters III and VI of my forthcoming book *Aspects of Social Mobility in China, 1368-1911*.

of the Ming their total number was rather limited, but in the latter half it grew by leaps and bounds. If we adopt an arbitrary figure of 200,000 as the aggregate number of *sheng-yüan* cumulated in an average generation during the Ming period, we find that Category B constitutes only 1 per cent of the total Ming adult male population. During the Ch'ing the cumulative number of *sheng-yüan* in an average generation has been estimated by observant contemporaries at about 500,000. To this figure we have to add the cumulative number of holders of the title of student of the Imperial Academy, which is estimated at 500,000. Thus Category B accounts for 2 per cent of the Ch'ing adult male population. In other words, in spite of the increase in the size of bureaucracy and two student bodies, the percentage of commoners without degree, our Category A and the lowest status group, actually grew during the Ch'ing because of more rapid multiplication of the national population. While admittedly all the above estimates are but very rough guesses, they will probably not seriously prejudice our main purpose of comparing the *chin-shih* recruitment ratio from each category of the population, because the lowest group in both Ming and Ch'ing periods accounts for an overwhelming majority of the total population.

TABLE I

Chin-shih Recruitment Ratios from Three Major Status Groups *

A. Ming Period

Status group	Per cent of total adult male population	Per cent of total *chin-shih*	Recruitment ratio
Category C	7.5	50	666
Category B	1.0	2.5	250
Category A	91.5	47.5	52
Total	100.0	100.0	100

B. Ch'ing Period

Category C	4.0	62.8	1570
Category B	2.0	18.1	905
Category A	94.0	19.1	20

* Source: My forthcoming book *Aspects of Social Mobility in China, 1368-1911*, Ch. III. Because of the availability of a few further *chin-shih* lists the figures here do not exactly agree with those given in my article. The recruitment ratio is arrived at by dividing the percentage in the second column of the table by the percentage in the first column in the same row. In other words, you divide the percentage of all *Chin-shih* from a given stratum by the percentage of the total population which that stratum constitutes. If a stratum constituted 10% of the population and if 10% of all *Chin-shih* were from this stratum its recruitment ratio would be 100.

The above figures should be compared with these on the social origins of

modern British and French higher civil servants, worked out admirably by two University of London sociologists. Their findings are summarized in the following three tables.

TABLE II *

Social Origins of Higher British Civil Servants: (I)
Father's Occupation at Child's Birth in the Case of (A) Those Above the
Rank of Assistant Secretary, 1950, (B) Entrants by the Open Competitions
of 1949-52, Arranged according to the Registrar-General's
Social Class Groups (1951 Census)

Social Class Group	% of total adult male population (aged 20-64)	% of total higher civil servants	(A) Recruitment ratio	(B) % of total successful candidates	Recruitment ratio
N	1.5	3.0	200	0	0
I	3.4	29.3	862	30.9	909
II	15.0	40.5	262	41.1	280
III	51.7	24.2	47	25.1	47
IV & V	28.4	3.0	11	1.8	6
Total	100.0	100.0	100	99.9	100

* Source: R. K. Kelsall, "The Social Origin of Higher Civil Servants in Great Britain, Now and in the Past", *Transactions of Second World Congress of Sociology*, 1954; and R. K. Kelsall, *Higher Civil Servants in Britain, From 1871 to the Present Day* (London, 1955), p. 153, Table 25.
(1) This table is an adaptation and simplification of the above sources. (A) consists of 331 individuals; (B) 223 individuals.
(2) Recruitment ratios are mine.
(3) Description of social class groups: N—"no gainful occupation"; I—"professional etc. occupation"; II—"intermediate occupations"; III—"skilled occupations"; IV & V—"partly skilled and unskilled occupations".

If we regard the "no gainful occupation" group and groups I, II, III as "middle" and above, then from both series of figures we find that the recruitment ratios of the "lower" groups, i. e., IV and V, are lower than the Ch'ing Category A ratio and much lower than that of Ming Category A. If we group III, IV, and V together, which account for 80.1 per cent of the total adult male population, we get the aggregate recruitment ratio of 34 in the case of (A) and 33 in the case of (B), which, though larger than the Ch'ing Category A ratio of 20, are still substantially less than the Ming Category A ratio of 52. It goes without saying that this grouping is too extreme to serve as a fair basis for comparison with Chinese Category A, but for general illustration it has its value.

Dr. Kelsall's study also contains data on the social origins of higher British civil servants of the rank of assistant secretary and above for the years 1929

and 1939. There are, however, no corresponding census occupational figures for each major group. For purposes of rough illustration, it seems not entirely unjustified to use the 1951 census occupational breakdowns as a basis for computing the recruitment ratios for two earlier years, because numerically the most important change in occupational census between 1929 and 1951 is likely to have been the increase of group III at the expense of groups IV and V, thanks to the continual technological revolution that raised many of the partly skilled and unskilled to skilled and lower "white-collar" professions. In any case, when our grouping is so broad and when groups III, IV, and V account for so overwhelming a majority of the total adult male population, their aggregate recruitment ratios should not be too far from the truth.

It will be seen in the following table that not until 1939 did groups III, IV and V achieve a recruitment ratio that is barely larger than the Category A ratio of Ch'ing, a period of greatly diminished mobility.

TABLE 3 *

Social Origins of Higher British Civil Servants: (II)

Social Class Group	% of total adult male population	% of total higher civil servants	1929 Recruitment ratio	% of total higher civil servants	1939 Recruitment ratio
N	1.5	8.3	553	2.8	187
I	3.4	33.0	1177	36.9	1085
II	15.0	47.1	380	41.9	280
Subtotal	19.9	88.4	444	81.6	405
III	51.7	11.6	27	15.6	30
IV & V	28.4	0.0	0	2.8	10
Subtotal	80.1	11.6	17	18.4	23

* Source: R. K. Kelsall, *Higher Civil Servants in Britain, From 1871 to the Present Day* (London, 1955), Table 25, on page 153.

Note: This is an adaptation and simplification of the original. The year 1929 contains 121 individuals and the year 1939 contains 179 individuals. Recruitment ratios are mine.

From this extreme grouping and from the fact that not until 1939, approximately a century after the Industrial Revolution had run its first course and two generations after the institution of universal compulsory education, had Britons of lower social origins (groups III, IV, V) broken into the higher civil service, we may be justified in saying that ruling-class membership in Ming-Ch'ing China was based less on family status and more on individual merit. That the Ming period was in many ways rather unusual cannot be seriously doubted.

The most important reform in modern French higher civil service was the

foundation in 1945 of the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration*, which has since been responsible for holding a single annual examination for nearly all ministries. The following table shows the social origins of all the successful candidates at the *E. N. A.*'s examinations from 1945 to 1951.

TABLE 4*

Occupations of Fathers of Higher French Civil Servants
(641 individuals; in per cent)

Occupational Group	% of total adult made population	% of total successful candidates	Recruitment ratio
I. Employers and independent professional men	4	23.2	580
II. Higher civil servants, managers, and technicians	5	41.8	836
III. Artisans and shopkeepers	15	11.4	76
IV. Independent farmers	25	3.6	14
V. Lower grade civil servants and clerical workers	17	16.7	98
VI. Skilled and semi-skilled workers	22	3.3	15
VII. Agricultural workers	10	0.0	0
VIII. Unskilled workers	2	0.0	0
Total	100	100.0	100

* Source: T. B. Bottomore, "La Mobilité Sociale dans la Haute Administration Française", *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie,* 13 (September, 1952).
   Note: Recruitment ratios are mine.

French social and economic structure, as is well known, is characterized by its large middle stratum, which consists among others of small but substantial artisans, shopkeepers and landowning farmers. In the French social context these occupational categories and group V, lower civil servants and clerical workers, should probably all belong to the "middle" classes. Although the predominantly urban group VI has a recruitment ratio of 15, if we compute the aggregate ratio for the three lowest occupational groups VI, VII, and VIII, we get a combined ratio of 10, which is one-half of Category A ratio of the Ch'ing period. The combined recruitment does not change at all if we include group IV, independent farmers, in the lowest categories. Only by combining group III, artisans and shopkeepers, with IV, VI, VII, and VIII, do we get an aggregate recruitment ratio of 25, which is still less than one half of the Ming Category A ratio.

   The uncompromising logician may point out that it is possible for a society to have a broad social representation in its national elite but to have little or almost no mobility at intermediate and lower levels. For not until the national elite and general mobility of all societies, historical and modern, have been studied, is it logically impossible definitely to establish the infer-

ential value of national elite mobility data as an aid for the study of or specu-
lation on the general mobility. Like most historians, in arriving at a major
conclusion I rely on the *aggregate* rather than on any one particular type of
evidence. In the early stage of my inquiry, the fact that the Ming-Ch'ing
ruling class, especially the early-Ming ruling class, was recruited from a
broad social base does not in itself definitely indicate that Chinese society then
in general was mobile. But, on the other hand, we do know that in complex
societies to climb up to the status of national elite is necessarily a difficult
and highly selective process. For every one who has reached the very top,
thousands must have striven but fallen short. In this sense, data on national
elite mobility probably have a significance which somewhat transcends the
national elite class itself. For my study, there are data on the ancestry of
holders of the second or intermediate degree and of holders of the first or
elementary degree which all show a fairly large representation of the lower
classes. Even during the Ch'ing period when the percentage of *chin-shih*
from humble non-scholastic families dropped to between one-third and one-
quarter of the early-Ming average, still more than 50 per cent of the holders
of the first degree originated from humble non-scholastic families. These
supplementary quantitative data seem to enable us to say that there was
considerable socio-academic mobility at all three levels, namely, national,
provincial, and local.

While statistics are most valuable, historians must not overlook the
importance of various types of qualitative evidence, such as, for the present
study, biographies, genealogies, social novels, contemporary observers on
social and family affairs, the existence of various institutionalized and non-
institutional channels which promoted mobility, the almost complete lack of
institutionalized means to prevent the long-range downward mobility of high-
status families, the absence of effective legal and social barriers to the move-
ment of individuals and families from one status to another, the permeation
into many segments of the population, not infrequently women and children,
of certain social concepts and myths conducive to mobility—all these and
much else suggest the existence of substantial mobility at the broad base of
the social pyramid and explain why Ming-Ch'ing China achieved substantial
socio-academic mobility at all three levels. Owing to space, these types of
evidence are barely mentioned or unmentioned in a crowded interim article,
but they will be submitted in full in my forthcoming book to the scrutiny of
social scientists and historians.

Suffice it here to say that in a study of this nature and scope, our statistics
on a specific type of mobility can be meaningful only when they are in-
terpreted and evaluated against the aforementioned facts, facets, and im-
pressions. They must not be isolated from the combined evidence, nor
should they be chosen as the sole foundation for abstract statistical de-
ductions. Perhaps it is not trite to repeat that the historian draws his major

conclusions from impressions which he has accumulated from an examination and appraisal of the *aggregate* evidence at his disposal, which should also serve as the basis for any balanced and fair-minded criticism.

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