Downward Social Mobility in Pre-Revolutionary China
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# *Downward Social Mobility in Pre-Revolutionary China*

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Most analyses of social mobility in traditional China have concentrated on the gentry—the people who had obtained degrees in the Confucian examination system. For one thing, these were the most influential people in the society. For another, it is possible to define them rather precisely; a man either had a degree or he did not. Still, the gentry formed less than 1% of the population. The overwhelming majority of the Chinese people were not members of the gentry and had no reasonable prospect of having their children join the gentry. For them, social mobility meant movement upward or downward within the category sometimes referred to as the commoners. For instance, a tenant farmer might hope that his sons would someday have land of their own, while fearing that they might lose even the position of tenants and sink to become landless laborers. This paper will deal with this kind of mobility, within the mass population; it will have nothing to say about the gentry. The data on which it is based refer mainly to the period from 1850 up to the Revolution of 1949, but the situation described must have existed long before 1850.

In any discussion of social mobility, there are three phenomena which should be carefully distinguished. First, there can be

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changes in the average level of wealth in a society. Economic development can make everyone richer without changing their relative positions. Second, there can be changes in the structure of society; thus the gap between the richest and poorest elements of Chinese society is much narrower today than it was in 1930, and one could treat this as representing upward mobility of the lower strata. Finally, there can be a movement of individuals relative to society; the overall pattern of the society may remain the same but one person or family may move up or down relative to that pattern. This paper is primarily concerned with the third phenomenon.

In the century before the Revolution, China had a fairly fluid society. There was no fixed hereditary class system; the major forms of wealth, including land, could be freely transferred from one family to another. There were significant amounts of both upward and downward social mobility. Scholars in the United States may particularly have noticed the possibilities for upward mobility, since mobility in American society has been predominantly upward.

In China, mobility for individual men and for families was predominantly downward. The simple fact is that the families at the bottom of the economic scale tended to die out. The poorest men often were unable to have children at all; any children they did have were rather likely to die young. This means that the poorest 15% of the men in one generation could not be the children of the poorest 15% of the preceding generation; very few such children existed. They had to be the children of parents farther up the economic scale.

The word "men" was used deliberately in the above paragraph; there was much more downward mobility for men than for women. The average Chinese man was significantly poorer than his father. We can say that his family was downwardly mobile, since the family system was patrilineal. But if we consider his wife separately we will see that she was born in another family, probably one slightly poorer than the family of her husband's parents. She was less likely to be downwardly mobile

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relative to her mother than her husband was to be downwardly mobile relative to his father. This paper will primarily discuss patterns of social mobility among men and patrilineal families. These patterns were much less pronounced among women, and in some periods they may not have applied among women at all.

### *FAMINE*

It is possible to get crude data on some of the ways in which the poor families died out. One was famine. Table 1 is based on data that Buck (1937: 19) collected on famines that occurred between 1850 and 1932 in 146 *xian* (districts) throughout China. Famines were more frequent in North China than in the South and killed far more people. But the percentage of the population that migrated to escape the comparatively mild famines of the South was almost as large as the percentage in the North. This may have been related to the higher rate of tenancy in the South; a tenant family would probably have abandoned its home more readily under conditions of mild famine than a family that owned land. Buck's figures for death by famine may well be underestimates, since a considerable number of those who migrated in search of food would have died on the road after leaving their home xian, and they might not have appeared on death statistics for the xian in which the famine had occurred.

TABLE 1

| | North | South | All China |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of xian studied | 59 | 87 | 146 |
| Number of famines, 1850-1932 | 215 | 220 | 435 |
| Average % of population killed | 8% | 1% | 5% |
| Average % of population emigrating | 14% | 11% | 13% |
| Average number of years between famines | 23 | 33 | 28 |
| Average number of famines per 25-year generation | 1.1 | 0.8 | 0.9 |
| % of each generation killed by famine | 8.8% | 0.0% | 4.5% |

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TABLE 2

| Ages | Males per 100 females |
|---|---|
| All ages | 107.7 |
| 0 to 4 | 106.2 |
| 5 to 9 | 112.7 |
| 10 to 14 | 117.3 |
| 15 to 19 | 112.1 |
| 20 to 24 | 108.2 |
| 25 to 29 | 114.0 |
| 30 to 34 | 113.9 |
| 35 to 39 | 108.6 |
| 40 to 44 | 106.6 |
| 45 to 49 | 104.4 |
| 50 to 54 | 104.6 |
| 55 to 59 | 102.5 |
| 60 to 64 | 94.8 |
| 65 to 69 | 86.8 |
| 70 and over | 68.9 |

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If the interval between generations was about 25 years, then by Buck's probably conservative figures about 4.5% of each generation died as a result of famine in China as a whole, and about 8.8% in North China. One cannot simply assume that the poorest 4.5% of each generation died of famine; for one thing, famines were likely to start epidemics which could attack all social classes. Still, the great majority of those who died would have come from the bottom quarter of the population.

*SEX IMBALANCE*

Another key factor was sex imbalance; the Chinese population contained substantially more men than women. Girls born into peasant families often died in infancy, from lack of food or outright infanticide. In one Hebei village Crook and Crook (1959: 11) noted that

> Because of the marked shortage of women, there were always a great number of men without wives at all. This included the overwhelming majority of long-term hired laborers.... The poorest families died out, being unable to arrange marriages for their sons. The future generations of poor were the descendants of bankrupted middle and rich peasants and landlords.

This was a problem all over China, not just in the North. Between 1932 and 1942 there were censuses of the modern type in ten areas of China, with a total population of 3,168,555. In all of these areas combined, the ratio of males to females was about 110:100 (Chen, 1946: 17-19, 81). Statistics for limited areas must be used with extreme care, however, since young men congregated in places where jobs were available. The city of Kunming [Kuenming] attained a male:female ratio of 127:100 by draining off males from neighboring xian, in one of which the ratio dropped to 86:100. There probably was also some exaggeration of the ratio due to underreporting of females in a society where they were regarded as less important than males, despite claims for the modernity of the census procedures. This would

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have been partially counterbalanced for our purposes by the fact that the ratio among people of childbearing age would have been greater than the ratio for the population as a whole.

China's only nationwide census measured the population in mid-1953. Its results are shown in Table 2 (Aird, 1961: 81). It found an overall sex ratio of 107.7:100, with wide variations by age. The ratio among the main childbearing age group, the people from 15 to 44 years old, was 110.7:100. The greatest imbalance was found among children born during the war against Japan. Even allowing for possible inaccuracies in the census, which probably were not as great as some authors have suggested,[1] the long-term imbalance in the population of childbearing age was probably not much under 110:100.

Almost one man out of every ten was unable to marry because of the shortage of women. And the men who went without wives were, rather precisely, the poorest men. As a village head told the Crooks (1959: 133-134):

> How could any man in our village claim that his family had been poor for three generations? If a man is poor, then his son can't afford to marry; and if his son can't marry, there can't be a third generation.

Simply taking the effects of famine and sex imbalance, then, we find that in every generation a group of poor men amounting to between 10% and 15% of the men in that generation failed to reproduce themselves because of their poverty; their family lines ended. This left spaces open at the bottom of the social scale which were filled in the following generation by families and individuals who had previously occupied a place higher on that scale. If we add the large number of the poor, especially children, who died of various diseases aggravated by malnutrition even when there was not an actual famine, the total would be 15% or more.

The disappearance of families from the bottom of the social scale did not cause the families that remained to become poorer, but it is one link in a chain of logic that proves they were be-

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coming poorer. The poorest men of each generation were approximately as poor as the poorest men of the preceding generation, but they could not, for the most part, be the children of the poorest men of the preceding generation; they had to be the children of people not quite so poor, who had been downwardly mobile.

## *A MODEL*

It is possible to get a much clearer idea of the implications of this by building a mathematical model, even though the model will be a slight oversimplification of reality. Let us rank all the men in China in order of wealth, on a percentage scale running from 0 to 100.[2] A family at rank 63 will be the family of a man who is richer than 63% of the men in the society and poorer than the other 37%. Indirectly, an analysis of social mobility on this relative scale can lead to important conclusions about changes in absolute wealth, which could not have been reached directly because the statistical data are inadequate. But upward or downward mobility on the relative scale is not the same as upward or downward mobility on a scale of absolute wealth. If a family were at rank 60 in 1932, and at rank 61 in 1942, this would be upward mobility on the relative scale. But inasmuch as the Japanese invasion of China made the whole society poorer, the absolute wealth of such a family in 1942 would have been less than it was in 1932. Conversely, since 1953 almost all families have participated in a general rise of living standards, but this does not constitute upward mobility on the relative scale.

Under what we might consider "normal" conditions, upward and downward mobility on the relative scale must balance each other. If one individual or family moves up into the top 10%, then someone else must move downward to make room. However, there are situations in which, because of demographic anomalies, this logic does not apply.

In the United States, for many years, there was considerably more upward than downward mobility even on the relative scale.

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Between 1900 and 1910, the number of immigrants was equal to about 11% of the original population. Almost all the immigrants were extremely poor when they arrived. Consider a family which was at rank 50 in 1900, richer than 50% of the population. If it behaved in an average fashion, then in 1910 it would still have been richer than 50% of the families that had been in the United States since 1900. It would also have been richer than almost

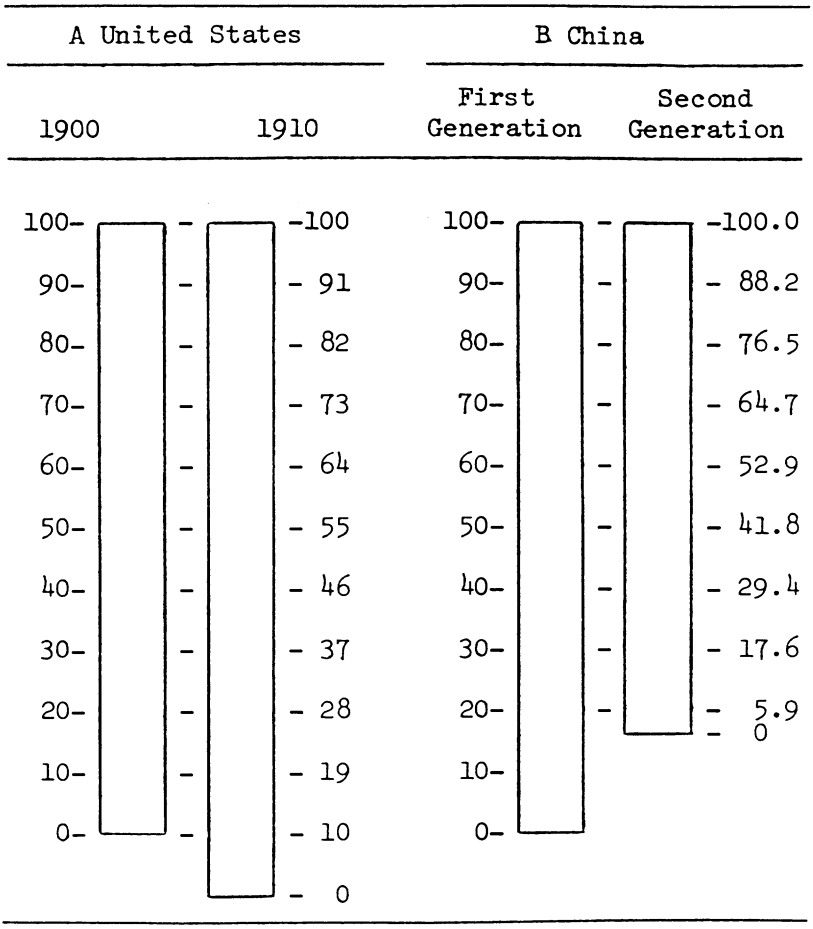


**Figure 1: Changes in rank on the relative scale when population is added or removed at the bottom of the scale.**

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all the new immigrants. It would thus have been richer than 55% of the total 1910 population. This is fairly rapid upward mobility on the relative scale, from rank 50 to rank 55 in ten years, without the need for any corresponding downward mobility by some other family. In a real society, of course, most individuals and families do either better or worse than average. One person might rise from rank 45 to rank 55, and another might not rise at all.

The tendency to upward mobility on the relative scale was less pronounced among the rich. A family which was at rank 90 in 1900, and which ranked above 90% of the original population plus all the new immigrants in 1910, would only have been raised to rank 91. Figure 1A shows a simplified version of the situation, in which the rank of a family on a social scale composed only of the people who were in the United States in 1900 is compared with the rank of the same family on a scale that includes the new immigrants. It assumes that all the immigrants were poorer than the poorest of the original population. In fact they were not, of course; someone who was at rank 10 in 1900 would not have been richer than all the new immigrants, and therefore would not have risen as high as rank 19 by 1910. Still, the average rate of upward mobility would have been approximately as shown over most of the social scale. Except for a minority subject to racial discrimination, American families could look forward not only to a rise in their absolute wealth, but to a rise in their relative positions in society. This upward tendency created an immense optimism, a climate in which the Horatio Alger myth could be widely believed. To Americans, "social mobility" generally means upward mobility. This has made it difficult to see the predominance of downward mobility in Chinese society.

Figure 1B shows what would happen if the bottom 15% of Chinese society were suddenly removed. A person who was at rank 15 is suddenly at rank 0; there is nobody left who is poorer. The richest person in the society remains at rank 100. A family which was at rank 50 finds that only 41.2% of the people still remaining are poorer than it, so its new rank is 41.2. The people who were already lowest on the relative scale fall the farthest.

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In practice, the poorest elements of Chinese society did not disappear all at once, but gradually, and the families that did not disappear produced enough children for the total population to grow rather than shrink. Figures 2A and 2B show the average amounts of downward mobility for families starting at different levels of the relative scale, with a population growing at 0.6%

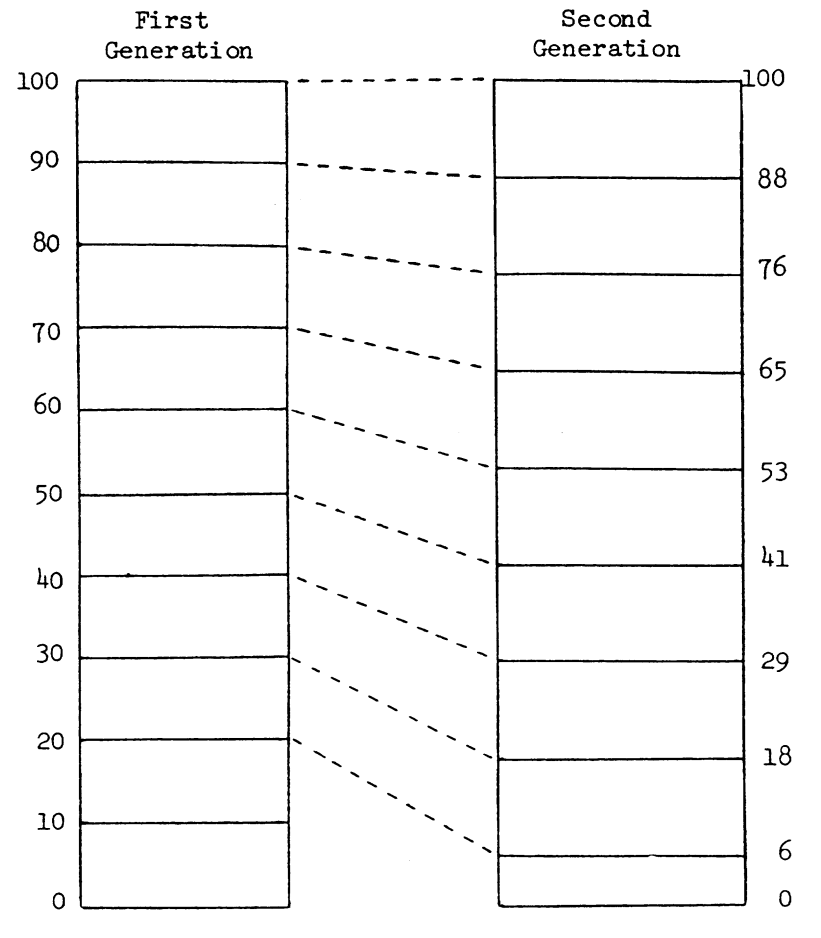


**Figure 2A.**

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per year. This is an arbitrarily chosen compromise figure; the actual rate of population growth was probably less than 0.6% at the beginning of the period under consideration, and more by the end. Population growth is shown by the greater width of the columns representing the second generation[3]; equal areas in the columns represent equal numbers of men. The broken lines connect groups of families in the first generation with their

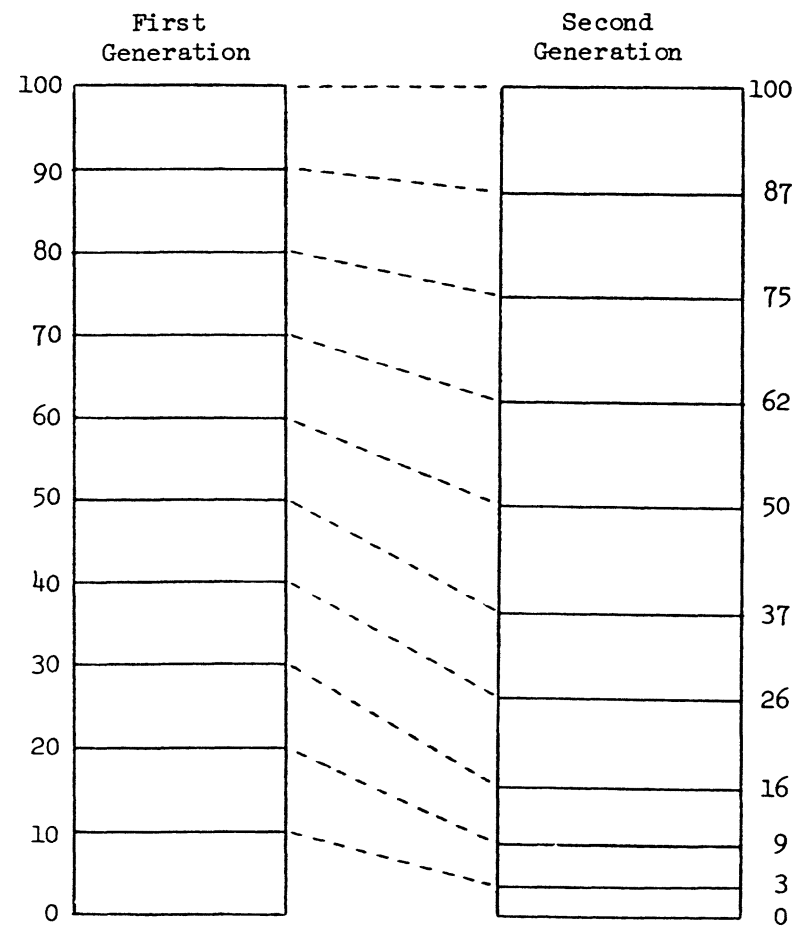


**Figure 2B.**

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sons' families in the second generation. Figure 2A shows a very simplified picture of the situation; it assumes that the men who were unable to raise children because of their poverty were precisely the poorest 15%, and that the men in all other sections of the social scale raised about the same number of children. These assumptions lead to exactly the same rates of downward mobility on the relative scale as those shown in Figure 1B.

In practice, the families that disappeared would not all have been exactly at the bottom of the scale. And poor families, even if they were able to raise some children to adulthood, would not generally have been able to raise as many as wealthier families. Figure 2B is a closer approximation of reality. It assumes that the 15% who failed to reproduce themselves were scattered between ranks 0 and 30 on the relative scale; two thirds between ranks 0 and 15, and one third between ranks 15 and 30. It also assumes that the rate of population growth among the families that were in the upper half of the scale in the first generation was twice as great as the rate of growth among those families of the bottom half that did manage to perpetuate themselves to some extent. The refinements of the model shown in Figure 2B lead to more downward mobility over most of the relative scale, but less at the very bottom. Overall, an average family in the second generation is about 8% lower on the relative scale than it was in the first generation. This is an average only of those families that still existed in the second generation; it does not count those that had disappeared.

At this point we can make a useful check on the plausibility of the model. The assumptions embodied in Figure 2B lead to a population growth rate slightly above 1.5% per year for the families that were in the top half of the relative scale in the first generation. Given what is known about the growth rate of populations that have enough to eat, it seems reasonable and indeed rather conservative to suppose that when the growth rate for the population as a whole was 0.6%, the growth rate for the families that were in the top half of the scale in the first generation would have been 1.5%. These two figures *alone* would mean that the

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families that formed the top 50% of the population in the first generation would have formed 62% of the population in the second generation, and therefore that a family that was at rank 50 in the first generation would have fallen to about rank 38 in the second.

### *THE MODEL AND REALITY*

Did the families that moved down the relative scale also decline in absolute wealth? Almost certainly they did, even if we allow the possibility that the standard of living for the society as a whole was stable or rising for much of the period under consideration.

Some scholars agree with Fei Hsiao-tung and Chih-I Chang (1948: 1) that "The economic life of the peasant has been deteriorating ever since his first contact with the West." Others dispute any such assertion. In his study of Shandong and Hebei, Myers (1970: 210) said:

> It may be concluded that peasant living standards over the period [1880-1937] did not decline except during times of prolonged poor harvests and war. If we accept Buck's data we can even admit the possibility of a slight improvement in living standards for this region.

From the viewpoint of the present study, Myers's statement requires several comments. His exclusion of periods of warfare from the generalization is an important one; the trend would have been less favorable if he had chosen the period 1880-1949. Furthermore, the two provinces he studied were the two least plagued by landlordism in all of China. According to one study, between 1912 and 1936 the proportion of peasants who were full owners increased from 67% to 72% in Hebei and from 69% to 75% in Shandong, while the average for China as a whole was falling from 49% to 46% (Zhang You-yi, 1957: 729). And Buck's data, on which Myers places considerable weight (Myers, 1970: 207-210), deals with a sample of the rural population which may

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have been more prosperous than the average for the areas studied. Buck's main survey of 16,786 farms found an average farm size to be 4.18 acres. His data on standards of living at the time of the survey (1929-1933) come from a much smaller sample of 449 farms, which had an average size of 7.5 acres. His data on

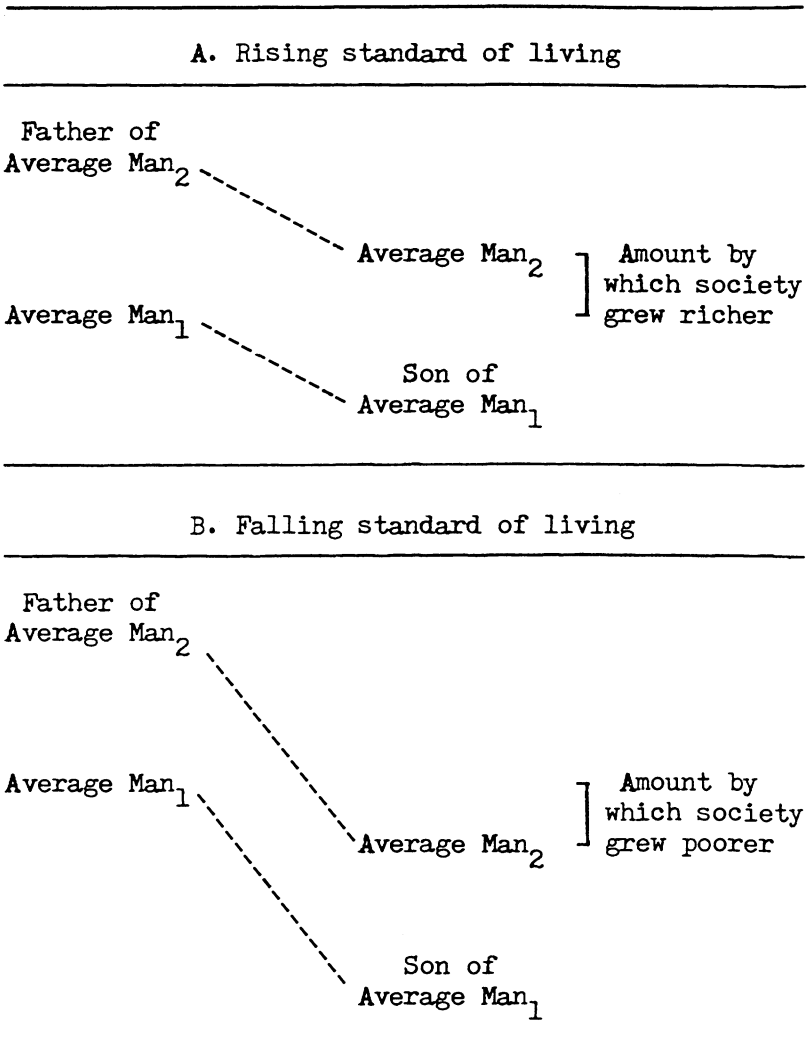


**Figure 3: The way downward mobility on the relative scale expresses itself in changes in absolute wealth, if the standard of living is rising or falling.**

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recent changes in the standard of living, which show an improvement in 82% of the localities checked, come from yet a third sample for which the number of informants and the size of their farms is unspecified. The attitudes expressed suggest that this third sample, like the second, may have been biased toward the well-to-do. Of the localities reporting a rise in the standard of living, only 27% reported better food as an example of the improvement; this would have been the main content of any improvement in the economic status of the poor peasants. The people questioned were most interested in the availability of better clothing (56%) and the replacement of oil lamps by kerosene lamps (45%). These sound like preoccupations of the middle and rich peasants. A separate study of 804 families, which dealt specifically with changes in the quality of diet, found "no significant trends" (Buck, 1964: 430, 437-438, 458-459).

Given the rates of downward mobility on the relative scale shown in Figure 2B, a family that was at rank 50 in 1850 would have fallen approximately to rank 10 by 1937. For a family at rank 10 in 1937 to have been as rich as a family at rank 50 in 1850 would have required an immense rise in living standards. So great a rise would have been unmistakable both to the Chinese and to foreign observers, and it was not seen. Even if we accept Myers's conclusions as valid for substantial areas in some periods, Myers suggests only a slight rise. Certainly the level of wealth in the bottom 1% of the social scale did not change appreciably; in all periods these were people who owned nothing and were in the process of starving to death. It follows that families that were downwardly mobile at the rates shown in Figure 2B were growing poorer in absolute terms.

Figure 3A shows what happens to the real wealth of families, from one generation to the next, if there is downward mobility on the relative scale and a slight rise in standards of living. Average $Man_1$ is at rank 50 in the first generation. Average $Man_2$ is at rank 50 in the following generation. Standards of living have been rising, so Average $Man_2$ is richer in absolute terms than Average $Man_1$ was. But Average $Man_2$ is poorer than his father, and the son of Average $Man_1$ is also poorer than Average $Man_1$ was. This deserves emphasis: a stable or slightly rising standard

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of living (the average man of one generation has as much or more wealth and income as the average man of the preceding generation) is fully compatible with a trend to downward mobility in terms of real wealth (the average man of a given generation has less wealth and income than his father had). The average discussed above is the median, but the same applies to the mean (see Table 3).

If the standards of living were declining (Figure 3B), the absolute level of wealth of most families would decline very rapidly—more so than could be accounted for by either downward mobility on the relative scale or declining standards of living alone.

The question of whether the average level of wealth in Chinese society was increasing or decreasing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries should be approached with extreme care, since widespread downward mobility on the relative scale could have created an impression that standards of living were declining even if they were actually stable or rising. Given the situation shown in Figure 3A, the average man would have observed that he and most of his neighbors were poorer than their fathers had been, and might have concluded mistakenly that standards of living had dropped. Impressionistic testimony about declining standards of living should therefore be treated with more reserve than would otherwise seem necessary.

Changes in the concentration of wealth would also have affected the implications of downward mobility on the relative scale. If wealth were becoming more concentrated, then a wealthy family which moved slightly down the relative scale could have kept the same level of absolute wealth, while poor families would have become poorer at a rate even faster than their downward movement on the relative scale would lead us to expect.

There was a complex interaction between social mobility and concentration of wealth, particularly concentration of landholdings. Families high on the social scale generally owned land. Downward mobility involved loss of land and other forms of wealth.[4] It generally passed into the hands of those higher on the scale; they were the ones who had the capital to buy land

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as it came on the market, to give mortgages which could later be foreclosed, to make loans at high interest, and so on. Chen Han-seng (1936: 96) said that "At least 70 or 80 per cent of the landless peasants in Kwangtung [Guangdong] have lost some of their land possessions through mortgage." The fact that many landless peasants descended from families that had lost land only one or two generations before was a considerable help to the Chinese Communist Party during land reform; it could say that it was returning the land to its original owners (*tudi hui laojia*) and be believed (Nanfang Ribao, 1950: December 10: 3; December 15: 1).

It is hard to tell whether or not wealth was becoming more concentrated in China; that is, whether the proportion of the total social wealth which was held by the people at the top of the scale was increasing or decreasing. Wealth continually circulated up and down the scale. When a family lost part of its wealth and moved down the scale, the portion of wealth that they lost usually went to another family higher on the scale. The portion that they still retained they carried with them as they moved down. In the long run these two effects—wealth moving up the scale by being transferred from one family to another and wealth moving down the scale when the families that owned it moved down—were of comparable magnitudes. It is hard to tell which effect was stronger. But regardless of whether or not wealth was actually becoming more concentrated, it would have had the appearance of becoming more concentrated because the majority of all transfers of wealth were from the poor to the rich.

The following is a hypothetical example of how this worked. Let us say that in a certain village a household can be called "rich" if it owns 50 *mou* or more of land. Landlord Wang, at age 35, owns 60 mou. By the time he is 50 he owns 80 mou; he then dies, *fenjia* (division through inheritance) occurs, and each of his two sons, who are about 25 years old, inherits 40 mou. After ten more years one son has acquired 20 additional mou for a total of 60; the other has been less clever and still owns only the 40 mou he inherited. The sons are now about 35 years old. From the viewpoint of the poor there has been a concentration of wealth, since the Wangs, already "rich" a generation before,

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have acquired 40 additional mou of land. But the amount of land owned by "rich" households as defined above is 60 mou, the same as before. And the two sons own a total of 100 mou, or an average of 50 each at an age when their father owned 60 mou, so there has been a slight tendency toward downward mobility in terms of landholdings per household.

The village of Guixi, in central Guangdong, provides a real example of how this process worked over a very long period. Originally, this was a multiple surname village which did not have any families named Huang. At some point in the Ming or the early Qing a merchant family named Huang came to Guixi and bought land. The Huangs accumulated wealth and became the biggest landholders in the village. From this came several results. One was that the land of the other, poorer families drifted into the hands of the Huangs; by 1949 all the land of the three other surname groups in the village had fallen to the Huangs. Another is that the families of surnames other than Huang moved down the social scale and disappeared off the bottom; by 1949 they formed only 26% of the population, and all were poor peasants or laborers. Meanwhile, the Huangs had been increasing in number and expanding down the social scale. By 1949 the Huangs comprised about 35 households of landlords and rich peasants, 35 of middle peasants, and 60 of poor peasants and laborers. Many households of Huangs had evidently lost to their richer relatives the land they had inherited (Kong, 1950: 3).

### *AVERAGE TRENDS AND REAL FAMILIES*

The evidence that large numbers of poor men were unable to have children, or to raise as many children to maturity as the rich could, is overwhelming. This means that there was a substantial degree of downward mobility on the relative scale. Figure 2B is based on reasonable estimates of the magnitudes involved, although it cannot be precisely correct. Patterns of mobility measured in terms of absolute wealth would have been slightly different from the patterns of mobility on the relative scale, as a result of changes in the average level of wealth and in the degree of concentration of wealth, but the difference

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probably was not very striking over the long run. Figure 2B can therefore be accepted as a crude approximation of the downward trends, both in relative and in absolute terms, which existed in Chinese society.

But even if accurate it is only a picture of average trends. When the figure shows a decline from rank 60 to rank 50 on the relative scale, this does not mean that all the families which were at rank 60 in the first generation fell to rank 50 in the second; it only means that the average location of these families was rank 50 in the second generation. Some would have fallen far below 50, some would have fallen, but not so low, and some even would have risen on the scale.

The families that did not disappear in the second generation would not necessarily have kept the same order on the relative scale that they had had in the first generation; there was a significant amount of random reshuffling. But *this* reshuffling would have been completely balanced, as it was a matter of families trading places on the relative scale. In this respect, there would have been equal amounts of upward and downward movement. It would not have affected the average trend of downward mobility. To put it another way, if we took all the families that moved up from rank 60 on the relative scale and added the amounts by which they were upwardly mobile, and took all the families that moved down from rank 60 and added the amounts by which they were downwardly mobile, the total downward mobility would exceed the total upward mobility by the same amount as if there had been no individual variations between families and the only source of social mobility had been the different birth and death rates at different levels of the social scale, the effects of which have been discussed. If the assumptions about birth and death rates embodied in Figure 2B were approximately correct, the total downward mobility would have exceeded the total upward mobility by an amount equal to 10% on the relative scale for each of the families that had originally been at rank 60. For every family that rose from rank 60 to rank 65 there was another that fell from 60 to 35.

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If the statistical average was a decline, both on the relative scale and in real wealth, does this mean that most families were losing ground? We might imagine that the average declines shown in Figure 2B were made up of a majority of families that stayed at the same level or rose, and a minority that fell a great distance. Thus, one family falling from rank 60 to rank 28 would balance out two families that rose from 60 to 61. Before we can accept the obvious hypothesis that a majority of all the families in China became poorer from one generation to the next, we must deal with questions of statistical bunching. Could the downward mobility have been sharply concentrated in a few areas, or in a few families in each area?

One major factor in the proof for downward mobility was famine, and death by famine was confined for the most part to North China. Within North China famines were unevenly distributed, although only one of the 59 xian Buck studied had had no famines at all. A more important factor however was sexual imbalance, which spread over most of China.

There would have been some areas, especially near large cities, where economic development in the form of new crops, intensive vegetable farming for urban markets, and so on would have been enough to reverse a general trend of impoverishment. But these were only a small fraction of China. The cities themselves do not seem to have provided massive exceptions to the general trend. The peasants were quite mobile, traveling in search of work or simply food. Yet most of this migration was from one rural area to another, rather than into the cities. The clear implication is that opportunities in urban areas were not vastly greater than those in the villages. Much of the urban population was desperately poor (Lamson, 1934: 15). Sexual imbalance seems to have been worse in the cities than in the countryside. It seems likely, then, that the average downward trend for China as a whole was also an average downward trend for most localities.

In a given locality, might the downward trend have been concentrated among a few families? The main reasons why an indi-

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vidual family might have been impoverished relative to its neighbors are:

(1) Having a large number of sons survive to adulthood, among whom the family wealth had to be divided. Given the birth and death rates used in Figure 2B, almost half the men who survived to maturity would have had at least one brother survive to maturity. With a higher rate of population growth, a clear majority of the mature men would have had mature brothers.

(2) Wedding expenses: these would have been required of every family that had children survive, but more prosperous families would probably have spent more on a wedding.

(3) Funeral expenses: same as the above.

(4) Stupidity, laziness or bad luck: these would have been randomly distributed.

(5) Addiction to drugs or gambling: these would have caused serious difficulties for only a few families, rather than being spread evenly among the population.

(6) The vicious cycle of usury, in which a man runs short of money, is forced to borrow, and then is drastically impoverished by the interest payments: this would have fallen heavily on those who had some initial bad luck. Still, debt was very widespread in China. Buck's figures (1937: 403) indicate that between 1929 and 1933 about 39% of all farm households borrowed, and that both the proportion of households in debt and the size of the debts were slightly higher in the South than in the North.

(7) Sickness: this might have fallen especially heavily on a few unlucky families.

The factors tending to impoverish particular families seem to have been spread in a fairly random fashion in Chinese society. If this was in fact the case, it follows that from one generation to the next a large proportion of the families in China, probably not much less than half, declined on the relative scale by the average amount or more. Another large group would have declined by less than the average amount. Those who remained

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TABLE 3

Fifteen Men and Their Sons: Hypothetical

| | Fathers | | Sons | | | Rise or Fall | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Rank | Wealth | | Rank | Wealth | Rank | Wealth |
| A | 100 | 300 | a-1 | 94 | 122 | - 6 | -178 |
| | | | a-2 | 81 | 57 | -19 | -243 |
| B | 93 | 100 | b | 100 | 300 | + 7 | +200 |
| C | 86 | 65 | c-1 | 88 | 74 | + 2 | + 9 |
| | | | c-2 | 75 | 44 | -11 | - 21 |
| D | 79 | 49 | (no sons) | | | | |
| E | 71 | 37 | e-1 | 69 | 33 | - 2 | - 4 |
| | | | e-2 | 50 | 19 | -21 | - 18 |
| F | 64 | 29 | f | 62 | 28 | - 2 | - 1 |
| G | 57 | 24 | g-1 | 38 | 13 | -19 | - 11 |
| | | | g-2 | 31 | 11 | -26 | - 13 |
| H | 50 | 19 | h | 56 | 23 | + 6 | + 4 |
| I | 43 | 15 | i | 25 | 9 | -18 | - 6 |
| J | 36 | 12 | j | 44 | 16 | + 8 | + 4 |
| K | 29 | 9 | k | 19 | 7 | -10 | - 2 |
| M | 21 | 7 | m-1 | 12 | 5 | - 9 | - 2 |
| | | | m-2 | 6 | 3 | -15 | - 4 |
| N | 14 | 5 | (no sons) | | | | |
| P | 7 | 3 | p | 0 | 1 | - 7 | - 2 |
| Q | 0 | 1 | (no sons) | | | | |
| Mean | 50 | 45 | | 50 | 45 | - 8 | - 17 |
| Median | 50 | 19 | | 50 | 19 | - 9 | - 4 |



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at the same level, or rose, would have been a distinct minority. Fei Hsiao-tung and Chih-I Chang (1948: 128-129, 283) have described areas where it was almost impossible for a family to rise by farming, and society was divided between a majority who lived off the land and were downwardly mobile and a small minority who rose, often strikingly, by military service, smuggling, and the like.

Table 3 is an illustration of what might happen to a group of families from one generation to the next, allowing for all the circumstances that might cause families to do better or worse than average, if the picture of Chinese society in the preceding pages is correct. It is intended primarily to show how the average son can be poorer than his father, whether "average" is taken to be mean or median, even when there is no change in the standard of living (average level of wealth) from one generation to the next, and no significant change in the degree of concentration of wealth.

When analyzing the relationship between the average trend and what happened to particular families, it is vital to remember the difference between the trends at the top of the social scale and those in the middle and lower sections. Among the wealthy, the model presented in this paper indicates only a slight downward trend; in Figure 2B the richest 4% of one generation simply spread out slightly to become the richest 5% of the next generation. Behind this rather small average movement lay substantial amounts of both upward and downward mobility. Many of the rich derived their wealth from political influence, which could be gained or lost quite suddenly in the unstable period under consideration. Belden (1970: 151) has described the way political and military figures were able to accumulate immense new landholdings during the warfare of the 1940s. On the other hand, Muramatsu (1966: 574, 589-594, 599) has described how some large absentee landlords who had been dependent on the cooperation of local officials and tax collectors were ruined by tax increases and loss of control over their tenants after the Guomindang victory of 1927. In much of Sichuan the families that had been landlords in the late Qing were severely weakened by the 1930s, and over 80% of landlord land was held by "new landlords" (Gunde, 1976; Wu, 1940: 112). If rich families were

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rising and falling quite rapidly it might not have been either noticeable or particularly important that there was slightly more downward than upward mobility.

It was among the poor that the downward trend was really striking. Even Myers (1970: 42), who generally argues that the peasants were not in desperate straits, quotes a former village head as saying: "Those who are very poor must buy their goods from other people. The poorer one is, the poorer he becomes."

There are hardly any statistical data dealing directly with social mobility among the mass population of China. Figure 4 shows in simplified form the results of a study of social mobility in ten villages of Panyu xian, Guangdong, from 1928 to 1933 (Chen, 1936: 138). It seems for the most part in accord with the conclusions of this paper, but it should not be given too much weight; the sample (924 households after fenjia) was small, and it covered a short period of economic crisis. 846 families stayed in the same social class, 19 were upwardly mobile, and 59 were downwardly mobile. There were eight households which made

| Class | Up | Stable | Down |
|---|---|---|---|
| Landlords | | 28 | |
| | 4 | | 2 |
| Rich peasants | | 95 | |
| | 9 | | 21 |
| Middle peasants | | 170 | |
| | 3 | | 35 |
| Poor peasants | | 480 | |
| | 4 | | 8 |
| Agricultural laborers | | 73 | |

**Figure 4.**

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double shifts on the class scale and were therefore counted twice in Figure 4. Young (1970: 641) gives similar figures for a larger sample covering several provinces, but they deal with the same short time period and the categories are less clear.

### *DOWNWARD MOBILITY FOR WOMEN?*

Most families were downwardly mobile from one generation to the next, but the family was usually a group defined in terms of some man. The real meaning of the statement above is that most men were poorer than their fathers. Women shifted from one family to another when they married, and this shift usually moved them up the social scale; the average woman married a man whose parents were slightly richer than her own parents. This meant that there was substantially less downward mobility for women than for men.

The most obvious factor here is sex imbalance. Fewer female than male babies were born in the first place, and of the female babies a smaller percentage survived to maturity. This made it easy for women to find husbands; it was only men who might be unable to marry because they were too poor.

A wealthy man might have several women in his household: secondary wives, female servants, and so forth. This phenomenon presents immense difficulties in any analysis of social mobility among women. How many such women were there? From how far down the relative scale had they come? How should we regard them—should a concubine or servant in a landlord household be considered to have been higher on the social scale than the wife of a middle peasant? How many children did such women have?

We have even less exact information about the lives of Chinese women than we do about the lives of Chinese men, so considerable caution seems desirable. Ho Ping-ti (1959: 58-61) has found evidence of staggering levels of female infanticide in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Under these conditions there might have been a very strong tendency toward downward mobility for men and none at all for women; almost all the women who survived to maturity would have been able to marry men fairly high up the social scale. By the twentieth century

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there was much less infanticide, and women who formerly would have died young were instead growing up to live lives of poverty. The average woman would have been slightly poorer than her mother, but the difference would have been much less than the margin by which the average man was poorer than his father.

## CONCLUSIONS

A simplified outline of Chinese society now appears as follows.

At the top of the economic scale was a group, probably not less than 10% of the population, in which family wealth usually seemed to be increasing; income exceeded expenditures. They acquired more land than they sold, and so forth. However, children were born into this group faster than new wealth was acquired, so the average level of wealth per person declined over time, and there was some tendency toward downward mobility. Only those families that had unusually few sons survive to maturity, or that acquired new wealth at an unusually high rate, were able to maintain or raise their positions.

Next was a group in which income and expenditures were approximately balanced, for the average family in an average year—but the birth of new children tended to reduce the level of wealth per person at a significant rate.

Finally there were the poor. Their average incomes over the long run were so low that even though they produced less than their share of children the level of wealth per person in poor families declined rather rapidly.

This paper has carefully distinguished two ways of looking at changes in levels of wealth in Chinese society: comparing the wealth of the average man with the wealth of the average man of the preceding generation (which measures changes in the standard of living), and comparing the wealth of the average man with the wealth of his father. The first measure will give a more favorable picture of society than the second, regardless of whether standards of living were rising, falling, or stable. The first of these criteria is the significant one for most questions of macroeconomics. The second, which indicates the serious decline in the fortunes of most individual families, is probably the most

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important in any analysis of mass attitudes. The Chinese people did not describe the situation in quite the terms used here, but neither were they oblivious to it. They were conditioned to a continuous and desperate struggle for wealth. Hinton (1968: 38) described the situation of even the well-to-do in Hebei:

> Security, relative comfort, influence, position, and leisure [were] maintained amidst a sea of the most dismal and frightening poverty and hunger—a poverty and hunger which at all times threatened to engulf any family which relaxed its vigilence, took pity on its poor neighbors, failed to extract the last copper of rent and interest, or ceased for an instant the incessant accumulation of grain and money. Those who did not go up went down, and those who went down often went to their deaths or at least to the dissolution and dispersal of their families.

This background helps to explain why the struggle for wealth took such a violent form during the land reform.

The attitudes generated by the trend of downward mobility would have been different at different levels of the economic scale. Near the top this trend would not have been very visible and, to the extent that such a trend did exist, it would have been caused primarily by fenjia. This would not have led to any resentment of the system involved. At lower levels of the scale the downward trend was more evident, and it was more likely to result from an outflow of wealth from the family rather than from fenjia. The system was visibly unsatisfactory in that peasant families had no assurance of maintaining even their low levels of wealth, and the problem was visibly related to the flow of wealth from them to the rich in the form of rent, interest, and the like. This situation helped make the revolution possible and necessary.

## NOTES

1. Aird (1961: 82), of the U.S. Bureau of the Census, has presented an adjusted version of the 1953 census figures, in which the sex ratio is 103.7:100 for the population as a whole and 105.6:100 for the people of childbearing age. I find his figures extremely implausible. Many of his comments on the potential sources of error in the census figures

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appear valid. But in the amended figures which he presents as an alternative, he sacrifices accuracy to precision; he chooses to assume that Chinese demographic patterns were very similar to those of other countries, for which exact figures are available, and makes the smallest possible allowance for the known peculiarities of the Chinese situation, for which he would have to guess the exact magnitudes or accept Chinese census figures. Thus, his figures on the age distribution of the population are very regular. Even the age group born between 1939 and 1943 appears to have suffered little loss from the harsh conditions of that period—less than half the loss shown in the official census figures. This is especially bizarre in light of his own earlier comment that the official figures are more regular than seems really plausible (Aird, 1961: 65).

Aird is aware that there was a tendency toward neglect of female children in China, and even female infanticide, especially during times of crisis. He argues that even a "high" estimate for infanticide and neglect would not explain the sex imbalance found in the census figures, which should therefore be discarded. But a close examination of Aird's "high" estimate shows that for children born between 1939 and 1943, the period in which the census figures imply the greatest excess of female infant mortality over male, Aird is assuming a *lower* rate of infant mortality for females than for males. In a normal population female babies have a slightly better chance of survival than male babies, and Aird's "high" estimate that infanticide and neglect killed 1.5% of the female babies is not enough to overcome this differential (Aird, 1961: 77-78). I do not regard this as a high estimate; in the absence of any evidence for Aird's figures I will accept the impressions conveyed by the census figures and various other sources that infant mortality was higher for females than for males during the 1930s and the 1940s.

2. I am using total personal (or family) wealth to define my social scale. I believe that total wealth, yearly income, and sociopolitical influence are closely enough connected that I could have used any of them, or any combination, without affecting the validity of my conclusios.

3. I am treating Figures 2A and 2B as if the same diagrams could be used to represent two different things: the entire population of China at one date as compared with the entire population 25 years later, and one generation as compared with the children of that generation. This is certainly valid as an approximation. For it to be precisely correct it would be necessary for the age distribution of the population to remain constant, and for the interval between generations to be exactly 25 years.

4. Sometimes this was simply a matter of definition; if a crop failed and a family had to sell half its land to make ends meet, this would shift the family down the relative scale. Sometimes it was cause and effect; if a man had several sons and his family went through fenjia, the same amount of land would be spread among several households, and this would mean the family had been downwardly mobile from one generation to the next. This is not loss of land directly, but it was likely to lead to loss of land; the new households, each having less land than the original household had had, would be more vulnerable to disasters which could force them to sell land. In any case, for a family to move to the bottom of the scale meant for it to lose all its land and other wealth.

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