HIERARCHY, ILLUSION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

(A comment on Ping-ti Ho, "Aspects of Social Mobility in China, 1368-1911",
CSSH, I, 330–359)

Historic China and pre-industrial Europe were both once typed as rigid societies with their population more or less frozen into fixed social groupings. Since in both cases the trend of research has altered this view, one cannot help wondering why it ever prevailed. The present revision in Chinese studies is the more dramatic in being a return to the view of Quesnay, namely, that Confucian ideals guaranteed a constant social circulation: men of merit could rise in the world, but their sons, if they were inept, would sink. In medieval and early modern European studies there has been a steady shift away from emphasis on hereditary fixity to recognition that very considerable currents of social mobility may exist within a stable social structure.

In both fields writers had begun by relying on ideals of order, rather incautiously, as a clue to actual custom. Confucian philosophy and ethical doctrine, it is true, gave rise to Quesnay's happy guess, but when this was discarded as doubtful, scholars fell back on legal texts. Here they found ideals of order expressed in an array of distinctions of juridical status. Instead of still postulating that these were mere lines of demarcation between groups, lines that a man could cross, they chose to regard them as effective barriers to mobility. The same kind of over-interpretation and misinterpretation of juridical distinctions occurred in European studies. In the use of medieval philosophical and ethical writing, too, references to ranked orders and estates were taken as implying that the lines of demarcation between these hemmed people in for life.

How did this presumption against social mobility arise? In European studies one might say that it came through a too liberal extension of the principle of heredity which was present at the top of the scale, in the nobility, and at the bottom, in medieval serfdom; but for China, where the hereditary nobility were known to be insignificant in number, this is hardly a reasonable explanation. It is more likely that Western writers in both fields developed the presumption by drifting into a certain mechanical way of using the concept of class. In historical work on a remote scene over a broad sweep of time, without attention to the tedious detail of family histories, it is particularly easy to assume that the members of any group were in it for life. As Schumpeter remarked, the circumstance of a class being fairly stable in character, changing only slowly, may

create a false impression that the membership is equally stable. He likened this to the illusion of supposing that the people in a hotel were always the same people.

The inferences that were drawn from Western traditions of hierarchical thought about the nature of medieval society certainly require some such explanation. Even the cult of ancestry among the nobles themselves, put together from legends and the lore of stable and mews, had to recognize the ennoblement of new men and the rise of their families. The emphasis of social philosophy on the structural order of medieval society, on its ranked estates, gives no ground for inferring disapproval of the existing institutional means to social mobility, in the towns, in the service of nobles and monarchs, and within the hierarchy of the Church. Although organic social theory, stressing the value of every function in society, from the humblest to the highest, carried overtones of the lesson of contentment with a given task or lot in life, it never implied that a man should not avail himself of legitimate means of improving his lot or of securing a better lot than his father's.

In the second main form of Western hierarchical tradition, derived from the fifth century writings of the pseudo-Dionysius, the scheme of the downward diffusion of power through the nine grades of celestial beings and through the government of the Church is clearly theological, juridical, and political. Yet the scheme is so extraordinarily impressive, it dwells so on the splendor of the celestial hierarchy, as to create an emotional presumption that its intent went further, that it was designed to inculcate a spirit of respect, not only for government but for all social superiors, and would thus militate against social mobility.

Essayists could the more readily pass on this impression because medieval commentators rarely said anything about the application of the scheme to society except in the government of the Church and in the duty of civil obedience. William of Auvergne turned it into a theoretical model of monarchy, with a rather flat-footed comparison of the work of royal officials to the functions of the angels in the service of God. In his effort to glorify the officials in this way he did not stop to note that they were likely to be men risen through education and looking for promotion in the royal service. Bonaventura saw the principle of hierarchy as upholding the separation of the three estates of Church, nobles and commoners but there it is simply a matter of juridical separation. One of Berthold of Regensburg's popular sermons draws an arbitrary grouping of the non-noble lay population by occupations into the scheme; he censures upward movement into the knights and nobles, but not at lower levels. A fifteenth century English writer who drew out nine distinctions of rank among gentlemen, by analogy with the celestial orders, allowed upward movement both into the lower ranks from outside, and for the descendants of the new men, into the higher ranks.

It is not only for emotional reasons that the scheme lent itself to over-inter-

pretation, but through the principle of functional separation of grades. This held throughout the celestial hierarchy. Celestial beings were fixed in one or other of the nine grades because they were incapable by nature of performing any other functions but those attached to the grade to which they belonged. They could rise a little within that grade by striving to shine more brightly, but they could not be promoted. They were like aristocrats serving at court by virtue of ancient titles. In a slightly different form, to the effect that a lower function could not be combined with a higher, the principle is applied again in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, to drive home the lesson that monks are not to interfere with the work of the secular clergy. The eighth appendix to the pseudo-Dionysian treatise on the ecclesiastical hierarchy is a scathing letter to the monk Demophilos, who had turned a priest out of his church and taken over his function of preaching to the people. He is told that he is a wolf in sheep's clothing, too ignorant to preach, that he should not have leapt out of his proper grade, he should have been content with his station. The same principle is applied again to the laity but only as they attain a measurable status in the hierarchy, that is, as they strive to draw nearer to God, by devotion to holiness. Fixity in such status was however not so much a fact as an ideal, to be achieved only by steadfast devotion, in the higher grades, to virginity. Jonas of Orleans points out that one cannot leap in and out of such a state. Thus the principle of functional separation within the hierarchy carried no clear opposition to social mobility in the ordinary sense of the term. Medieval towns were applying the principle in their ruling that a citizen should belong to only one gild.

Nor did the ideal of the individual's fixity in one function run throughout the whole scheme of hierarchy. Pseudo-Dionysius makes a point of the fact that priests can be promoted and become bishops. He mentions also that the higher officials of the Church have more knowledge. One might infer that study would help in obtaining promotion, but there is no suggestion of urging study in the spirit of Confucius. The picture of the secular clergy as they form the upper part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy is more like that of a bureaucracy in which knowledge comes with seniority and promotion by mysterious favor.

The presumption against social mobility in Chinese and European studies thus came in both cases by misinterpretation of the historic emphasis on juridical order through too mechanical a concept of class. In the first case this encouraged doubts as to the influence of philosophy, and in the second it ascribed a kind of conservatism to philosophy which is now hard to conceive as part of its intent. Meanwhile it is to be hoped that the advance of quantitative research will serve the end of more than incidental qualification of the old generalizations about rigidity, the end of better theoretical understanding of the so-called traditional civilizations.

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