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INTRODUCTION: CLASS AND CLASS FORMATION IN CHINESE SOCIETY

James L. Watson

The general theme of this book – class and social stratification – was chosen because it cuts across the disciplinary boundaries of the China field and incorporates those whose interests might be broadly defined as 'sociological', irrespective of academic title. Contributors include two anthropologists, three sociologists, three political scientists, and an historian. The project began as a conference sponsored jointly by the Contemporary China Institute and the American SSRC and ACLS. During our discussions it became apparent that we did not all share the same approach to the study of 'social class' in contemporary Chinese society. This is not surprising given that the Chinese terms for classes and status groups are very difficult to pin down. The Marxian notion of class as a set of relationships based ultimately on the ownership of the means of production is no longer applicable in China and, yet, this mode of analysis still plays an important role in society. In effect, Chinese authorities operated for thirty years (1949–79) with a vocabulary and a conceptual apparatus more suited to the needs of land reform in a traditional peasant society than to the organization of production in a modern socialist state. The problems arising are discussed at length in this book.

The study of contemporary Chinese society is made all the more difficult by the fact that little is actually known about the *pre*-revolutionary class system. Among historians, the issue has been clouded by a preoccupation with the tiny elite of scholar-bureaucrats who served the imperial state. There have been several attempts (misguided in my opinion) to treat this elite stratum as a dominant 'class'.[1] This approach has been criticized on the grounds that

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scholar-bureaucrats represented only the 'tip of the iceberg' and did not constitute a class in and of themselves.[2] On the whole, Western historians have not made a concerted effort to analyse the class system in late-imperial Chinese society. The situation for Western anthropologists and sociologists is even more discouraging. Anthropologists in particular have treated social class as a peripheral issue,[3] overshadowed by kinship groups (lineages, clans, etc.) and voluntary associations which cut across divisions based on class. Chinese scholars (based in the People's Republic) have, of course, contributed a great deal to our understanding of the pre-revolutionary class structure.[4] The difficulty with many of these studies is that the authors build on Mao Zedong's 1926 survey of rural classes and, as such, they tend to accept a preconceived model of society. Class is not treated as a *problem* to be analysed; it is taken for granted.

DESTRATIFICATION AND THE LIMITS OF SOCIAL ENGINEERING

It can be argued that this is a particularly opportune time to examine the Chinese class system. Party officials have reversed many of the earlier policies which were designed to transform society overnight. The post-Cultural Revolution era has been marked by a return to pragmatism and an acceptance of the fact that utopian socialism cannot be achieved in a single generation. This reversal is paralleled by a shift from radical programmes based on an ideology of destratification to the promotion of new guidelines which may lead to the restratification of Chinese society.[5]

Discussions of destratification relate to another subject of general interest: the limits of 'social engineering'. How far can a society, especially one with a strong peasant heritage, be pushed by state authorities who are determined to destroy old social institutions and introduce new ones? The process begins, according to William Parish, by redistributing key resources. He finds (Chapter 5) that, after thirty years of destratification campaigns, China is 'slightly more equal [with respect to income] than the average socialist state'. Parish acknowledges that this is indeed an important achievement, given the baseline from which the campaigns began in the 1950s. In addition to income, he considers education, housing, and

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the distribution of consumer items – all of which are in short supply. In China the best schools are often reserved for exceptional students, most of whom tend to be the children of government officials, technocrats, and intellectuals. Housing has always been limited in China, particularly in the larger cities. As Parish notes, certain social groups (notably cadres, industrial workers, technicians) are protected from the intense competition for living space. The distribution of consumer durables and food items is another source of contention in China. Government officials and Party cadres often enjoy special access to these goods, much to the annoyance of ordinary Chinese citizens. Parish concludes, therefore, that there has indeed been a levelling of incomes since the revolution but this does not mean that all vestiges of economic and social privilege have been eliminated.

Another aspect of social engineering in China which has gained widespread publicity in the West is the women's liberation movement. It is widely assumed that the Chinese government has succeeded in its campaign to abolish traditional, androcentric attitudes and practices. There have, of course, been notable advances for women, particularly in the legal domain (see Elisabeth Croll's essay on marriage reforms, Chapter 8). But there is considerable evidence to suggest that Chinese women are far from attaining parity with their male cohorts in respect to income, employment, and education. Martin Whyte's paper (Chapter 9) examines the question of sexual equality in detail.

In order to assess the progress of women's liberation campaigns in China, Whyte compares his Chinese sample with similar samples gathered in other societies. His conclusions may come as a surprise to some: 'There does not seem to be much difference in the degree of sexual equality ... between China and the other countries surveyed.' Whyte does acknowledge that the comparison may not be entirely fair given that the Chinese began with a lower level of economic development but, nonetheless, the results of his study are not encouraging. He found that, despite determined efforts at social engineering, women still carry the 'double burden' of outside employment combined with household chores. The circumstances of life in Chinese cities (Whyte's sample is exclusively urban) makes this burden even more difficult to bear. Routine chores such as shopping for food or washing clothes consume vast amounts of time

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and energy. Whyte's interview data confirm Croll's view, derived from mass media sources, that Chinese wives are expected to sacrifice their own careers to provide secure home environments for their husbands (see Chapter 8). A high proportion of Chinese women (in comparison to women in other societies) are now engaged full time in the labour force, but Whyte demonstrates that they tend to cluster in segregated job sectors. In cities, women are employed disproportionately by low-status, collective enterprises (managed at the local level) while men predominate in state-run units. The latter have higher salaries, better security, and superior benefits.

THE CONCEPT OF CLASS IN CHINESE SOCIETY

The study of class in contemporary China is complicated by a number of issues, many of which – as noted earlier – relate to the question of definition. Pre-revolutionary class divisions, based on the ownership of the means of production, no longer play a role in the organization of society, but the notion of traditional classes (e.g., landlord, middle peasant, landless labourer) has survived in the conceptual system. People are still categorized and ranked by a set of class labels which they have inherited (in the patriline) from their fathers and grandfathers.* These labels were originally assigned during the first years of the revolution and, hence, they no longer bear any direct relationship to the occupational or management structures of the 1980s.

The complications of the system are such that the Chinese themselves are not always clear about the use of class terminology.[6] As Gordon White has argued '"class" is not merely an abstract category but a term of living political significance, the definition of which has changed in response to the dynamics of modern Chinese politics'.[7] People are classified, first, in terms of their source of economic support during the three years immediately preceding 1949. The resulting categories, called *chengfen*, are rather specific, defining people as 'poor peasant', 'middle peasant', 'landless labourer', and so forth.[8] Thus, when people are given a *chengfen* label they are identified with a specific stratum which reflects their (pre-revolu-

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* Class labels have been officially deemphasized since January 1979, but this does not mean that they have disappeared altogether. See Jonathan Unger's discussion in Chapter 6.

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tionary) position as exploiters or exploited.[9] The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences defines *chengfen* as 'social role', relating to 'a person's most important background or occupational status before entering revolutionary work' (see discussion by Philip Kuhn in Chapter 2). The term is often used in conjunction with *jieji*, commonly translated as 'class' and perhaps closest to the Marxian conception of social class. *Jieji* is used to identify broader categories such as 'worker' or 'capitalist'. It thereby subsumes *chengfen* categories.[10] In Chinese the two terms are often used together, *jieji chengfen*. Gordon White refers to this combination as 'class *chengfen*';[11] it might also be translated as 'class subsection' or 'subdivision'.

To complicate matters further, another key term (*chushen*) is used to denote one's class of origin. Philip Kuhn (Chapter 2) translates *chushen* as 'social origin' and, drawing on the official dictionary of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, he defines it as 'a person's status as determined by his early experience or his family's economic circumstances'. This, Kuhn argues, is close to the Western concept of 'class background', in that it does not change as one's activities or consciousness change. *Chengfen* labels, on the other hand, are subject to alteration – at least in theory. More will be said about this problem below.

In Chapter 2, Philip Kuhn explores the historical dimension of *jieji*, 'social class'. His conclusions should be of interest to all scholars who work on post-revolutionary Chinese society. *Jieji*, he argues, is a very old ideographic compound. It was taken over by the Japanese in the early twentieth century to represent the Marxian concept of social class and subsequently reintroduced (in this new guise) back into Chinese. In its original form, however, *jie* referred to steps in a scale or rungs on a ladder. *Ji* was taken to be the order of threads in a fabric. Thus, according to Kuhn, this classical compound 'connotes hierarchical degrees on a continuum, rather than groups of people'. It was used to designate 'ranks on a scale' in late antiquity. Even in the 1920s and 1930s, Kuhn argues, many Chinese thinkers (including Mao Zedong) still used *jieji* in this traditional sense. Given the conceptual apparatus available, this may help explain why the Chinese have had difficulty adapting the Western concept of social class to their own society.

Kuhn supports his argument by drawing on Qing sources which show that the Chinese imperial court did not draw social boundaries

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on the basis of relative wealth or poverty. Differences between rich and poor, landlord and labourer, were not perceived as being part of the eternal order of society. Quoting from a Qing text, he maintains that the oscillation of family fortunes was accepted as a 'principle of heaven and earth' and, therefore, not subject to social engineering.

If Kuhn is correct, and there is considerable evidence to suggest that he is,[12] the concept of class (*jieji*) as fostered by Party cadres in the 1950s was based on an alien mode of thought. This does not mean that classes, in the Marxian sense, did not exist in China (clearly they did); nor does the absence of class consciousness on the part of peasants (see n. 12) necessarily invalidate Marxian analyses of Chinese society. But Kuhn's findings do raise some interesting questions concerning the adoption of Western Marxist categories by Chinese leaders during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. As Stuart Schram shows in Chapter 3, Mao Zedong changed his views about the nature of social class several times during his long career. Following Kuhn's and Schram's lead, more research needs to be done on the 'mental history' of the Chinese revolution.[13] We might then be in a better position to understand why certain ideological constructs were adopted and others rejected.

THE NATURE OF CLASS IN MODERN CHINA

Even though it is apparent that the vocabulary of class analysis was little understood in many parts of the country, nearly everyone in China was assigned a class label during the early years of the revolution. In rural areas this was accomplished in the course of land reform campaigns. Based on Mao's 1926 analysis of rural classes,[14] the following five categories were used: landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, and landless labourers. City dwellers were more difficult to categorize and a rather *ad hoc* system of class designations arose: bureaucratic bourgeoisie (exploiting capitalists and merchants), national bourgeoisie (capitalists and merchants willing to work for socialism), petit bourgeoisie (teachers, shopkeepers, low-level employees, doctors), workers, and idlers (the lumpenproletariat, some of whom were defined as 'class enemies').[15] The ambiguities of the urban class system were such that certain professionals, officials, and intellectuals were given the neutral

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label of 'staff'; higher-level bureaucrats who had served the Kuomintang were categorized as 'false staff'.[16] The majority of class labels were ascribed but a handful could be earned. If, for instance, the son of a landlord had distinguished himself during the revolutionary struggles against the Japanese and the Kuomintang, he might receive the label 'revolutionary cadre'. However, as Jonathan Unger notes in Chapter 6, such cases were rare. The vast majority of people had to live with ascribed labels.

The fact that certain class designations could be earned indicates that there was some flexibility in the system. Mao Zedong stressed in his early writings that people could indeed change their class nature by adhering to Party discipline and by accepting a new world view. Yet, as Stuart Schram demonstrates in Chapter 3, Mao's thought on this issue is characterized by an internal contradiction. On one hand, Mao believed that human nature was subject to change but, on the other hand, he did not trust the remnants of China's former exploiting classes. Mao undoubtedly realized that the revolution could not succeed without assistance from skilled technicians and managers. Thus, a distinction was drawn between the exploiting bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie – the latter consisting of scientists, technicians, managers, and intellectuals who were willing to help 'build socialism' under Party leadership. Given the circumstances it was necessary to uphold the view that these experts, who had been trained under the old regime, were capable of transforming their attitudes and, by definition, their class natures. By 1956, a mere seven years after Liberation, Deng Xiaoping justified this policy change in a remarkable statement: the old system of class designations, he argued, 'has lost or is losing its original significance'.[17] In May 1957, an editorial in the *People's Daily* went even further and stated that '[following the victory of socialist transformation] the previous several thousand years of history of a system of class exploitation has been basically concluded' (quoted in Chapter 3). As Schram notes in Chapter 3 (see his n. 13), this editorial reflects Mao's own views at that time.

This editorial was published at the end of the Hundred Flowers campaign. In the course of this movement, many Chinese intellectuals attacked the leadership and the politics of the Communist Party. Schram argues (Chapter 3) that Mao hardened his views regarding the malleability of human nature in the aftermath of this

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disastrous campaign. In 1962 Mao electrified China with a new slogan which became the basis for a new political era: 'Never forget the class struggle!' He called for the training of a 'vast new army of working-class intellectuals' who would not be tainted by questionable class origins. At the same time, Mao warned that the bourgeoisie could easily be 'born anew' in China, just as it had in the Soviet Union (quoted in Chapter 3). In subsequent years, social investigations were carried out to probe the class origins of people in all walks of life (see chapters by Jonathan Unger and Lynn White). The pendulum had swung back to the view that human nature is not easily changed.

During the Cultural Revolution, however, Mao gave implicit support to young radicals who believed that subjective factors, such as correct attitudes and loyalty to the Great Helmsman, should be the main criteria used when selecting Party leaders of the future. The most radical factions of the Red Guards, notably those whose class origins were questionable (i.e., children of the former bourgeoisie), maintained that revolutionary virtue was not an inherited characteristic. The idea of virtue as a key element in Chinese ideology is the theme of Susan Shirk's paper (Chapter 4).

According to Shirk, the movement to promote 'virtuocracy' had as its goal the radical reordering of society by distributing opportunities and rewards to those deemed to be morally virtuous – irrespective of class origin. Political movements based on the arbitrary assessment of virtue are, by definition, unstable; and, as Shirk demonstrates, this is exactly what happened in China. The collapse of virtuocratic policies in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution sparked a serious crisis of belief among radical youth. Many people who reached political maturity during the mid-1960s and early 1970s are now extremely cynical. It is unlikely that they will respond to virtuocratic campaigns in the future.

CLASS AS AN INHERITED CHARACTERISTIC

The Cultural Revolution, of course, was not dominated entirely by radicals who advocated virtuocratic policies. There were others, notably the descendants of 'good class' workers, peasants, and cadres, who argued that revolutionary virtue was an inherited characteristic which could only be acquired by a 'blood transfusion

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of status'.[18] The doctrine of 'natural redness',[19] as it became known, is a two-edged sword. This is demonstrated by Lynn White's analysis of class struggles in Shanghai (Chapter 7). During the early years of the revolution there was considerable flexibility in the determination of class labels for urban peoples.[20] This was due primarily to the complexity of urban society (in comparison to the relative simplicity of drawing class lines in the countryside). Thus, many descendants of the former bourgeoisie rose to positions of great responsibility and power in the cities. Shanghai was a particularly complicated case. In the wake of Mao's 1962 call for a reordering of society, a 'cleansing of the class ranks' campaign was carried out. High-level managers and bureaucrats suddenly found themselves under suspicion as their family histories were investigated in minute detail. Those caught misrepresenting themselves were driven from office and many were sent to the countryside for reeducation. As White shows, the irony was that in Shanghai the purges were led by Party cadres who were themselves of bourgeois origin. White suggests that these leaders 'apparently resented their own origins but hoped to save themselves through communist faith, through a radical will to acquire a new identity' (see Chapter 7). During the Cultural Revolution it was Zhang Chunqiao (a member of the notorious Gang of Four), of bourgeois origin himself, who led the Shanghai movements to suppress those who adhered to the 'blood-line theory' (*xuetong lun*) of revolutionary succession.

There were fewer opportunities for rural leaders to disguise their class origins and, hence, the 'blood-line theory' was used with somewhat less finesse in the countryside. Hereditary notions of virtue were frequently called upon to justify the marginal advantages enjoyed by the so-called 'good class' peasants. In Chapter 6, Jonathan Unger shows how the poor and lower-middle peasants of Guangdong were quick to seize upon the doctrine of 'natural redness' when it suited their needs in the 1950s and 1960s. As circumstances changed in the 1970s, however, the doctrine was abandoned with equal rapidity. In January 1979, the central government announced that class labels were no longer to be emphasized when considering people for appointments or promotions. Based on recent interviews with emigres in Hong Kong, Unger found that the 'structure of discrimination' based on pre-revolutionary class criteria had disappeared from many Guangdong villages by 1982. He argues (Chapter 6)

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that this dramatic change is due primarily to economic causes: the doctrine of natural redness helped 'good class' peasants maintain a slight edge over 'bad class' elements when resources were scarce but, with the recent economic liberalization in the countryside and the push toward privatization, the state no longer holds the only key to economic security. Nearly everyone in the villages surveyed by Unger is now able to earn a reasonable living – irrespective of class background.

Philip Kuhn (Chapter 2) offers another explanation for the demise of the class label system in 1979, one that complements Unger's. According to Kuhn, there has been a shift in emphasis from social origin to social role, as Party leaders move toward a 'less conflictual view' of society. He acknowledges that there are good policy reasons for shelving class labels, but 'a more profound reason may perhaps be sought in layers of Chinese consciousness about social classification which lie far back in history' (see Chapter 2). The concept of social class, as an inherited characteristic, may have had a very brief reign in the context of Chinese history.

THE PROCESS OF CLASS FORMATION

In terms of comparative sociology, what makes the Chinese case particularly interesting is that it presents us with a unique opportunity to observe the *process* of class formation.[21] There is evidence that a new set of classes is emerging, notably in the cities. In Chapter 7, Lynn White argues that old class distinctions (based on ownership of the means of production) were obliterated soon after the revolution in Shanghai. Nonetheless, the need for technical and managerial skills remained unchanged. Engineers, technicians, high-level mechanics, and managers were essential for the smooth operation of Shanghai factories.[22] White (Chapter 7) sums up the position of technocrats in the socialist system: 'Their relation to capital was not expressed in legalistic property terms – but in fact, they controlled it exactly as if they owned it'. As Stuart Schram notes in Chapter 3, one of Mao's greatest fears was the creation of a 'new class' of privileged bureaucrats and technicians along the lines outlined by Djilas.[23]

The children of the pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie formed the core of this 'new class' of technocrats, along with selected representatives of the old proletariat. Their privileged position in the occu-