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Xueguang Zhou

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# The State and Life Chances in Urban China

*Redistribution and Stratification, 1949–1994*

XUEGUANG ZHOU

*Duke University*



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*To Zhaohui and Katie*

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## Preface

This book is about the impact of the state and state policies on ordinary citizens, and how individual lives have been shaped and reshaped by the political twists and turns in the People's Republic of China, from 1949 to 1994. Behind the lifeless numbers, statistics, and academic jargon in this book, I want to tell stories of real people – there were millions of them – who lived through a political environment that witnessed major and often volatile changes in the forty-five-year history of the People's Republic of China. My academic training has taught me to be abstract in theoretical arguments, rigorous in statistical analysis, and systematic in presenting empirical evidence, often, unfortunately, at the expense of real people and real lives. While I was working on research for this book, different images often came to my mind from my personal experience when I grew up in China and from the recollections of many others with whom I am acquainted. It is these real life stories that made up the statistical patterns reported in this book.

I want to share some of these stories with the reader as an introduction to the context of this study. Let me begin with a Chinese scholar I met in the 1980s. He was a talented student in a university in Beijing in the 1950s. During the Hundred-Flower period, he responded to the government's advocacy to criticize the misconducts of the officials in his university. One thing led to another, and for reasons no one could comprehend, he was put in prison – for more than twenty years. Even today, his wife told me, because of the imprinting from his long prison experience, he only sleeps on one side of the bed and turns over in bed on the same spot, no matter how big the bed is.

A friend of mine went to a labor farm in a remote region with his family when he was only six, because his father was purged in the political campaign and sent there. The economic disaster in the early 1960s hit that farm especially hard; many died of starvation. He vividly recalled, witnessed from a child's eyes, that even those who carried the dead bodies for burial were trembling, because they were so hungry that they could barely support their legs. When he left the farm a few years later, of several hundred laborers working there, only a few dozen remained.

Zhaohui, my wife, told me her own experience. When she was a little girl during the Cultural Revolution, her mother was routinely called to the meetings by the "red guards" to be "criticized" simply because of her "exploiting class" family background. Often Zhaohui would walk alone to the corner of the street late at night, waiting for her mother to return. "Many times," she said in a low voice, "I had a feeling that my mother would never come back."

I still have a vivid memory of the humiliation and despair I felt when I saw my father's name on a "Big Character Poster" in a public place in the Cultural Revolution, revealing his "exploiting class" background. As I walked home that day, I felt as if the sky were falling on me, and I tried to avoid anyone on the street. I was only seven or eight years old at the time. When I first began working on this book, my daughter was about that age. Often times when I saw her innocent eyes, I could not help but realize how fast the political turbulence has pushed a young generation to mature!

These stories are by no means extraordinary ones that I deliberately sought for sensational reasons. Any individual who lived through the political turbulence in China can narrate many similar and even more dramatic experiences. They were part of everyday life experience in those years! Indeed, through the lens of social stratification patterns in this book, we can observe many different, often contradicting, images of state socialist China in the second half of the twentieth century. On the one hand, it is undeniable that, in the forty-five-year history of the People's Republic of China, there were impressive improvements in different aspects of living standards for the Chinese people and in equalizing opportunities among social groups. At the same time, we also witnessed the ups and downs of individual career trajectories, the losses and regains of opportunities, the break-ups and reunions of families, and the political purges and rehabilitations of cadres and intellectuals. This book reports my efforts to describe, analyze, and explain these ironies and multifaceted patterns of political and social changes and their impacts on individuals' lives.



In the course of working on the research reported in this book, I have accumulated much debt to colleagues and friends. I want to especially thank Phyllis Moen and Nancy Brandon Tuma, who collaborated with me on this project from the very beginning and who co-authored several publications that are adapted into this book. I learned statistical modeling methods from Nancy and life-course research from Phyllis, and they left their marks on many aspects of this book. But their influence on me far exceeds this research project. Through our collaborations over the years, they continued to educate me, nurture my professional development, and push me to think clearly about the theoretical and analytical issues pursued in this book. To them I am forever in debt.

I thank Liren Hou, Lin Lu, Olga Suhomlinova, and Wei Zhao – my research assistants, friends, collaborators, and colleagues – who have provided not only valuable research assistance but also invaluable friendship throughout this process. I thank Yanjie Bian, Ronald Breiger, Claudia Buchmann, Debbie Davis, Tom DiPrete, Ken Land, Tom Gold, Nan Lin, Victor Nee, Angie O’Rand, Bill Parish, Ken Spenner, David Stark, Andy Walder, Feng Wang, Marty Whyte, John Wilson, and Yu Xie who have commented and helped me improve on my work over the years. A special thanks goes to David Grusky, whose initial encouragement jump started this book project. Although this book is on China’ my scholarship has been built on many years of learning from my teachers Jim Macch, John Meyer, Dick Scott, and Buzz Zelditch. I am grateful to Ms. Alia Winters, my editor at Cambridge University Press, whose guidance and help has made this publishing process an enjoyable experience!

This project first took shape when I taught in the Department of Sociology, Cornell University. My current institution, Duke University and the Department of Sociology there, has provided generous support for my research over the years. This project began with a pilot study in which we collected data in Beijing and Shanghai in the summer of 1993. The pilot study was funded by small grants from ASA/NSF Fund for the Advancement of the Discipline, the Lam Fund, and Halpern Fund from the East Asian Program at Cornell University. The main data collection for this project was carried out from June to December 1994. It was funded by a grant from NSF (SBR-9413540) and carried out with the collaboration of the Institute of Sociology at Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences, and the Departments of Sociology at Fudan University and at the People’s University. I am grateful to Fan Weida, Li Qiang, Pan Yunkang, Peng Xizhe, and Wang Hui, as well as to many students and researchers in these institutions, for their help in the data collection. A Spencer Fellowship

from the National Academy of Education allowed me to take a leave from Duke University to organize the survey in the field. I thank the funding institutions for their support of this project. As usual, they are not responsible for the analyses and opinions expressed in this book.

My greatest gratitude goes to my parents. In those difficult days when most books were forbidden in my native country, they carefully protected and nurtured a young, curious mind. Without their inspiration, my intellectual career would have ended after high school.

Finally, I want to thank Zhaohui Xue, my wife, and Katie, my daughter. They have quietly but unfailingly supported me and my work, and tolerated my late hours, disrupted schedules, and absences from birthdays and holidays when I was on research trips. To them I dedicate this book.

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Finally, I note that almost all statistical information reported was re-analyzed using updated data and alternative statistical models when I adapted these previous publications into this book. In addition Chapters 3 and 9 were also based on previous publications but were thoroughly revised for this book.