

The Changing of the Social Stratification Pattern in Contemporary China

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Abstract

Communist societies and capitalist societies present two distinct social stratification patterns. The nature of stratification pattern has changed radically since China shifted from a socialist society to a market economy. The factor that determines people's social status has become different. This paper is proposed to discuss how the social stratification pattern has changed over the last three decades in China. While the social stratification in many other countries remains relatively consistent over time, China appeared to be an exception in the twentieth century. Since 1980, the inconsistency of people in China's upward and downward social mobility has characterized China's economic reform experience for more than 30 years.

Keyword: Social stratification, social status, social mobility, market reform.

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1.0 Introduction

Social stratification is a key concept in the study of social inequality of any organized societies. As a matter of fact, it reflects not just the differences between groups but beliefs as well, for instance, caste stratification pattern is closely related to the culture of the Indian subcontinent and estates were found in European feudalism and many other traditional societies. Communist societies and capitalist societies present two totally different social stratification patterns. Since China shifted from a socialist society to a market economy, its nature of stratification pattern has changed radically and this has attracted the attention of sociologists on the formation and changes of its social stratification.

Two decades ago, Mao's egalitarianism made China one of the most equalized nations among developing countries of the time (Bian, 2002, p.98). Experts estimated that the Gini coefficient in China remained under 0.2 for over three decades before 1988 (Yan, 2006). Today, China's Gini coefficient has reached a more than alarming level of 0.4. China Human Development Report 2005 indicated that "China's Gini coefficient is lower than that of some Latin American and African countries, but its urban-rural income inequality is perhaps the highest in the world". (UNDP and China Development Research Foundation, 2005 p.27)

Communist ideology pursues a classless society in which social stratification is abolished and property is commonly shared by every member in society. Nowadays, in China, while the wealthy urban Chinese enjoy a luxurious lifestyle, the poor rural folks still struggle for basic public amenities such as education and health care. With the raise of inequality, China's social order has shifted from destratification to restratification. The complicated transition process raises new questions and concerns on "who gets what and why", and what the impact is on social stratification pattern in China. These are the questions that this paper attempts to answer.

Base on different states, I will distinguish three different stages in China's market reform. To make the idea clearer, the groups and actors involved in the institution change and their influence on the social stratification pattern will also be discussed. There are different actors who have played different roles in policy making in each stage and have influenced the change in the pattern of social stratification. The three different stages that I will discuss as below:

- 1) The 1980s and into the 1990s: Unstable Policy and Unstable Social

Stratification Pattern

- 2) The 1990s and into the 2000s: The Transitional Economy and New Social Identities
- 3) After 2000s: New Player and Limited Social Mobility

2.0 Debating on the Theory of Stratification Pattern in China

Under the Mao's regime, the social stratification pattern in China most often associated with the work unit (*Dan Wei* 單位), political belief and household registration (*Hu Kou* 戶口) system. Different social resources and rewards were determined by these three factors. Rural-urban division, work unit boundary, cadre-worker dichotomy and political classification occupied unequal distribution of "life chances" across individuals. As a result, a rigid institutional wall was constructed and people could hardly change their social positions. When Deng Xiaoping began his policy of market oriented reform to produce economic outcomes, this transition remarked the change of fundamental rules that shaped the social stratification pattern in China. People now can maintain or change their social positions by commercialization of production and consumption.

One of the most important theories on social stratification pattern in China is Victor Nee's Market Transition Theory. Victor Nee's earlier market transition theory indicates that if "power control over resources shifts progressively from political disposition to market institutions, there will be a change in the distribution of rewards favoring those who hold market than redistributive power." This theory states that the consequence of this transition, the growth of market institutions causes a decline in the significance of state socialist redistributive cadre power. Groups and individuals who were formerly barred from advancement in the state socialist bureaucracy and economy gain chances for social mobility through emergent labor markets and private entrepreneurship (Nee, 1989, 1991, 1996; Yang & Victor, 2000).

However, not all researchers agree with the market transition theory. Some of the researchers claim that the state socialist bureaucracy is still the key actors in the formation of social stratification pattern in China. Against market transition theory, there are other competing explanations, such as those put forward by Bian and Logon (1996) who emphasized the persistence of political power, Rona (1994) indicated the conversion of political power to economic resources. Zhou (2001) highlighted the

relationship between life course factors and policy changes in the determinants of individual life chance. Analysis on post socialist stratification pattern has accumulated rich sociological knowledge about a fast changing society.

Anyway, in discussing China's social stratification theories, we should not ignore the fact that social stratification pattern in China is not static. While pattern of social inequality in many other countries remains relatively consistent over time, China appeared to be an exception in the twentieth century. China's economic reforms have gone through several stages, this paper attempts to identify the different stratification patterns under the different economic reform stages. To capture the real picture of the changing patterns of social stratification, we should also note for the actors who have shaped the new institution and affected the formation of stratification pattern. Without the participation of the actors or interested groups in the policy process, new institution will never develop or function.

3.0 The 1980s and into the 1990s: Unstable Policy and Unstable Social Stratification Pattern

Unlike the shock therapy approach in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, China's market reforms started without a clear blueprint. In China, reforms began as what Deng Xiaoping had described - 'touching stones to cross the river'. After the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution which ended with Mao's death, Deng saw the need to improve the standard of living of the people, and to do this, Mao's egalitarianism and collectivism had to be abolished. Deng pronounced that 'some will get rich more quickly', in other words, social inequality and re-stratified social order was allowed. Deng's reforms were facing pressure from Communist ideology. A 1983 People's Daily article described this attitude towards private business as 'If individual business isn't capitalism, it's a tail of capitalism. Anyway it's not socialism' (Young, 1991, p.121).

In terms of ideology, market economy was a subject of controversy, this tended to cause uncertainty in policy making. Two key political players, Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun had developed very different policy orientation. Inside the party, Deng's most prominent protégés were Zhao Ziyang and Hu Yaobang, while Chen's were Li Peng and Deng Liqun; all held dominant positions within the system (Lieberthal, 2004, p.128) By the mid-1980s, Deng emphasized marketization and diversification of the economy, depoliticization of the society and opening to the international arena. Chen

sought planned growth, placed greater attention to political ideology, favoured a more controlled opening to the outside world, and anticipated more modest growth rates. Due to their difference in perceptions, the market economy reform policy tended to lurch from one policy package to another. This contention resulted instability in politics and policies throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s (Lieberthal, 2004, p.140).

Economic reform without changing the political ideology had created 'dual track system' in which the traditional plan coexisted with market channel for allocating resources. At the Chinese Communist Party's 12th Congress in 1982, the leadership defined the country's economy system as one in which the 'planned economy is the main pillar and the market economy a supplementary element' (Zhen, 2004, p.275).

By implementing rural household responsibility system, market reforms in the rural area allowed peasants to lease plots of land and sell their crops for profit. Groups of individuals or entire villages and townships could form cooperative enterprises to manufacture, transport, and sell goods (Gamer, 2008, p.84). By the middle of 1980s, China had seen the re-emergence of family farming peasantry, followed by the establishment of the 'township and village enterprise' (Stockman, 2000, p.137-138)

Urban reforms were implemented later than rural reforms. First, the influx of peasant peddlers to cities ignited the rise of household business (个体户) among other desperate urbanites. Then, decentralized state industry and the fiscal system awarded incentives to local governments, factory managers and individual workers (Bian, 2002, p. 95).

3.2 Unstable Social Stratification Pattern

Initially, the three groups of people who benefited most from Deng's reforms were the peasants, party bureaucrats in coastal provinces and urban workers who could form cooperatives. The students, intellectuals, urban youth, central planners and workers in state industries, on the other hand, did not enjoy any advantages at all. Some were still trapped in the countryside (Gamer, 2008, p.84).

In general, the policy in the 1980s was unstable, for instance, full official recognition of the social status of private entrepreneurs and their contributions were yet to come. Private household businesses were limited to take in up to seven assistants until 1988 and only the state officially allowed private enterprises to employ eight or more workers, although it had been tacitly condoned since 1983. (Stockman, 2000, p.139).

The role played by private businesses in the economy was ambiguous. Young (1991) described:

When I asked a young woman in Chengdu if she would consider leaving her collective job to make three times as much money with her business woman sister, she said she wouldn't, because 'You can't rely on state policy'.

Actors, ideas, and politics are important to the shape of new institution, and the uncertainty of policy reform in the 1980s was because of the different perceptions of key political actors. Private business in China was apparently an ideological contradiction which prevented the Chinese government from actively encouraging private business. When market building just started, people felt insecure to grab the new opportunity given. In the Chinese experience, people suffered in radical policy change for today's capital might become tomorrow's liability. Not surprisingly, as China embarked on the course of institutional transformation, it was those disadvantageous organizations in the non-state and semi-state sectors that had strong incentives to break away from the old command economy and to open up new avenues for growth (Zhou, 1996).

In the fluctuating political environment, state policies changed frequently and substantially between political control and economic development, and between centralization and decentralization. Dramatic swings in developmental ideology made the social order inconsistent. A very unusual social stratification pattern was formed. Return to education was extremely low, occupational status, social prestige and income status are not parallel to each other. Intellectuals, bureaucrats and skilled blue collar workers with assigned jobs and fixed salaries, found themselves making less than uneducated peasants and laborers. There was what people said "selling eggs is better than inventing bombs". Some new classes emerged and then dissolved in a very short time, for example, a class was called "ten-thousand-yuan households" (万元户) once appeared in the 1980s. In general, there was negative perception of the new rich in the 1980s. People's Daily noted in 1987 that 'some people say individual operators earn a lot of money for very little work and rely on loopholes in policy', and that this was a major problem for their image (Young, 1991, p.121).

As a result, social stratification pattern was fluid and vulnerable to state policy shifts. New class such as private business was still searching for their legitimacy, and

social classes were in the making and did not yet have clear boundaries.

4.0 The 1990s and into the 2000s: The Transitional Economy and New Social Identities

After the Tiananmen tragedy in 1989, market reforms were under serious attack. Many observers doubted whether market reform policy would continue. Conservative leaders regarded the prodemocracy movement as the result of the spread of capitalism as an idea and as a practice (Zheng, 2004, p.275). Just as the reforms reached a crossroads, the sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union and the subsequent collapse of communist ruling party in the Soviet Union and East Europe in 1991 shocked the world. The historical event truly made a great impact on the domestic economic reforms in China. The collapse of Soviet Union ended the debates on planned economy versus market economy. Planning economy lost its credibility completely. “The collapse of the Soviet Union demonstrated a political and social failure, but the root cause was its economic system,” argued Xu Zhixin of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia Institute. He argued that planned economic system would not fulfill the demand of consumer commodities. He also attributed the non-integration of the Soviet Union into the global economy as a contributing factor. As such, “concentrate our energies and work hard for further reform and opening up” was undertaken by the Chinese Communist Party (Shambaugh, 2008, p.59-64).

4.1 The Emergence of New Social Identities

In January and February 1992, at age 88, Deng traveled to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone and then to other parts of Guangdong Province and Shanghai. In each place, he called for the whole country to push ahead with rapid market oriented change. (Lieberthal, 2004: 146) The 1992 14th Party Congress entitled “socialist market economy”, opened up an unrestrained endorsement market oriented reform. A new expression ‘plunging into the market’ (下海) was soon developed. Socialist market economy was not only a new milestone for domestic market reform, but it also pushed China to become a major international economic player. The government allowed foreign firms such as insurances, retail sales and legal work to take the first steps toward entering major new sectors of the economy (Lieberthal, 2004, p.147). Since 1992, China

has led all developing countries to become targets for foreign investments (Lieberthal, 2004, p.264).

Since then, the economy had grown at double-digit rate until overheating warning showed up. By the end of year 2006, the accumulation of Foreign Direct Investment in China reached a total of US690 billion, in term of purchasing power parity (PPP). Since 1999, the Chinese economy has been the world's second largest after the United States (Tong & Wong, 2008, p.120-122).

It seems that China was in a harvest season, however, different people benefited to different extents. Transitional economy and globalized economy in the 1990s put the whole country to a new market allocation mechanism which determined to an individual's life chances. By life chances, it means an individual's opportunity is related to socioeconomic well-being, such as educational opportunities, position in occupational, physical and mental health, residence and political status. With decentralized fiscal system, local government had to fund public services, and this brought about many problems in poor rural areas as the poor rural government could not afford to provide basic health and education. Hence, the rural people tended to be lack of opportunity on socioeconomic well-being. Empirical studies show that the opening-up process of the economy benefits coastal areas more than inland counterparts (Lu, 2008). While the new rich social clusters enjoyed the opportunity under the new economic reforms, the laying-off and re-employment of surplus employees of the state-owned enterprises threw millions of workers to streets. At the same time, the household registered system made it almost impossible for peasant migrants to access to any social security benefits in cities, such as unemployment insurance, pensions or medical insurance.

Since market allocation mechanism is unchallengeable, social boundary has become clear and less susceptible to political changes. People began to create their social identity according to their market status. People with social status built up their cultural capital, shared mainstream value and enjoyed a stable lifestyle. Social stratification pattern has become possible to classify.

4.2 Ten Strata of Chinese society

Through the economic, social and political status, Lu Xueyi has identified 10 social strata in contemporary China. The major social stratum of industrial workers and agricultural laborers remains largely unchanged from the pre-reform period. Together,

the workers and laborers accounted for the majority of the population (60.4%) (Yan, , 2006)

Table: Ten Strata of Chinese society

Status rank	Stratum	% in population
1	Administrators of state & society	2.1
2	Managerial personnel	1.6
3	Owners of private enterprise	1.0
4	Professionals	4.6
5	Clerical staff	7.2
6	Owners of small & medium-sized private business	7.1
7	Service sector employees	11.2
8	Industrial workers	17.5
9	Agricultural laborers	42.9
10	The unemployed and semi-unemployed in cities	4.8

Another study completed by Li Qiang, according to his measurement of International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status score, China's current social structure is neither olive-shaped nor pyramid-shaped, but presented as inverted T-shaped (Li, 2005). This study indicates that the majority of China population is considered poor or in a low class and the middle and upper classes account for only a very small portion of the population.

When social inequality becomes greater, three notable class groups appear in the current social stratification: new rich, urban middle class and a high ratio of people in a low social class. The new rich class who has made their fortune under reforms always affiliate themselves with key government officers. When political power is used to gain economic benefits, corruption becomes inevitable. To avoid wealth polarization, the Chinese government now encourages the expansion of the middle class. They believe the middle class can play a buffer role in bridging the rich and the poor to reduce the social tension. On the other hand, a high ratio of people in the low social class becomes a controversial issue for it is closely related to the social and political stability of the country.

5.0 After 2000s: New Player and Limited Social Mobility

In November 2002, Jiang Zemin called to recruit party members from all social strata. He argued that the class composition of Chinese society and the proletariat had changed as a result of two decades of economic reform, and if the party was to remain the vanguard of the proletariat, it needed to include newly emergent elements of the working class, particularly in the private sectors. The Chinese Communist Party 16th Party Congress embraced a new ideology – the “three represents” to the Chinese Communist Party constitution. The “three represents” indicated an important and even radical shift in party philosophy, party composition, and party orientation (Shambaugh, 2008, p.112)

An effort to legitimize and institutionalize new private class has reflected the emergence of new player in making public policy. The legalization of private enterprises means the private interests have come to wield more influence over economic decision making. The emergence of different interest groups is the societal consequences of market reforms. Some Chinese scholars have indicated that the market and political reforms in China have produced a predominant social group who are armed with capital, knowledge and political power. These interest groups attempt to lobby the policy which allocates resources to various sectors of society and economy (Sun, 2002). In some major issues, such as the reforms of household registration system, health care and the Labor Contract Law in 2008, different interest groups have been involved in lobbying policy-making process to protect their own interests.

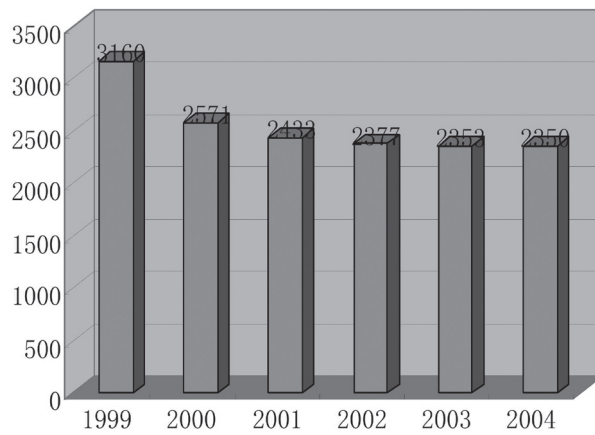
While the wealthy Chinese are able to influence the legislative process, government agencies and public opinions, the poor and the minorities are largely unrepresented in policy making. As a result of imbalance of power between the rich and poor, social stratification tends to be rigid and the lower class’s opportunities for upward social mobility has become limited.

5.1 Rigid Social Stratification Pattern

The disadvantaged class, for instance, the peasant migrants and laid off workers now get limited opportunities for upward social mobility. Study by Wu Xiaogang and Treiman (2007) has revealed the role of rural status in blocking occupational opportunities. They show that because of the household registration system and its

selective process, although a small fraction of rural men was able to achieve high-status occupations, many were unable to take advantage of their fathers' achievements.

Another factor restricting the disadvantaged class to achieve higher social status is the increasing cost to participate in market economy. In the 1980s, household business (个体户) was a road to riches, or a path upwards, particularly for the disadvantaged groups. In the 2000s, there was a continuous decrease in the number of household business for several consecutive years.



Number of household business 1999-2004

Source: Wu Xuean (2007). *Decrease of household business and weakness in regulation*. *Ling DaoWen Cui* 1: 31.

In China, self-employment has been one of the ways in which disadvantaged groups can improve their social and economic status, “In a 1985 reader survey by Chinese Youth magazine on job preferences, self-employment was ranked number one while entering government service was ranked number seven” (Huang, 2007). However, research has shown that this channel has been blocked. Research by Huang (2007) reveals that the heyday of small entrepreneurs was in the 1980s and early 1990s, while the business policies in urban has become more constrained since late 1990s, it has caused a dramatic decline in the number small entrepreneurs those are politically

weak but economically nimble.

Reforms in China began with what Deng Xiaoping had described as “touching the stones to cross the river”. But now, many scholars in China have warned that a small group of vested interests may be more accustomed to touching the stones but have forgotten to cross the river. (Tsinghua University Sociology Department, 2011) This report argues that vested interests resist further reforms and bent on monopolizing their resources. China nowadays is stuck in a “transition trap”.

In addition to the domestic social change, global players have also become key actors in shaping Chinese social stratification since the late 1990s. With globalization, the social relation between employers and employees has undergone a complete transformation. It can be described as “local workers versus global capitalists”.

The Chinese economy is deeply integrated with the global economy. Leading corporations or well-known trendsetter enterprises such as McDonald’s and Wal-Mart have far reaching influences upon the Chinese economy. Their executive’s decisions have implications and ramifications that could change the employment opportunities and economic structure of the country. In order to maximize profit, multinational corporations have begun to adopt the so-called flexible accumulation whereby corporations use ‘just-in-time’ manufacturing and ‘just-in-time’ employment operational modes. These modes increase a precarious work force, including the short term contract workers. Moreover, employers do not need to provide any social benefits such as health insurance. When this happens, then the corporation is no longer a secure or stable place to work with. China’s youths now prefer to enter the government services, and this reflects the fact that the opportunities for social mobility in China have decreased.

6.0 Conclusion

Country which has established relatively stable politics and economics is always characterized by an ordered social structure. Therefore, its social stratification is arranged in a systematic way and does not change radically over long periods of time. The stability of social stratification is supported by the society’s culture, political ideology and the power of individuals **and organizations as well**.

In contemporary China, since the beginning of the market reform, the change of political ideology and economic structure has had a far reaching impact on people’s life chances. During the transition period, especially in the 1980s, both the people

and the government still hesitated at the idea of market reform, and hence the social stratification structure was very unstable. Moreover, we found that some new classes emerged and then dissolved in a very short time. Since the Chinese government engaged socialist market economy in the 1990s, private capital has gradually established its legitimacy in China. Consequently, the emergence of new interest groups with new social identities. Since the 2000s, China has become one of the main global economic players, social stratification has become stable. However, increasing social inequality has already affected social stability in China. The upward social mobility for the poor is becoming more and more difficult.

For the last thirty years, Chinese society has been facing complicated changes on the patterns of social stratification which are not easily captured by any simple theories. In contemporary China, the political stability of the country is under constant threat as a result of enormous social inequality and wealth polarization. It is worth further academic research to find out how this social phenomenon will influence the current social stratification in China.

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