

Social Stratification: The Legacy of the Late Imperial Past

R. Bin Wong

Changes in social stratification remain one of the most useful arenas in which to search for indicators of larger patterns of social change as economic developments of one kind or another occur. In the 1950s and 1960s, scholars approached social stratification within a larger set of understandings about modernization. Agrarian social systems composed of lords and peasants typical of sedentary societies were increasingly displaced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by urban-based social systems at the top of which sat industrial and professional elites and beneath whom were the working classes. Social structures became increasingly complex. Economic differentiation meant additional occupations; social changes included the development of new forms of popular culture and the transformation of elite cultures, which created new markers of social status. Politically, the formation of modern states created new positions of authority. Power was expressed through new kinds of economic, social, and political capacities.

As the simple and confident explanations of large-scale historical change have fallen on hard times, analysts have often continued with their empirical studies without larger claims about what the phenomena represent in terms of broader patterns of change. Alternatively the broader patterns of change become so general as to encompass all manner of variations within them without necessarily having any account for the sources of variation among diverse cases. This volume has introduced new data and analyses to the study of shifting patterns of social stratification in China amidst the rapid economic development of the past quarter century. Many particular findings resemble elements of change found for other parts of the world, yet the overall picture also contains features that reflect the history behind contemporary China.

This chapter briefly considers some of the broad features of social change attending economic development in China over the past quarter century and puts these into the historical perspective of Chinese political economy at three historical moments beginning in the mid-eighteenth, mid-nineteenth, and mid-twentieth centuries. China enjoyed a vibrant agrarian commercial economy in the eighteenth century, which the state made considerable efforts

to support and complement with policies designed to protect material prosperity for poorer people in wealthier areas and extend material prosperity to populations living in peripheral regions. Between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, connections to an expanding capitalist economy created new problems and possibilities for people in some parts of the empire; while those in other areas came to have fewer effective political or economic ties to other regions within the empire. Foreign businessmen and diplomats enjoyed protection and privileges under their own self-rule in a growing number of treaty ports. From these bases, Western economic and cultural influences spread across China, especially in major urban centers. By the 1930s, there were increasing gaps between cities and countryside as well as starker contrasts among regions. The People's Republic established in 1949 moved swiftly to achieve a unitary state ruling a unified country in which economic development followed a Soviet-style industrialization strategy combined with varied efforts to organize and control the countryside. Central state ministries planned the construction of heavy industry and by the mid-1950s nationalized previously private, industrial consumer industries. Redistribution of agricultural land in land reform campaigns was followed in the 1950s by collectivization of agricultural production. Farming households were given work assignments by local authorities who responded to directives from higher levels of government.

The economic reforms launched in the early 1980s typically are conceived as a radical break with a planned economy in which close governmental control gave way to market-based exchange and new hierarchies of wealth, status, and power. If, however, we view economic and social changes of the past 25 years not simply in terms of post-1949 conditions, but also with respect to dynamics at work in the two centuries preceding the mid-twentieth century, we can discern some broader and deeper patterns to social and economic changes that can inform our sense of future possibilities.

THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY POLITICAL ECONOMY OF AGRARIAN EMPIRE

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the Chinese economy became increasingly commercialized. Millions of peasants produced for the market and many commodities, including daily necessities such as grain and cotton textiles, traveled long distances. In addition to a small merchant elite, there was a substantial class of small-scale traders and shopkeepers who accumulated substantial capital. Commodification of land also was extensive, but, as best as we can judge based on early twentieth-century data, only a fraction of land was controlled by large landlords; most households relied on tilling their own fields or renting use-rights of relatively small parcels (Lavelly

and Wong 1992). In contrast to England, however, sharp class divisions did not accompany commercialization of agrarian production in China. Instead, the continuation of rural social relations in China amidst commercialization was more similar to the experience of France and of German-speaking areas on the continent (Aston and Philpin 1985). Just as in Europe, especially parts of eastern and central Europe, China included areas untouched by markets and specialized production for long-distance trade. But overall, commercial economic expansion was as significant a phenomenon in eighteenth-century China as it was in eighteenth-century Europe. For present purposes, a simple awareness of these similarities helps us understand that the range of Chinese experiences of economic growth in the preindustrial era were broadly comparable to those found in Europe.

Peasants in the richer parts of the late imperial empire often specialized in crops and crafts for the market. The eighteenth-century agrarian economy grew through a combination of intensified use of resources and the extension of agricultural production to lands devastated by the mid-seventeenth century dynastic transition or previously uncultivated. Long-distance migrations of millions of people made possible some of the extension of cultivation across the empire, while improvements in agricultural technologies raised levels of productivity on richer lands. Chinese and Japanese scholars have led the way in documenting the expansion and transformation of agrarian economic activities between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The best-studied examples are not surprisingly the best documented in original sources; they concern the development of textile handicrafts and changes in cropping in the lower Yangzi or Jiangnan region, around present-day Shanghai (Zheng 1989). Other commercially dynamic regions, such as the Pearl River delta in Guangdong and coastal Fujian, have also received attention (Marks 1998; Rawski 1972). In addition, poorer and more peripheral areas experienced additional clearance of land and the production of commercial crops. Southern Shaanxi, for example, first recovered from the fighting taking place with the fall of the Ming dynasty and establishment of the Qing dynasty in the 1640s, and then extended hill land food cropping with corn and sweet potatoes to help feed workers engaged in the timber trade, paper making, and iron production (Wong 1997:19). In both richer areas with considerable market town and city growth as well as poorer areas with limited urban sites, rural inhabitants became increasingly connected to markets and in the process often became linked to people and products in distant parts of the empire and even overseas. In richer areas like Jiangnan or the Pearl River delta, people living in villages typically went to market towns on a regular basis because physical distances were modest and the economic and social reasons for going to a market town frequent, be these to arrange a marriage, discuss a land transaction, or conduct some kind of commercial

business. The lives of many villagers, therefore, were not fundamentally cut off from those of people living in towns and cities. In poorer areas where peasants might be less likely to go a larger city, there were also fewer large urban centers. As a consequence, the urban-rural divide for common people was socially more muted than it was in many parts of Europe in the same time period.

Within rural areas, late imperial Chinese economic growth seems rarely to have produced the kinds of social differentiation that took place in parts of Europe. The development of factor markets that facilitated the commodification of land, labor, and capital did not lead to the kinds of class differentiation that Marx famously found basic to the development of English capitalism. For many years, Marxist-inspired historians, both in China and beyond, looked hard for evidence that commercialization heightened social differentiation. But there was little evidence of strong connections between commercialization and increased social differentiation. Unlike villagers in Europe, some of whom became rural proletarians before moving into cities to work, Chinese households usually combined craft and crop activities, and market developments contributed to the abilities of village households to maintain, or even increase, their incomes despite rising populations. Similar economic processes, in particular the expansion of the rural textile and craft industries, did not generally lead to the European experience of a stratum of rural proletarians, working both as landless labor and in rural industries, who married and reproduced themselves before they moved to cities (Tilly 1984). In China, craft activities remained anchored in agrarian, farming households, and there was little social differentiation between people working in rural industries and those working the land (Wong 1997:33-52). Moreover, landless laborers in China rarely married, and thus they did not reproduce themselves. Rather the ranks of the landless were replenished by those who had lost or sold their small holdings. The equal division of property among males in every generation tended to reduce per capita land holding over the generations, but individuals continued to rise and fall in their fortunes beyond what happened through land partibility alone. The hardworking and lucky accumulated land or began small businesses, while the unfortunate and less diligent could lose land and even livelihood without the general distribution of household types changing.¹

During the late imperial era, China's social and economic elite gained status from education and passing civil service exams, wealth from land and commerce, and power from government positions and leadership roles within local communities. They formed large and complex families that had interests in land and commerce and maintained residences for extended families simultaneously in villages and towns or cities. At the heart of the elite reproduction were scholars who after passing the civil service exams

staffed the world's largest state bureaucracy for most of the millennium since 1000 CE. Families producing scholars often had gained wealth from land ownership, commerce, or some combination of both. But in contrast to the societies of early modern Europe or Tokugawa Japan (1603–1867), the imperial Chinese elites had far fewer institutional distinctions. Europeans distinguished among urban elites, aristocracies, and religious elites, each of whom had their own distinct institutions through which they could express their power and authority. Japanese samurai and urban elites did not enjoy the same kinds of power and authority typically found in European societies, but they were institutionally distinct from each other. The social separation of elites in European and Japanese societies was by no means consistent, let alone complete, but compared to late imperial China, the former societies had sharper breaks and more distinct concentrations of separate elites than China, where there existed a social continuum for elites between town and countryside rather than sharply distinct urban and rural elites.² When we look at the conditions of both elites and nonelites in eighteenth-century China and compare their social structures to those of societies in Europe and Japan, China has a structurally less complex form with fewer rigid and sharply defined divisions. Yet commercial expansion and economic change unfolded in broadly similar ways across these diverse social structures. The social changes generated by economic growth were contingent upon the character of social relations in each society. The Chinese evidence is particularly difficult to assess because it ranges over such a diverse set of conditions; it is at times problematic and occasionally even foolish to compare social and economic conditions in China with those in any European country since the spatial scales are so fundamentally different.

Eighteenth-century Chinese officials were attentive to regional differences in economic well-being as well as differences among rich and poor in a particular area (Wong 1997:19–27). Complicating their assessments and our understanding as well were the possibilities of stark differences between rich and poor in some small part of a larger poor region in which many locales lacked any rich people to speak of; in such conditions, officials typically worried more about general and absolute poverty than relative income inequalities. In richer parts of the empire, eighteenth-century officials continued to voice concerns heard for many centuries concerning inequalities of land ownership. Behind these concerns was a desire to assure that all households possessed the means to secure at least their subsistence if not a more ample prosperity. Officials continued to assume that a materially solvent society was the basis for social stability and political order. To achieve these goals, eighteenth-century officials developed a range of policies to promote agrarian production in poorer areas, including promoting migration of people and the movement of technologies and resources from

richer areas to the peripheries. In addition, officials intervened in both richer and poorer areas when famine conditions threatened to cause social disruptions. Peripheral areas remained poorer than economic cores, but the movements of people and resources to these areas allowed for extensive economic expansion. These developments complemented economic growth in more prosperous areas created by division of labor and specialization for market production. Indeed, without these changes in peripheral areas, the prosperity of core areas would likely have been more limited as larger populations would have remained to put pressure on resources.

The eighteenth-century political economy of Chinese agrarian empire supported commercial growth that was the key to levels of material prosperity equal to or even exceeding those achieved over similarly large territories in Europe. Since scholars of Europe typically focus on very limited parts of northwestern Europe when looking at early modern economic growth, they largely ignore the far poorer peripheries within Europe. When these are brought into our comparative picture and scholars are able to assemble reasonable estimates of productivity and standards of living for both them and Chinese peripheries, we'll likely confirm that both China and Europe had similar ranges of economic productivity and standards of living before the Industrial Revolution. For present purposes, it especially matters that China lacked the kinds of institutionalized social stratification found across Europe before the nineteenth century at the same time as it was able through a largely different mix of institutional devices to create widespread commercial expansion.

During the nineteenth century, industrial societies were created in several European countries and by the turn of the twentieth century they were also established in North America and in East Asia, most visibly in Japan but not in China. In the nineteenth century some of the Chinese areas that had become more densely settled in the eighteenth century exhausted their resource bases or became sites of more fierce competition over scarce land. The state proved unable to affect the kinds of resource transfers it made during the eighteenth century to promote material security. The disruption of midcentury rebellions and uprisings that affected most all of the empire was, in fact, quelled but at very high costs. The strength of different eighteenth-century forms of economic and political integration were seriously weakened over the nineteenth century. Distinct and separate regional economies, which were politically and economically less integrated, took shape (Wong 2004: 27–32). The political integration of the empire thus became more vulnerable to social and economic changes that tended to enhance separation and differences among various regions of the empire.

A few eighteenth-century towns and cities grew due to their positions as trade entrepôts. Many continued to prosper during much of the nineteenth

century, their growth usually enhanced by trade opportunities with the West. Though Western influences are often assumed crucial, economic dynamism predated the nineteenth-century opening of China by Europeans. Moreover, as William Rowe has argued at length based on the Yangzi River port of Hankow, nineteenth-century Chinese cities developed organizational capacities for rule and public order prior to and independently of Western influences. Merchants thus were important not only economically but for their social and political leadership (Rowe 1984, 1989).

At the same time as merchants increased their economic and social importance in larger towns and cities, and at least some peasants in the hinterlands of these cities were prospering in the nineteenth century, there were many people in more peripheral areas who were doing far less well. Indeed, it seems very likely that some of them were doing less well than the previous two or three generations of people in the same areas. Exhaustion of resources, declines of trade, and mounting subsistence uncertainties produced increasing threats of Malthusian crises. Famines attacked many parts of north China in the mid-1870s. Far more widespread than famines in the eighteenth century, late nineteenth-century agrarian difficulties reflect a combination of ecological crisis and economic uncertainties. Absolute poverty may well have become more common in the late nineteenth century at the same time as peasants in other regions were doing better than people of earlier generations. The more prosperous parts of the empire became increasingly connected to international markets and prosperity spread among both new commercial elites and farming households producing for new markets. Even without industrialization, some late nineteenth-century Chinese appear to be doing better economically because of international trade.

The collapse of the dynasty in 1911 ushered in nearly four decades of political uncertainty marked by widespread conflict and violence—ranging from banditry and small-scale protests within cities and across the countryside to large-scale fighting among warlord armies in the 1920s, by Chinese armies against Japanese invaders after 1937, and between Communist and Nationalist armies between 1945 and 1949. Amidst the political turmoil of the first half of the twentieth century, the social and economic separation between poor peripheral parts of the former empire and the richer urban cores became reinforced politically by the absence of effective rule spanning the many regions of the country.

Many peasants in the interior countryside were subject to growing economic uncertainties. These peaked in the early 1930s with the Great Depression for those who had previously benefited from their connections to worldwide markets; others more isolated from international markets often faced grinding poverty that led to crisis quite separately from global trade. Economic uncertainties in some rural areas combined with structural poverty in

others made for difficult conditions over much of the Chinese countryside in the 1930s, conditions only exacerbated by the Japanese invasion after 1937. Some of those who could escape left the countryside for cities.

Cities became home in the 1920s and 1930s to growing numbers of poor people, some of whom found jobs in service industries or peddling goods. But a handful of cities also housed the new commercial and industrial elites, as well as a kind of professional class. Nascent working and professional classes emerged amidst the presence of foreign elites. Urbanization and industrialization created patterns of production and consumption similar to and connected with those found elsewhere in the world. New kinds of voluntary associations and groups brought people together for economic, social, and political purposes. Focusing solely on cities, we could say that forms of social stratification associated with other modern societies were taking place in Republican-era China. We might expect that if the Communists had not come to power, one of two possibilities might have obtained. Both counterfactuals start with the assumption that urban development would have continued. They differ in their projected endpoints. One would lead to the eventual demise of rural society, which is the hallmark of social stratification in typical modern societies. The other would posit a society bifurcated between a modern urban economic sector and a traditional rural one, each sector with its own associated social system and between which a variety of gaps, barriers, and problems would be found. What is missing from both counterfactuals is any sense that the previous relationships within and between urban and rural portions of Chinese society could potentially matter to later dynamics of social change. Before suggesting that such possibilities deserve consideration in our evaluations of contemporary China, we need to consider how the high socialist interlude of some three decades might matter to present-day dynamics of social stratification and economic change.

SOCIALIST SIMPLIFICATIONS AND THEIR AFTERMATH

From the perspective of economic and political integration between urban and rural sections of China over the previous century and a half, the Communist system of rule represented a distinctive kind of development. The Communists made administratively explicit the division between urban and rural China and controlled the links that connected them. Through the work unit and household registration system, the Chinese party state managed virtually all aspects of urban production and distribution (Bian 2002a: 92–93). Through varied forms of local administration, the party state aimed to be the one defining force beyond the village that shaped people's lives. A common Communist ideology was preached across urban and rural China. Economically, limited goods made their way from urban factories to the countryside,

while considerable resources were mobilized by the government to form the capital needed for state-led industrialization.

More significant for our common purpose of examining changing forms of social stratification was the radical simplification of social life imposed on both urban and rural China during the 1950s and 1960s. A party elite spanned cities and villages to the exclusion of any other kind of elite. Even more than the late imperial Confucian elite, the Communist party state elite actively subordinated other potential economic and social sources of elite formation to their ideology and institutions. Cities were stripped of virtually all forms of social associations and political groups; those left were put under various kinds of state control and surveillance. Rural China was deprived of the market connections that created broadly horizontal links spanning economic and social purposes. These changes hardly represented a return to pre-twentieth-century forms of urban and rural social life. Native place and kinship ties were rarely visible socially or economically.

The state controlled society through a process of aggressive simplification, more radical indeed than the kinds of state simplification James Scott has suggested in his *Seeing Like a State* to be a general trait of high modernist projects of twentieth-century states. Whether considered from the vantage point of classes in which the interests of different large sections of society compete with each other or from the perspective of "civil society" organized in numerous voluntary associations—each able to pursue competing or complementary economic, social, or political agendas—industrialized or industrializing societies typically have structures that promote some degree of social autonomy from government intervention. Post-1949 China lacked both the social stratification of a capitalist society and the organizational nuclei of a strong civil society. Instead, status distinctions were labels defined politically. Those attached to one's "class background" were difficult to avoid. Individuals could, however, achieve those depending on zealous participation in political life. Such labels were a feature of political campaigns and movements through which the Chinese Communist party state was able to mobilize large segments of society. Were society organized and stratified according to the conventions more common among industrial and industrializing societies, it may well have been more difficult for the party state to achieve the kinds of political mobilizations they repeatedly made in the 1950s and 1960s. Chinese society subject to radical social simplification by the state, became, by the standards of other nonprimitive societies, weakly stratified and underorganized.

Social simplification in the countryside began with land reform and progressed under collectivization. First, major differences in land-based wealth were reduced dramatically by locale. Then, by the late 1950s, rural incomes were largely determined by the value associated with different kinds of labor.

While socialist agriculture was planned and therefore in some ways cumbersome and inefficient, the social structure it promoted was far simpler than what would have obtained under a market-based capitalist system. Similarly in cities, the state achieved direct control over production in the second half of the 1950s. The vast majority of the urban population were workers in state-managed offices and factories. The urban elite, like the rural elite, derived status, power, and wealth from their party membership and roles they played through their party positions and connections.

Eighteenth-century rural stratification had been fluid. Some locales had one or two dominant landlord families but far more places were stratified more gradually between rich and poor peasants. After 1949, there were no major differences in rural household wealth. Moreover, the main factors that promoted social mobility two centuries before—partible inheritance, which reduced average landholding over generations, and market opportunities, which raised incomes for some households—were absent after 1949. In some senses at least, post-1949 rural Chinese society was socially stable in ways more reminiscent of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western images of rural stagnation in Asian societies than the realities of eighteenth-century agrarian life.

Urban social structures were more sharply different. Those of the eighteenth century were dominated by associational forms developed within society and with which officials attempted to gain some effective relationship. Much of the social order within Chinese cities depended on the people themselves; officials played a secondary and supporting role, in contrast to the dominant role that officials enjoyed in the three decades after 1949. Amidst these changes, a Communist elite has replaced a Confucian elite at the top of society. Absent in eighteenth-century Chinese society were the sharp corporate divisions among urban, aristocratic, military, and clerical elites that could be found across much of Europe and in Japan. A Confucian-centered Chinese elite pursued wealth, power, and scholarship without the social differentiation typical in many other parts of Eurasia. Post-1949 Chinese elite status was defined principally by party membership and position in ways more strict and narrow than those present two centuries earlier. Once again, there are certainly changes in the bases of elite formation but these hardly conform to our general expectations about social change from agrarian to industrial societies.

The shift from Confucian-centered to Communist-dominated elite structures was mediated by more than a century of social change in which multiple new elites emerged in Chinese cities based on new kinds of economic, professional, social, and political roles. Chinese cities by the early twentieth century were increasingly connected to international markets for commodities, technologies, ideas, and institutions. These ties tended to overshadow and in

some cases even replace connections to the countryside. Chinese coastal cities and towns, heavily influenced by foreign agents of change, enjoyed new forms of consumption and developed new cultural sensibilities. At the same time, many rural residents in the agrarian interior faced chronic subsistence insecurities as they produced crops and crafts more similar to those of their ancestors than they were to the many new goods in Chinese urban settings. These two conditions bring us to the counterfactual for China of what would have happened in the absence of the Japanese invasion and subsequent Chinese Communist victory? Would there have been the spatial and social patterns of urban centers with strong global ties but weak economic, social, and political connections to their domestic agrarian sectors?

REFORM ERA SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

In the three decades before the 1980s, party cadres formed the political and economic elite. Economic reforms have changed their positions in different ways. In cities, nonparty elites have emerged as well as an economic middle class quite separate from the Communist Party. In the countryside, party cadres, however, have often occupied a salient place in economic reforms because they controlled access to resources and information necessary for expanding rural industries, a key component of economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s. Not surprisingly, economic and social changes in cities and countryside differ.

Sociologists within and without China have begun to assemble increasing amounts of data and make many fascinating analyses of social change in Chinese cities. The formation of new kinds of elites who can be identified both by occupation and consumption patterns as well as the persistent presence of those who have not benefited greatly, if at all, from a quarter century of economic reforms have been studied. The general arc of change seems pretty clear—Chinese patterns of urban social stratification are generally moving toward practices we can recognize in other industrialized and industrializing societies. Previous forms of social organization under state administrative control basically get left behind as new forms of association and new kinds of networks are formed. New urban economic elites achieve their wealth through new occupations tied to an industrializing economy and the kinds of goods and services such an economy generates. Their status claims, however, may differ from the status hierarchies that have emerged in Western European and North American societies, since economic changes do not entirely drive changes in social prestige and cultural values.

The situation outside Chinese cities is less clear. The rise in per capita rural incomes has depended on a combination of labor migration to the cities and

the increased employment of the remaining people in small-scale industries. The development of township and village enterprises in the 1980s and 1990s allowed new forms of production that used factor proportions far more efficiently than before. In two very different kinds of places, cadres played a very large role. First, in extremely poor and peripheral areas, officials played, and continue to play, a large role in organizing the local economy, for many of the same reasons that they were relatively more important in such areas in the eighteenth century—the paucity of private wealth to be invested in production and exchange. These areas continue to require state subventions in order to entertain any possibilities for economic development; indeed, the challenges today are far greater than those of two or three hundred years ago. In the eighteenth century the technological possibilities for production were far more limited; it was far easier to imagine transferring textile and agricultural techniques than the much more involved industrial technologies of today. Second, and unlike the situation in the eighteenth century, officials are important in particular core areas, including those in which they played a far more modest role in the political economy of eighteenth-century agrarian empire. The so-called Sunan model of the early 1990s—predicated on the involvement of cadre as entrepreneur—formed the basis for what Jean Oi has called “local corporatism” and even after most rural industry was privatized, state agents still play a critical role.

The formation of township and village enterprises, which in practice included a wide range of ownership and management forms, and their subsequent evolutions, represented a pattern of industrialization quite distinct from experience in Europe and North America where farm labor migrated to urban factories. In China, initial emphasis on heavy industry and ideological preference for an urban proletariat as the leading class of the revolution created a model of industrialization that institutionalized a sharp urban-rural divide and blocked mobility from villages to cities. The reform-era Chinese pattern of rural industrialization emerges, at least partially it seems to me, as a path-dependent outcome from earlier forms of rural production, including both late-imperial-era craft production and small-scale industrial production begun during the Great Leap Forward.

These economic connections between past and present are complemented by political parallels. The kind of political authority found in rural areas today, of course, differs from those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet in contrast to Europe where political authority never reached deeply into the countryside in earlier centuries and remained urban-focused in more recent times, in China the political authority that reached into rural communities during late imperial era penetrated even deeper after 1949. The reform-era opportunities for rural households to succeed economically and socially quite independently of local political authorities create complex

situations with at least some social differentiation more similar to stratification possibilities under the market conditions of earlier centuries than the largely nonmarket conditions of the 30 years preceding socialist reforms. But local party leaders have often continued to enjoy advantages owing to their political connections, which have allowed them to prosper in ways that some people have sometimes found illegitimate. The most egregious cases have been identified as forms of corruption by the government and subject to severe punishments.

When we leave the countryside specifically and look at elites across both urban and rural society, Communist Party elites no longer enjoy a monopoly on most sources of status, wealth, and power. Before the 1980s party membership was the key conduit to status, wealth, and power. The limited number of alternative discrete sources of status, wealth, and power provides another indication of the relatively restricted possibilities for social stratification available, at least when compared to other developing societies or advanced industrial ones. In the reform era, the sources of status, wealth, and power have multiplied. Wealth and power remain connected, but there are many different threads of each that can be woven in more varied ways. Social status markers have become more diverse even as they are hardly divorced from wealth and power. Education, which had been so important to the status of Confucian elites in late imperial times, matters in new ways today.

Confucian elites had been at the top of the late imperial status hierarchy even if merchants were wealthier and officials were more powerful. Merchants often wanted Confucian educations for their sons and certainly hoped some family members might become officials. Confucian education was crucial to being a member of either the intellectual or political elites. Distinct from, but related to, both the changing economic and political elites of the country are the new knowledge elites whose status and wealth depend on their familiarity with science and technology. Within the new knowledge elites are people whose technical skills are used directly in production as well as those whose abilities are in finance or business organization. The latter forms of knowledge relate to broader forms of social science knowledge practiced within academia and thus bring us to issues of how intellectuals as a diverse elite figure into contemporary Chinese social structure.

There are at least three different ways in which education matters to social stratification in China. First, there are the human capital issues similar to those in other industrializing or industrialized societies; levels of education affect the kinds of jobs and therefore the kinds of income people can have. Second, education matters for both general reasons and those more particular to the Chinese situation. As elite positions become more diverse through economic development, the sources of status become more varied;

higher education will create both technocratic and critical elites with evolving relations to political elites. Third, education of different kinds also creates tastes of particular kinds that can be distinct from those of mass market consumerism. People with particular kinds of social tastes also form their own networks; Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* comes to mind as a relevant comparative point of departure.

All societies combine different kinds of mechanisms and processes to create social strata and economic hierarchies. The relative importance of the economist's "human capital" and the sociologist's or political scientist's "social capital" does, however, vary among societies. One can consider the importance of informal networks that cut across and through bureaucratically organized social and political space to have been especially crucial given the radical social simplifications of the bureaucratic socialist era. But networks utilizing social capital can also be built in other situations. If one thinks of the role of education in the United States today, the features distinguishing an Ivy League education from that available at other first-tier research universities and distinguished liberal arts colleges are less likely to be the substantive content that can be translated into human capital and more likely to be the social relations and networks available through the contacts only available at, or at least largely restricted to, the Ivy League. At the same time as we look in the future at how human and social capital both develop and affect Chinese social stratification, we should also be mindful of the persistence of old networks beyond those within occupations. Consider, for instance, the persistent role of native place ties to explain employment on the passenger ships working the Yangzi River; whether maid, cook, cabin boy, or ship's officer, all seem to be tied through their Chongqing connections. This is perhaps a variation of Arthur Stinchcombe's classic observations about social organization and social structure, namely that an organization takes on features reflecting the social structure of the era in which it was formed (Stinchcombe 1965).

There are two final aspects of social stratification that deserve attention and remind us of how China's future will grow simultaneously out of its past and through its connections with the larger world. Both affirm the importance of analyzing different kinds of social space. One concerns the continuing creation of new small-scale urban centers out of what were previously rural social settings. The second involves migration to larger metropolitan areas. The urbanizing social structures of areas that were formerly agrarian is a process distinct from the formation of ever-larger metropolises, but how much these processes will subsequently share and how closely they will ultimately be connected remains to be seen.

Looking more closely at social settings in the countryside in different parts of China, only some are becoming more urban, usually when they are

already close to larger cities. What will characterize the larger range of possibilities that includes rural areas farther away from existing urban centers? Much of what are today poor peripheries were settled in the Qing dynasty and the political economy of that era created the material possibilities of these regions. As I previously mentioned, the state today faces a far greater challenge in transferring technologies to these areas than the Qing state confronted. How will social stratification change in these less-developed areas as the state continues to promote a variety of development policies for the so-called western region? In particular, how will urban-rural social relations evolve across the country and how will we analyze these as basic features of changing social stratification? Since standard models posit a shift from rural to urban as basic to modern society, the persistence of a rural sector that is itself modern can expand the framing of social stratification issues in the developing world. The intense concern that policy makers are currently spending on urban-rural relations suggests that China will not necessarily be transformed into a largely urban society at any point in the near future (Qiu 2006; Fang 2007). At the same time our understanding of contemporary Chinese social stratification and economic change promises to illuminate more general issues, it will benefit from being anchored in an understanding of earlier forms of political economy and social stratification, especially those regarding urban-rural relations across the spatial scale of the former Qing empire. The chapters of this volume offer some useful signposts for marking the paths of social change taking place in contemporary China. The socialist upheavals of three decades have now been followed by three more remarkable and very different decades of social change. What will we be writing about Chinese society 30 years from now?