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PEASANTRY AND GENTRY: AN INTERPRETATION OF CHINESE SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND ITS CHANGES

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ABSTRACT

Peasantry and gentry form relatively rigid social classes in Chinese society. The peasants farm the gentry's land and their rents support the gentry in leisure. The function of the gentry is local administration. Since the rigors of government may always be mitigated by friendship, every peasant family hopes to educate a son into the gentry and official life and thus secure for itself a friend at court. The gentry, being educated, are the logical carriers of Western cultural innovation; but they are noncommercial and see no gain in Westernization. The innovators, in reality, are social outcasts who have lost their traditional status and lead a socially irresponsible life in the treaty ports. This class of compradors is a new element, usurping what would have been the gentry's role in acculturation.

The polarization of the rich and the poor gives birth to a social dichotomy common in many advanced communities. Benjamin Disraeli used "The Two Nations" as the alternative title for his *Sybil*, a story describing the social life in nineteenth-century England. That describes our traditional China equally well. Probably more than 80 per cent of the Chinese are peasants. They are poor but they are economically productive. In a country in which industry and commerce are not yet fully developed, the peasants are the sole producers. Those who stay at the peak of the social pyramid are the leisure class—the gentry—a minority who live on rent collected from the peasants. Wealth and poverty create not only an economic difference which separates the rich from the poor but a social gulf between the two classes as well. The people thus separated carry on their lives differently. The upper class live in a more elaborate structure of social relations and are more sophisti-

cated and more articulate. They are usually considered as the cultured group, while the majority of the population, engaged in the hard work of production, leaves little impression on observers and little trace in historical documents. When the historians exalt or condemn the Greeks or the Romans, they have in mind only the warriors and the philosophers. Is it not also true that China has been praised and criticized according to that China which is found in Western museums, exhibited in art galleries, and described by writers of best-sellers? The China so represented comprises only the minority, the leisured gentry. A fair view of China, however, should include both the poor and the rich and the relation between them.

I

Peasantry, the key toward understanding China, is a way of living, a complex of formal organization, individual behavior, and social attitudes, closely knit together for

the purpose of husbanding land with simple tools and human labor. Peasants are settled and sedentary. Growth of population on limited resources puts the law of diminishing returns in effective operation. Cultivation of land tends to be intensified. Minute care of the soil and delicate application of human labor hinder the utilization of improved tools. Standard of living lowers as population increases. Animal labor becomes uneconomical. Highly developed application of human skill in handling soil and crops yields a return only sufficient for a bare existence. When work is mainly done by hands and feet, the advantage of division of work is reduced. Extensive organization in such enterprises gives no appreciable profit but rather complicates human relations. This accounts for the fact that among the peasant society the basic group is usually small.

The smallness of the co-operative group is characteristic of peasantry. Peasants, unlike nomads, live in settled communities. They are nonaggressive because, on the one hand, extension of land beyond the ability of cultivation means little to them, and, on the other, living in a rural environment, they face no immediate threat of innovation or invasion. Security is a matter of course. There seems to be no necessity for any militant organization on a large scale.

This is perhaps one reason why the family is so predominant in the structure of social organization in a peasant community. The family in a peasant community is a sufficient unit to provide the necessary and minimum social co-operation in everyday economic pursuits. Such co-operation is maintained by, or rather an extension of, another main task of the human race, that of reproduction. The mutual reinforcement of the related functions of life achieves a strong solidarity.

The small size of the basic social unit seems quite contrary to the popular conception of the Chinese social structure. It is often believed that in China the family unit is large. There are big houses in which a large number of kin live together, but this

is found only in the gentry. Among Chinese peasants, the basic social unit is numerically small and is mainly composed of parents and children. Evidences from various studies in rural China show no exception. The average varies from four to six persons. However, from the point of view of structure, the basic group among the Chinese peasants is more than a family, as defined by anthropologists. It sometimes includes children who have grown up and married. I have called it the "expanded family."¹ If the principle of expansion carries far, the result will be a clanlike big house, as seen among the gentry; but among peasants such expansion is limited. As a rule, lateral expansion—brothers continuing to live together after marriage—is rare and unstable. The usual practice is that the aged parents stay with one of the married sons. Without any social provision for the old, it seems very natural that the parents should be taken care of by their son.

In a mobile community, nomadic or industrial, an individual has his own locus. He moves about by himself and acquires his social status on his own behalf. But for a settled peasant, it seems that all his activities are bound to the group. The family is a self-sufficient and self-supporting group, in which he maintains his existence and perpetuates his kind. It is the center from which his relations, kinship, local, and professional, ramify. The singularism in extension of social relations differs in principle from the pluralism in modern society. Individuals in such a structure are counted only as members of a certain family.

The traditional ideology in China suppresses individualism in favor of familism. The meaning, or value, of the individual's existence is defined by its being a link in the chain of social continuity which is concretely conceived in terms of descent. The most important task of a man is to continue the family line. Of the three traditional charges against an undutiful son, the failure

¹ *Peasant Life in China: A Field Study of Country Life in the Yangtze Valley* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1939).

in giving offspring comes first. The interest of the group is paramount even in such affairs as in modern society are strictly private. The collective responsibility of family members in social contributions or offenses has only recently been abolished by law, though it still persists in practice. Fathers will be held responsible for the crime committed by their children. Wives and sons are often killed solely because their husbands and fathers are revolutionists. Even now district (county) jails are full of prisoners who have committed no crime other than the fact that some of their family members happen to be deserters from the army. I am not certain whether such imprisonment is lawful, but this is the practice and no legitimate protests have been made. For the present purpose, I am taking it as a living evidence of the collectiveness of the family group and the nonrecognition of the individual as such in social responsibility.

The same principle is found in the part played by the family in wider organizations. In community organization the family, not the individual, is the unit. In practice the basic constituents of a local government are families. Local assemblies are represented by family heads; local taxes are collected from families. The family thus is a civic unit. Few have questioned the validity of the family basis of civic society, although democracy in the modern sense is essentially a recognition of equal rights among individuals. Thus in Western democracies individuals enter the civic society directly and the family has no place in the political structure. It is interesting to note that, when modern civic structure is introduced to China, the traditional form persists. The family still supersedes the individual.

The family is thus the basic unit in the social structure of rural China. From this basis larger organizations are formed, but on the whole these are not strong. The peasants recognize kinship. They gather on ceremonial occasions and help each other when they are in need. But it is rare to find wider kinship organizations of a permanent nature among the peasants, and even mutual obli-

gations among the relatives are not pronounced. In local organizations, neighborhood is universal. But as I have seen in the villages near Lake Tai, each house counts five families on either side of it as its neighbors. In Yunnan, however, neighborhood forms a permanent group and possesses a common temple. The function of the neighborhood is limited to ceremonial assistance and recreation. When we come to the village organization, we find that it is not organized by the peasants alone but by the gentry as well. It is, in fact, a rule of the gentry over the peasants. As far as the peasants are concerned, social organization stops at the loosely organized neighborhood. In the traditional structure, peasants live in small cells, which are the families, without strong ties between the cells. They carry on productive work in this kind of small co-operative group. They maintain their own subsistence and at the same time support the living of those who occupy higher positions in the social structure.

II

The chief occupation of the Chinese people as a nation is agriculture, and they depend on land for their living. As population increases, less fertile land can be utilized. Gradually there emerges a class of landowners who can afford to live without working on the land while they still enjoy the benefits of the land on account of their privileges as owners. This can be done either by employing farm laborers to work for them or by renting the land to tenants. The rise of a nonlaboring rentier class is an important step in the evolution of an agrarian community.

Farm work under primitive technique is drudgery. It is quite conceivable that those who can afford to live without being engaged in hard work will do so even at the expense of their standard of living. It seems that there are two ways of reducing the painful experience in productive pursuits: either to improve tools and utilize animal and natural power or to shift the burden to others. The first is exploitation of nature

and the second is exploitation of man. In an agrarian community, when the population has increased to such a huge size as in China, the cost of human labor becomes even lower than animal labor. Under such circumstances, the first way is blockaded. It is small surprise to see that the tools used by the Chinese peasants of today are very much similar to those excavated from ancient archeological sites. Wooden wheels, an old invention, can be seen in their most primitive form on village roads, and even these are not extensively used. Loads are carried on human shoulders with the assistance of a pole. Exploitation of man is the only choice that one can make to avoid physical toil in getting a living.

I venture to think that the indulgence in physical comfort in the form of avoiding any sort of labor, which finds its highest expression in opium-smoking, is a reaction of the peasantry against hardship. Sharp contrasts of this kind are often observed in all cultures. Among the starving mass, the value of food is always exalted; the most extravagant cookery and exotic recipes are always found in poverty-stricken nations; the reckless and lavish maharajas vie with each other in gastronomical display in a famished India. Under the most strict code of sexual relations, periodic license is customary. When a long-suppressed desire becomes realizable, it drives the fortunate few unscrupulous. An unduly heightened value usually arises from the negation of the popular practice and normal discipline. The elevation from the common order becomes the goal of the common people. The hard-working Chinese peasant looks toward leisure and comfort with unusual eagerness. The denial by the laboring class of its own importance is expressed in the generally accepted popular saying, as first epigrammatically pronounced by Mencius: "Those who earn their living by labor are destined to be ruled." The self-abdication of the laboring class as the master of their own destiny is the foundation of a social dichotomy—a leisure class on top of hard-working peasants.

There is a social necessity for the gentry to develop a more elaborate social structure for themselves. The economic basis for their class is rent. It is a privilege which has to be protected by political power. Mencius' dictum has to be read in the sense that, in a community essentially agrarian, unless those who do not earn their living by labor can rule the peasants, their position is not secure. It is because an economically unproductive class living upon privileges is politically vulnerable. For the sake of security, the gentry has to be better organized. Better organization spells power. Gentry as a class differs from peasantry both in kinship and in local organizations.

I have said that among the peasants the basic social co-operative group is small. Among the gentry it is different. Big kinship groups are found. Peasants earn their living mainly by their own efforts. They work and they live. The sense of independence is strong. Although the Chinese peasants usually live with their parents who are too old to work and depend on the younger generation for support, the rule of the old is not deep-rooted. An adult son who tills the land and brings back necessities for the household is not living under the thumb of his father. But when a person does not earn his living by his own labor but depends on rent, the situation is different. An absentee landowner needs political power for his protection. In holding their privilege, the gentry are militant, as they must be. To be politically powerful and influential, the organization of the gentry has to be big and strong. Division of the household and independence of the young, as very frequently seen among the peasants, are definitely disintegrative forces and will weaken the group solidarity. In the town where I was reared, I was familiar with a number of big houses, each a colony of a number of dependent families, under the rule of a powerful and centralized authority. The head of the house holds the power in financial and social matters, maintaining the discipline of the members and enforcing the family laws. Some of them even have their own law

courts. Patriarchy works out in its full strength. The son refers to his father before others as "the terrible old one," which he literally is. He enjoys no intimacy with his father, who seldom laughs in front of his children. A good description of the patriarchal relation is found in the novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.

A big house is an empire by itself. The members, like subjects, live under the rule and whim of the patriarch. They know no independence until they themselves are promoted to the position of a ruler. They depend upon their house for their living; their career is determined by the house; for whatever they are worth the house is solely responsible. By such a strong kinship organization, the political power of the house in the larger community is secured. The members, even the servants, of the house enter the power structure of the nation with facility. The position they hold in the government in turn supports the privilege of the house, and their economic basis is thus guaranteed.

As the size of the house grows, generation after generation (the idea being that five generations should live under the same roof), the tension within the organization grows, too. Once an emperor questioned a patriarch by what means he ruled his house successfully. The latter answered by writing three characters: forbearance, forbearance, and forbearance. Yet forbearance has its limits. Houses disperse. But to maintain close relationship among the kin is necessary for the gentry. Then clan appears. A clan is a disintegrated house; the individual family in the clan gains a certain amount of independence, while kinship unity is preserved for the common interest.

I think that both the big-family (or the house) system and the clan are the gentry's organizations. Sometimes among the peasants, the clan is found, but it is of another kind. In Yunnan, for instance, I have seen that in villages local organization is formed in terms of clan which includes even members of different surnames. Functionally these are not strictly kinship groups. I shall

leave the question open as to the nature of the so-called clan-village. I rather suspect that such an organization among the peasants is a local organization, not a kinship organization. But I am sure that the clan is not universal in China, and the most effective and elaborate clans are found in the gentry. A clan organization among the landless or even petty owners is superfluous. Take my own clan, for instance. When the need for protecting our joint interest in landholding disappeared, our clan faded away. What is left now is only a name.

For a clan to be effective, it must possess some common property—invariably land. A piece of land is usually contributed to the organization by a member who is a government official, the ostensible pretext being that the products of the land may cover the expenses necessary in the keeping-up of the ancestors' tombs and regular sacrifices. But, in fact, this common property is a common security with which the position of the clan may be maintained in the wider power structure of the community. It finances the education of the young members so that they may be able to enter the scholar class and attain high official positions and protect the interests of their kinsmen. Members of the same clan are under obligation to help each other when help is called for. The clan organization, furthermore, has the authority to set up sanctions against any alienation of land. As is widely observed, individual contract in land transaction is not valid unless it is signed by clan members of the seller. This shows how closely the clan organization is linked up with land rights.

Clan organization, which defines the propinquity among unilateral kin, regulates the inheritance of land in order to prevent any disruption caused by a confusion in the line of descent and to enforce the solidarity of the group. This is known as the *tsung fa* in China, the system of descent. It is of little account when no problem of inheriting large estates is involved. In the villages of petty owners, as I have seen in Yunnan, the spirit of the *tsung fa* is weak. In other words, the people there do not observe strictly the

rule of inheritance according to patrilineal descent. What the peasants in general care for most is the maintenance of the working efficiency of the basic group. It has been the custom that, when a married son dies, a substitute will be found to take the place of the deceased, and, when the substitute becomes a widower, he will take another wife. As a result the family unit is bound by no biological relations at all. However, the basic working group achieves its continuity, and life carries on. This will not happen among the sophisticated gentry. The gentry who live on land rights have reasons to adhere to orderliness and discipline in order to hold the property.

The solidarity of the big house and the clan is only one aspect of the strategy of the propertied class. To be powerful and to achieve security, big houses have to be aligned. This is done through an extension of affinal relations. Marriage has been regarded as a family affair and has been customarily defined as an alliance of houses. Choice of mate is made on the ground of family status. Through marriage a number of big houses are confederated into a powerful group. But if we turn to the peasants, we shall see that the main consideration in matchmaking is the working ability of the girl.

It is true that in China kinship is the key to social organization, but it would be wrong to think that kinship is itself so dear to the people. Kinship is only a means by which social groups are organized for different purposes. I do not think that kinship possesses any force of extension by itself and is valued as such. Procreation can be carried on without extensive recognition of kinship ties. It is so recognized because such ties can be used to organize social groups for definite purposes. In China it is the gentry who find it necessary, in order to be powerfully organized, to employ the principle of kinship extensively.

III

The peasantry and the gentry can further be contrasted by showing their ecological

positions. To understand the rural economy of China, one has to bear in mind the fact that, with a very small farm under cultivation, land is closed to ambition. The average farm in China is only a few acres. (In Yunnan a good-sized farm is only about one acre.) Small farming makes accumulation of capital impossible. Villagers put it neatly: "Land breeds no land." In a community in which industry and commerce are not developed, in which land has already done its best, and in which the pressure of increasing population is felt, ambitious people have to seek their fortune not through ordinary economic enterprises but through acquiring power legally or illegally. Just the same they must leave their village for good. When they obtain wealth, they may come back to their village to acquire land, but if they retire to live in the village, the pressure of population will be borne upon them and soon wear them out—and after a few generations the big house will break down into a number of petty owners again. Therefore, it is essential for the rich to keep away from the village. The place where they can maintain their power and wealth is the town.

Towns in traditional China are not founded on manufacturing or commerce. In China the chief industries, such as textiles, are mainly peasant occupations. Owing to the smallness of the farm, the peasants cannot live entirely upon the land. It is a matter of necessity to have some additional income. Moreover, since agriculture cannot give full employment to the peasants, they have plenty of time to carry on industrial jobs in their homestead. Peasants live largely in a self-sufficient economy. The amount they buy and sell is small. If their commercial activities are centralized in a fixed locality, say a town, it will take a big area to support it. It is feasible only in those areas where communication is easy and inexpensive, such as in the Lower Yangtze Valley. In most parts of China the periodical market takes the place of the town. It gathers only once in several days. Its size and frequency of gathering can be adjusted to the temporary need from time to time. It seems clear

that the permanent town has no place in the traditional rural economy.

The traditional town is the seat of the gentry. The gentry class symbolizes political and financial power. The town in which I was born, and which I know very well, mainly consists of residences of the gentry, rice stores, pawnshops, tea houses, and private gardens. There are also a number of tailors, carpenters, blacksmiths, and goldsmiths and other craftsmen. The rice stores and the pawnshops are financial establishments. The peasants, when pressed by rent or tax or other crises, have to sell their rice to the stores in town at a low price. At the time when their reserves are eaten up, they come to the stores to buy at a high price. The rice stores are therefore similar in nature to the pawnshops. Tea houses, big gardens, and magnificent residences are also the paraphernalia of the gentry. From morning until nightfall, the leisured gentlemen gather in the tea houses to amuse themselves in sipping tea, in listening to the storytellers, in talking nonsense, in gambling, and in smoking opium. It would appear to a New Englander that such a town is no better than a concentration camp of voluntary deserters from life. But, to them, leisure means prestige as well as privilege. By displaying the leisure at their disposal, they stand high in the eyes of the lower classes. The professionals who live in the town are dependent on the gentry for their employment. Few of them keep their own shops. They are called to work in the employers' houses. This reminds us of medieval feudalism in western Europe.

Such towns do not lack their charm. If one is prepared to amuse one's self in an artistic expression of life, there are hundreds of small attractions here that win his admiration. I myself have often missed much of the delicious food of my native town and the specialties of all the towns which I used to visit in my boyhood. I will not hesitate to advise a visitor to Soochow to spend at least one day in a tea house, where he will be astonished at finding the cultured eloquence with which the average customer

talks and the mellowed and humorous outlook on life he has achieved. But one will be grossly mistaken if one thinks that this represents the ways and manners of the Chinese mass.

The mass of peasants do not live in the town. They look at the seat of the gentry with a mixed feeling of repulsion and admiration. They support the living of the minority by paying taxes, rent, and interests. The annual tribute is their burden. In the Yangtze Valley, with the social conditions of which I am most familiar, I believe, it will not be exaggerating to say that half of the yield of the peasants goes to the town. If the economic reason is still not sufficient to arouse the ill will of the peasant toward the town, he will no longer remain undisturbed in the village when he finds his unsatisfied wife run away from home to work as a maid in a gentleman's big house which he dare not enter. However, the town remains the ideal, the dream, and the incentive of the peasants. It seems that they are not antagonistic toward the town, nor the gentry, as such. What they are against is their own inability to become one of those who exploit them. As long as they believe that paradise is not closed to them, they have no desire to deny that that is where their own hopes and wishes lie.

IV

It would be unfair to the gentry if my analysis stops here. So far we have seen that the gentry is a class which is pre-eminently parasitic. The question then will be raised as to how such a system of exploitation could persist for a long period. Is the cultural achievement of the gentry, with which the peasants have little to do, sufficient to justify their existence? The rich in the town must make more tangible and concrete contributions before they can win respect and gratitude from the peasants. In the eyes of the peasants the gentry do give them political protection. But am I contradicting myself when, on the one hand, I have said that the gentry hold political power for their own interest which means the protection of

their own rights of collecting rent from the peasants, and, on the other, I now state that the gentry are the protectors of the peasants? It is true that the peasants are the exploited class in the traditional structure and the gentry are their immediate exploiters, but this is true only from our point of view. For the peasants themselves the situation is not so defined. As long as the right of private ownership is recognized, rent payment is an approved obligation of the tenants. Usurers are hated, but the rate of interest is agreed upon when the loans are made. If the gentry are exploiting the peasants, they do so through institutional means and within institutional limits. Rent and interest are fixed. Abuse of power is found only when the peasants fail to fulfil the contract. There is, however, another form of exploitation which is beyond the control of the peasants, and that is the absolute monarchical power unchecked by popular will and unbounded as the whims of the monarch are unbounded. Against this power, the peasants have to seek protection from the gentry. To make this point clear, I have to go further into the power structure of traditional China.

The center of the power structure is the absolute monarch. From the monarch, power is intrusted to the hierarchy of officials. On the vast continent, with bad communication systems, power is centralized only in name but not in fact. Officials of every rank enjoy such an amount of authority as their immediate superiors will tolerate. "The monarch is as remote as the heaven itself." That which rules the people is the hierarchy of officials. Since the officials are responsible only to their superiors, with the monarch far at the top, there is no legalized mechanism of popular check upon the power. The rights of the people are not protected by law. The welfare of the people is hung by a thread on the good conscience of the power hierarchy. Good conscience rarely appears in those who personify power. Therefore political power becomes sometimes even "more fearful than tigers." Protection from the encroachment of the power

upon one's own rights is thus essential. This is achieved not by organized popular action, which results in Western democracy, but by personal approach to the power hierarchy. Since the low official receives power from the one of a higher rank, he has to yield to the will of his superior. If one can influence the superior through personal means, the lower official has to behave amiably toward one, lest he should get into trouble. The direct way of access to the power hierarchy is to enter officialdom one's self. If a man is himself an official, he can protect his and his relatives' private interests not only by the power intrusted in his hands but also by his relation with his fellow-officials. This kind of political maneuver, traditionally known as face-saving, rises from the absence of the rule of law. When a community is ruled by sheer personal will, court politics is inevitable.

It should now be clear why the gentry, being a class of people living on privileges, are anxious to enter into officialdom. If they are not in alliance with the power hierarchy, their position as landowners is threatened. The wrongs done them can never be redressed. Alienation of land by powerful persons is not infrequent. It is a recognized necessity for the rich to hold a position in the hierarchy. Clan organization and affinal confederation are sufficient because they are systems of security through the establishment of a relation to the power hierarchy by kinship.

The gentry mediates between the ruler and the ruled. In the history of China the central power is usually in the hands of alien invaders or social outcasts who seize the political power by unscrupulous means. As soon as the monarch is enthroned, the gentry will join hands with him by filling the rank and file of the officialdom. In their official capacity, they are agents of the ruler, but in their private capacity they are closely related to, and share common interests with, the ruled. Herein lies the popular though not thorough check on the absolute and often alien monarch.

In the traditional system of government

the tentacles of the central power stop at the *hsien* (county). Each *hsien* consists of a number of villages which are usually organized locally by the villagers. The local organization possesses common property and regulates common enterprises such as religious ceremonies and irrigation. The executives of such an organization are elected not by all the representatives of the families but by the respected elders of the village. The respected elders are those who possess land and "face," i.e., connection with the officialdom or with the gentry in town. They are the lower rank of the gentry who are not rich enough to leave the village and live in town.

The central power operates on the people in the following way: When the central government orders the magistrate of the *hsien* to collect taxes or conscribe services, the latter will send agents to the village to carry out the order. The agents themselves are conscripts from the villages. They enjoy no prestige in their own community. In practice, they are only messengers of the magistrate. The government order passes unofficially from the hand of the agent to the local headmen who occupy no official position in the government constitution. The order then will be announced and discussed in the village teashops. All those present may participate. No vote will be taken, but the headman will decide according to the public opinion as well as to his own sense of appropriateness whether the order should be followed. If the decision is in the negative, the agent will be sent back to the magistrate without achieving anything. The responsibility of the failure in executing the order is his. He will be beaten or otherwise punished for the failure. However, court politics follows on the other hand. The elders of the village will call on the magistrate or ask someone among the town gentry to call on the magistrate for negotiation. Since the gentry have connections with the power hierarchy, the magistrate has to consider their suggestions and modify his order in a way he thinks fit. The actual practice is complicated indeed. The maneuver on both

sides may involve the mobilization of a big sphere of the power structure. Sometimes the issue may gradually move up to the monarch himself. Very often the monarch, to grant some personal favor, intervenes in local affairs in a way contrary to his own decrees. For a local government official, the gentry are his opposition, although the opposition is usually not frontal and finally appears in the order from his own superior. Although an official, he is in his private capacity one of the gentry. He will write letters to his fellow-officials asking favor for his own kin, relatives, or local people. The gentry-official is the pivot in the traditional Chinese power structure.

Whatever one may say for or against the traditional pattern, it is clear that, as long as the peasants live in the structure, they have to rely on the gentry for protection against the encroachment of the absolute ruler and his officials.

The gentry differ from the aristocracy in the West in that the former do not form a political party with the responsibility of running a government. Never in the history of China have the Chinese gentry organized their own government. As a class, they never reject any monarch who is able to seize the power and who recognizes the right of landowners. They will enter any government with the purpose of protecting their own kin and local people from the encroachment of the absolute power, but not for the sake of political power itself. They have no sense of political responsibility. They do not even want to remain in their official position for long, and certainly they abhor public duty. I do not think that it is only a matter of pretentiousness that the ideal gentleman is the one who enjoys himself among the people but not in the court. A large bulk of poetry reveals the psychology of retirement of the officials and is popular and typical. The happiest moment of a successful official is when he retires to his own country with high honors. Honor and prestige which the official gentry seek at any price have practical values. They mean security to his own clan and to the people of his

locality. In fact, even when he is holding an office in the government, he is at the same time working as a representative of his kin and relatives. The latter function is indeed his main job, but, in order to realize it, he has to take the former. Toward his public position he assumes a negative attitude. He is ready to resign whenever his record and influence are well established and can perform his function as protector of his people without a public office. The gentry as a class are outside the government. They take official positions individually. They are moved by social but not by political responsibility. This is why we should not rank them as aristocracy.

It may also be important to point out here that, owing to their pivotal position in the power structure, the gentry have through long history acquired a set of codes of professional ethics. They preach the doctrine of order: every one should behave according to and be satisfied by the position one occupies in the social structure. The task of Confucius was to set down for each social status its canon of correct behavior. The gentry's interest is not in possessing political power but in maintaining order irrespective of who the monarch is. They will serve him as long as he behaves as a benevolent ruler, but if he becomes despotic and suppresses the peasants too hard, the gentry will exert their pressure against him. On the other hand, if the peasants revolt against the ruler and disturb the social order, they will fight on the side of the monarch. This is their social responsibility. Being a privileged class themselves, they are never revolutionary. Order and security are their sole interests.

V

In discussing the ecological differentiation of the peasants and the gentry, I have shown that those who like to hold their privilege as a leisure class have to stay outside the village. This is because in agriculture there is little hope for the accumulation of wealth. It seems that a peasant who works on the land is bound to the land as a peasant. Therefore, we may ask how the gentry emerges. Of course, we must admit

that, since there is no social barrier preventing a peasant from entering into the gentry if he can afford to lead a leisurely life, there will be those hard-working peasants who strive to rise from the bottom. But it will take them several generations to climb up the social ladder, each generation promoting itself a little. Despite thrift and endurance, this is not only a long but also a haphazard way, because in the rural community misfortunes of all kinds are not uncommon. Drought and flood may cause famine. Epidemics may ruin a family. In a period of political disturbance bandits are as bad as locusts in the dry years. It will be most rare for a family to keep up its morale for several generations and to have no misfortune strike at them in the meantime.

Another factor which prevents a hard-working and well-to-do peasant family from rising is the high pressure of population. Upon these the pressure of population is particularly strong. For among the leisure class the birth rate is low because of their degenerated physical conditions, and among the poor peasants infantile mortality is high because of the lack of good care. But among hard-working, well-to-do peasants, the birth rate is as high as that of the poor peasants and the death rate is comparatively low owing to their better living standard. Such a family grows fast. If it cannot expand its estate at the same rate, its standard of living will sink in the next generation. It already requires fairly strenuous efforts for a peasant family to maintain its footing, but the hope of rising into the leisure class is slight.

It is quite natural that the common tendency among the peasants is not to rise on the social ladder but rather to sink toward the bottom. A petty owner may become a tenant when he sells his land as misfortune befalls him. He may further sink from a tenant to a landless farm laborer. He may in the end die disgracefully or disappear from the village. These outcasts are desperate. They have nothing to lose but their life of drudgery. They leave the village and plunge themselves into banditry or smuggling, or join the army, or seek employment as

servants in big gentry houses. These are economically nonproductive jobs, but it is only by taking up such jobs, in addition to good luck, that the outcasts from the rural society can hope to obtain wealth quickly. Of course, hundreds and thousands of such fortune-seekers die in despair and are forgotten by the world. But, once loosened from the soil, they have freed themselves from the bond of the land. They are the dissatisfied class and thus revolutionary in nature. When the ruling class is strong, they are suppressed. Only a few reach their aim through various kinds of more or less unlawful ways. But if the ruling class is degenerate and weak, they are the uprising group aiming at power. In Chinese history there are several instances where new dynasties were inaugurated by such desperate outcasts.

In peacetime the few successful upstarts when they have obtained wealth will buy land and insinuate themselves into the leisure class. They are looked down upon and looked at with a prejudiced eye by the gentry. Only gradually and especially by means of affinal alliance, are they admitted into the upper layer of the social structure. Not until one of the family members enters into the scholar group and into officialdom is their position in the gentry consolidated.

The gentry are maintained economically by owning land and politically by occupying a position in officialdom. As a landowning class they have the leisure to learn classical literature which is the professional requirement of an official. For nearly a thousand years the monarch has offered regular examinations to recruit officials from the literati. Only a few low classes are excluded from the right to take part in such examinations. Theoretically men from the peasantry are free to enter into the competition. And there are notable cases in which a son of a poor peasant learned the classics on the back of his buffalo while he was working in the field and attained high honor in the examination. But, after all, these are exceptions, for otherwise such stories would not be circulated like legends. It is true that in China there is no such social class system as the caste

system, but it is another question as to whether the Chinese class system possesses high mobility. I have no statistical information to prove the case, but from studies on existing rural communities it is clear that a child from a peasant family engaged in farm work has little chance of receiving a high-school education. I cannot help being cautious in accepting the popular belief that in the good old days everyone had a chance to become an official through equitable examination. The mobility between peasantry and gentry has been rather limited. It is needless to add that the existence of the belief among the peasant in the possibility of promotion to the gentry is important because it gives an incentive and eventually stabilizes the structure at large.

Conversely we may ask how frequently the members of the gentry return to peasantry. As far as my own knowledge goes, I cannot find a single case where a good-for-nothing gentleman picks up farming work again. It seems impossible that the gentry should return to the farm. Manual labor is highly deplored in the current ideology in China, even today. The gentry are especially conscious of it. A long gown that signifies leisure is the emblem of honor and prestige and is the last thing a gentleman will cast away. It is worth more than one's life. I had an uncle who became destitute by his fortieth year. He lived in a bare room and was penniless. But he carried on his life as usual in the tearooms and wore his long gowns until his death. The scene of his death was most pathetic. He lingered on at his last moment and was unwilling to close his eyes, as a cousin of my clan put it who visited him on his deathbed. He was worrying that he would not die as a gentleman, dressed in silk and buried in a coffin of good quality. My cousin comforted him by showing him all that he was going to have when he ceased to breathe. He smiled and then passed away in satisfaction. This incident presents in full the inner psychology of the gentry. The question will then arise as to how he could afford to live up to the standard of a gentleman. The answer is that he was helped by his clan members. The clan

is a system of mutual security. When I was young, I frequently witnessed the visits of my clan uncles to my home. They were poor, but they talked and laughed without mentioning any financial need. When they left us, my grandmother used to give them a handsome amount of money as a present. My grandmother was not rich then. I knew very well that she had sent a maid to the pawnshop from our back door in order to get enough money to aid our clan members who were in distress. The same spirit leads an official to offer jobs to his clan members regardless of their ability. The sense of responsibility for mutual aid and collective security among the clan members is stronger than the sense of duty as an official of the government.

The system of clan social security which prevails among the gentry encourages dependence especially when the class has kept away from participating in productive work. A child reared in such an environment is detached from the life of the people. He lives in a big house devoid of sunshine; he grows up in the reverence of the past, in the shadow of his ancestors, from whom his privileges are inherited. From the petty court politics among the family members he learns to put on a feigned obedience, is imbued with a sense of futility of all efforts, and is trivial, resigned, conservative, and cowardly. Physically he is weak, slender, and sometimes sterile. Of the six of my clan uncles, three have no children of their own. A similar state of affairs is found among many of my relatives. It seems that the lack of initiative and aggressiveness lead eventually to physical sterility. The gentry in China, like the city dwellers in the West, are the dying population, by which I mean that they cannot replace themselves. They have to rely upon recruits from the countryside.

Posed on the peak of the social pyramid, the gentry possess prestige and privilege. Prestige and privilege attract the daring and the aggressive individuals from the classes below. The new recruits revitalize the gentry, but, when they are assimilated, they become pacified and neutralized. The

energy that may cause upheavals is channeled into the petty mobility in the social structure and is finally eliminated in the pattern of leisurely life. The gentry class is in fact a safety valve in social changes. Conservatism becomes the rule of Chinese society, and China as a culture is singular in the history of human kind in its stability and perpetuation.

VI

Traditional China has not passed. It is present, although in many respects it has been covered by modifications and by novelties. This is why I have consistently used the present tense in the above description. Let no one think that what I have described is only a page of dead history. The essential pattern of the social structure is functioning as ever. That it is changing, I am sure. But the new order will not come all of a sudden and be built all in a twinkling. It will be born from the old through the gradual change of the habitual way of living of the millions. The more one analyzes the present situation, whatever new names it bears, a republic or a utopia, the more one wonders about the persistence of the old. Only by acknowledging the persistence, against the wishes of many patriots, may we acquire a better and more intelligent perspective of the situation. Vexations begin when one loses sight of persistent tradition. The above analysis is a preparation for our further discussion on the changing aspect of the Chinese social structure.

It seems that traditional China achieved a certain equilibrium from which ensued stability. This equilibrium was upset when China came in contact with the Western powers, with their industrial supremacy. Modernization is imposed on the Chinese by the machine age, and China is forced to enter the world community. Hence the change in the Chinese social structure.

It is true that China has never been a totally isolated country. For many centuries China was in constant contact with the West: Chinese silk was well known in the Roman court, Indian monks flowed into China and modified Chinese philosophy and

religion, Jesuits stood high in the favor of Chinese emperors. But the Western world never presented such a threat to the traditional Chinese way of living as it does today. This is because the Western world has changed from an agrarian culture to an industrial one since the Industrial Revolution, while China has remained virtually the same as before. The contact of the East and the West is not a matter of geography but a matter of economics. Modern industry gives the West a power unprecedented in history over agrarian communities. Unlike an age of agriculture when people can live harmlessly alone, the industrial age is an age of expansion, a lure to a world community. Seeking raw material and markets, the industrial nations will not let the Eastern Hemisphere alone. To be sure, trade is for mutual benefit, and industry is the best cure for the poverty of the East. But to the Westerner it is still a mystery why the Chinese of the past generation were so stubborn in refusing to let in Western industrial influences. And it certainly seems regrettable that China should be opened by force. Many friends in the West still wonder, too, why the Chinese should be so reluctant in receiving the salvation of their souls by Christianity and of their life by machine. Had this been all due to cultural inertia, the reaction would have faded away when the salvation showed its proofs. To say that the Chinese were prejudiced against new creeds of religion and new ways of production as such is without historical foundation. Buddhism was new to China when it was first introduced, but it was soon incorporated into Chinese religious beliefs and became deeply rooted among the peasants. New crops like the potato and tobacco spread without meeting resistance. To me, the unhappy history of the first period of contact between the East and the West is mainly caused by social factors which can be seen in the perspective I have outlined above.

When the Industrial Revolution started in Europe, it was the middle class who took the lead. Medieval feudalism was receding. But in China at the time of the contact with the West, the middle class was the con-

servative gentry. The ideal of the gentry is to enjoy leisure under the protection of officialdom. Production is the occupation of the peasants and is considered low. The initiative of the gentry in economic pursuits has long been suppressed. Industrialism is not like Buddhism. When Buddhism made its first appearance, it caught the spirit of the gentleman of leisure. It fitted neatly into the tradition of retirement. Therefore, it was able to recruit from that class a number of talents who spread the creed in China. But modern industrialism, on the contrary, runs counter to the traditional spirit of the gentry. The value of practical knowledge is slighted by them. They learn literature because it signifies leisure and delicacy and because it leads to officialdom. The abhorrence of manual work is strong even among the students of modern universities. Chinese engineers prefer making designs to handling machines. The social gulf between those who use the mind and those who use the hand is still present in modern factories in China and has created serious problems in labor administration. How could industrialism find an easy entrance into China?

The crisis created by the intrusion of Western industrial influences, since the Chinese government failed to resist the powerful intruding force, did not call forth the immediate and effective adjustment of the gentry. They failed because the crisis did not present itself as a direct threat to them. Their interest was in rent-collecting. As long as the peasants were able to pay their rent, the gentry had nothing to worry them. It would have needed foresight to see that Western industrial influences, if not adjusted to the rural conditions in China, would lead eventually to the bankruptcy of the peasants and affect the economic basis of the gentry. But the gentry lacked foresight. Having no strong sense of political responsibility, they were naturally even less sensitive to the fact that China's political sovereignty was dwindling. They had little impulse to meet Western industrialism squarely and none to re-examine their own position in the destiny of China. The leading social class thus failed to live up to their

social and cultural responsibility. The government at that time was in the hands of an alien monarch. The Manchu imperial house was degenerating. They certainly felt the danger of foreign intrusion, but the caliber of the ruling class was weak. They resorted to the primitive method of counteraction, such as the Boxers' Rising. The antforeign policy of the government furthered the aloofness of the gentry, who were submissive in nature.

The rapid intrusion of the Western powers, mainly motivated by commercial interests, on the one hand, and the ineptitude of the Chinese government and the leading class, on the other, resulted in a peculiar adjustment in the first phase of contact between the East and the West. It was characterized by the creation of a special zone of foreign settlement which was later developed into the so-called treaty ports. Treaty ports were created for the benefit of Western traders. To protect them, Western laws were allowed to apply in those cases in which Western interests were involved. Order in the ports was maintained by a specially organized government either in the hands of the consuls or in the hands of the representatives of the foreign residents. The Chinese government had no voice in the rule of the special zone. In such zones a type of cosmopolitan community developed. A brief analysis of the nature of such a cosmopolitan community will help us understand the main trend in the change of Chinese social structure during the last hundred years.

Cultures come in contact with each other through their agents. In the treaty ports different elements of the Western peoples and the Chinese are gathered. Among the westerners, traders are predominant. Their interest is in making profit. They are not concerned with the wider spheres of social welfare and international good-will which bear no immediate commercial benefit and endanger no community security. No efforts have been made on the part of the Western traders to improve the incongruous relation with the people among whom they are living. On the contrary, affected by their su-

periority complex, they make deplorable discriminations against the Chinese. These make a respectable Chinese uncomfortable. Humiliation prevents harmonious association. Therefore to such ports a special type of Chinese was attracted. They are known as *compradors*. I possess no sufficient data on the family background of those who form the first line of contact with Western traders, but I strongly suspect that those "secondhand foreigners" were, at least for the early period, recruited from the outcasts of the traditional structure who had lost their positions and sought their fortune through illegal means. Treaty ports are open to them. If they find regular employment in the community, such as servants or interpreters in a foreign concern, they gradually become compradors or first-boys; if they fail, they form gangs. They live in, and take advantage of, the margin of cultural contact. They are half-caste in culture, bilingual in speech, and morally unstable. They are unscrupulous, pecuniary, individualistic, and agnostic, not only in religion but in cultural values. Treaty ports are ultraurban. They are a land where the acquisition of wealth is the sole motive, devoid of tradition and culture. It is unfortunate that the East and the West should meet on such a ground.

To the towns in the interior come foreign missionaries. As individuals they are decent people. But they carry, in one hand, the enthusiasm to convert the heathens who are not conscious of their sins themselves and, in the other hand, the privilege of political protection given to the nationals of the Western powers. Religious salvation attracts few because the ordinary Chinese feels no need for a new creed, but the political protection shines in the eyes of those who need extra shelter for their illegal pursuits. Before the light of God has penetrated into the souls of the Chinese social outcasts, they have already done a lot in the name of God, who will never approve of their deeds. The antagonism against foreign missions that was aroused at the early period and resulted in open conflicts and wars between China and the Western powers came not from the

ill feeling of the Chinese people against foreign missionaries but from their hatred toward the "secondhand foreigners" who had turned God into the devil.

However, as the influences from the West, both political and economical, grow in China, the special group of Chinese, nursed in the treaty ports and in the churches in the interior, gathers importance. Regardless of the type of their character, they occupy a strategic position in China's transition. They are the first few who know foreign languages and the ways to deal with Western people. As their children grow up, they give them modern education and send them abroad to attend Western universities. From this group a new class is formed. They are engaged in professional jobs; at first mainly dependent on foreign sponsors and later on their own feet. But, being reared in a cosmopolitan community, they are fundamentally hybrids. In them are manifest the comprador characteristic of social irresponsibility. It is this class that dominates the first phase of Chinese social and political changes.

VII

Western industrial influence does not stop at the treaty ports. It works its way far into the interior. As I have mentioned above, the bulk of Chinese manufacturing industry is widely scattered in the homesteads of the peasants. The peasants work on their simple looms in their spare time. They have to take up jobs like that because the farm is too small to support them. But handicraft is far less efficient than machine work. Native products cannot compete with the manufactured goods from Western factories. The quality of native products is poor and the cost high. Gradually the native workers lose their jobs. The cheap but good cloth made in factories, for instance, penetrates deep into the remotest villages. This means that thousands of looms in the peasants' homes must stop working. The decline of native industry owing to the invasion of Western industrialism further impoverishes the already poor peasants. Rural depression forces the peasants to sell their land, and more and

more peasants sink into tenancy. This is not the end. Tenants have to pay rent to the owners. This means an increase in the peasants' burden. In the area near the modern cities in the coastal provinces, where Western industrial influence is most strong, more than 80 per cent of the peasants are already tenants. The annual drain on rural produce in terms of rent payment is terrific. Many peasants leave their land and become landless laborers. They crowd into the treaty ports to be factory workers or gangsters. Those who remain in the villages linger on, hard pressed under the exacting taxes, rents, and interests. They are desperate.

Rural depression at last threatens the privileges of the gentry. They begin to disintegrate. Those who cling to the traditional privileges have to resort to stronger political backing. They become the spearhead of the oppressors of the peasant movement. They exert pressure on the government to maintain their privilege. However, being an intellectual class, a part of them, the second generation of the old landed gentry, after receiving modern education, take up professional jobs and earn their living independent of land.

Here we find another front of contact between the East and the West. This front is different from that found in the treaty ports. It is mainly cultural. Early in the last period of the imperial dynasty, a new form of gentry had the opportunity to go abroad, mainly on government missions or scholarships, and, unlike the compradors, grew interested in Western civilization. They were educated in academic centers, mostly in England. They translated the works of Adam Smith, Herbert Spencer, Montesquieu, J. S. Mill, and others into classical Chinese (which, I believe, are still the best translations of Western classical works in Chinese). They tried to dig into the source of Western civilization and to introduce the best of the West to China. But it is a slow process, and much slower than the aping of the irresponsible and superficial commercial spirit of the foreign traders in the treaty ports. Slow as it is, it moves on gradually. The new gentry started the movement of the Chinese renaiss-

sance. It was a movement for vernacular literature, scientific research, democracy, and modern morality. This movement was a combined effort of the returned students and students in Chinese colleges. Most of them were the children of the landed gentry.

However, the new gentry share with the old the same traditional spirit in their lack of active political responsibility. They frequently voiced their disapproval of the government politics but rarely attempted to assume government responsibilities by taking up political power themselves. The central power, since the downfall of the Manchu Dynasty, has been held by the war lords and by the treaty-port group. The rising of a soldier into imperial power is an old story. In the traditional structure, when a ruler is degenerate and abuses his unbounded power, he will encroach on the peaceful life of the people. The peasant will suffer most. Many of them will become bandits and begin to revolt. Inefficient government will not be able to check the uprising. A new ruler will appear. In the same way, war lords appeared in the early years of the Republic. Most of them were of peasant origin and many started their career as outlaws. The treaty-port group rose from the same background and took a similar way. The difference is that they were settled in the protection of the cosmopolitan community and attained their power not through military strength but through financial strength. They lusted for power, and, living under foreign traders, they soon realized that the opportunity enjoyed by foreign traders could be theirs if they could get into power. With these matured compradors are the gangsters who form an integral part of the treaty-port group. They are well organized and disciplined in their gang spirit. They are daring and unscrupulous. The instability of the Chinese political situation gives those power-thirsty elements the opportunity to seize power. Indeed, I am not trying to minimize the importance of other groups of the Chinese people in the political struggle. Successive revolutions were prepared mostly by the new professional gentry and carried through

by the peasants and workers; but, owing to the lack of political responsibility in the gentry and the backwardness of the peasants, power repeatedly slipped into the hands of the war lords and the treaty-port group.

The economic decline of the land interest, on the one hand, and the rising of a new politically conscious treaty-port group, on the other, undermined the importance of the gentry in the social structure of China.

VIII

It is quite probable that the second generation of the old gentry and of the compradors may form a new responsible class on a professional basis, working for the modernization of China. With the combination of political consciousness and cultural farsightedness, this group may have a chance to employ modern knowledge to stabilize the deteriorating national economy, especially the depression of the rural areas. But, unfortunately, such a possibility continually diminished as the war against Japan lasted, the war itself resulting in a further alienation of these two groups.

In Free China the government has practical reasons for adopting a financial policy of inflation. This policy has shifted the burden of the war on a small group of people who earn regular salaries and wages. They are the professional class. Although the cost of war is not heavy in comparison with costs in other countries, yet, since it is borne by a limited number of professionals, the burden they have to shoulder is enormous. An honest civil servant gets about one-thousandth of the income of his pre-war days. This is a fatal stroke to the newly emerging class. They disperse in several directions. One outlet for them is to join the profiteers and give in to the old treaty-port spirit of irresponsibility and recklessness. Another outlet is to fall back upon their fathers' tradition of entering officialdom and participate in corruption. The few who stand on their own ground fight hard against the immediate menace of starvation.

Inflation encourages profiteering. With the ineffectiveness of governmental control,

the market in Free China becomes lawless. Concentration of wealth in the hands of a few is unprecedented in Chinese history. The ruthless class which represents vested interests seizes the opportunity of enriching themselves and exerts strong pressure on the government, which has long suffered from corruption and inefficiency (another result of inflation), to pursue the policy of inflation. This profiteer class is a combination of big landlords in the interior and financiers who have moved in from the treaty ports. It should not be compared with the capitalist class in Europe during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The latter gathered their wealth from introducing a new technique in production. They exercised their newly acquired power to further productivity and by so doing reformed the social relation of production and put an end to medieval feudalism. In China the war-profiteer class acquire their wealth through nonproductive means, like the old gentry. They monopolize opportunity by sheer power, which is feudal in nature. A type of trust organization is directly grafted upon the stem of medievalism. The stage of free competition is skipped over, and planned economy for social welfare is blocked. They drain capital from productive sources and hoard it for private enjoyment. They add poverty to the war-torn nation. The rise of such a class in the structure of Chinese society endangers its existence.

How about the peasants? A more or less self-sufficient peasant family can stand aloof from the change in the value of money. In the paper I read before the Harris Foundation Conference in Chicago in 1944, I described a war boom in the countryside in China based on my field study in Yunnan villages around 1941. The only source of suffering at that time was the bad administration of the draft. To draft an able-bodied producer from a family may ruin it. But such disasters do not fall on all families. Those families which do not suffer from labor shortages enjoy the benefit of a temporary relief from the population pressure. Wages for farm laborers increased and at

one time rose even higher than the price of rice. The real value of farm produce increased because the price of food in the early period of the war went up higher than that of other commodities. However, the situation has changed since the introduction of the grain tax. Before that the peasants paid their tax in money, and inflation reduced their burden. But in 1942 the government changed the policy and ordered the peasants to pay their tax in grain. In later years a law was introduced granting the government the power to buy rice from the peasants at a fixed price which is much lower than the market price. Bad administration further aggravates the burden on the peasants.

Since the land tax is collected from the landowners, the grain tax affects the gentry as well. To protect themselves, the gentry resort to their traditional means of neutralizing the law through personal influences. The revival of court politics in wartime, which has resulted in hundreds of cases of corruption and scandal, is the consequence.

The recent war has definitely arrested the trend of reorganization of the Chinese social structure according to a modern pattern. In some respects, it falls back to the old line and in other respects it slips into dangerous pits. What the next step should be is a grave question which the Chinese have to answer realistically.

In concluding the present paper, I should like to add that a sketch like the present one necessarily oversimplifies the reality. An attempt at making a comprehensive interpretation of the social structure of China is premature because it requires thorough investigation. But to formulate research programs, it is advisable to prepare an outline which will provide hypotheses for investigation. This is the purpose of the present paper. However, it may also be used as reference by those who are interested in a general view of the social structure of China. But this paper should not be taken as conclusive. It serves only as a stimulus for further studies.

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