HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN CHINA

Contents

Chapter 2: Classical China

Classical societies Between 800 BCE (or in China's case a bit earlier) and the early centuries CE, major regional civilizations developed in China, South Asia and the Mediterranean. This was a formative period for these civilizations, and this included the elaboration of characteristic social structures and ideas about social differentiation. Regional civilizations in the classical period all worked within the framework of agricultural society, but they generated strikingly distinctive approaches to social differentiation. Further, these approaches would continue to influence social patterns at least until very recently, and arguably to some extent even today.

China's social signature Several features stand out in the social structure developed in China during the classical period. Government involvement was one: as in other areas, China's government sought an active role in determining and regulating social distinctions – including specifying special dress in some cases. On balance, the Chinese approach also downplayed heredity. Inherited wealth and position played a huge role in populating the upper class, but there was always room for some newcomers, and this space tended to expand with time. Chinese cultural values also attributed unusual significance to the peasantry, often ranked officially as the second most important class – though whether this valuation did peasants much good can be open to question. The flip side of this valuation was the low prestige officially attributed to merchants – even though merchants could gain great wealth and influence. This ranking may have affected official policy at some points, and it definitely encouraged some merchants to seek entry to the upper scholar gentry class for themselves or their sons rather than remain in merchant ranks – an impulse visible in some other societies but particularly vigorous in China.

The main classes Accounts of China in the classical period sometimes emphasize three major social groups – aristocracy and government officials at top (though under the emperor and his family – the only clearly hereditary position); peasants; then the major urban groups. From the Zhou dynasty onward, government rankings listed four: upper class; peasants; artisans; and merchants – the latter sometimes required to wear white clothing, not an auspicious color in the Chinese cultural schema. Informally a fifth group also existed: the "mean" people, sometimes marked by wearing a green sash, including prostitutes and entertainers. China had a small slave class, no more than 1% of the total population, mainly devoted to domestic service but sometimes involved in agricultural labor. (Slavery oscillated in Chinese history, expanding under the Mongols; but several dynasties tried to abolish internal slave trading.) Women were assumed to be defined by the social position of their fathers and then husbands.

Confucianism Confucius' social philosophy, developed from the 6th century BCE onward and gaining official support particularly under the Han dynasty and its later successors, paid great attention to social hierarchy. Primary focus rested on the two main groups. The upper class was seen as the source of wise governance, its privileges balanced by responsibility to the general welfare. Lower classes, and particularly the peasantry, had a dignity of their own in fulfilling the production needs of society, while according proper deference to their superiors. The money-making impulses of merchants contributed to their low prestige in the Confucian scheme of things. And Confucian values discouraged excessive displays of wealth – leading on occasion to sumptuary laws that punished imprudent businessmen from showing off, sometimes under pain of death. The Confucian system was an ideal, but it sometimes touched base with reality. During periods of dynastic decline, however, aristocratic landlords frequently seized territorial power and increased exactions on the peasantry – usually leading, ultimately, to the advent of a new dynasty and greater protections for the peasantry. Confucian social values included elaborate manners based on hierarchical position, with a series of etiquette books laying out the rules.

Scholar gentry China's definition of the upper class, though acknowledging the importance of the landed aristocracy, gave pride of place to the scholar-gentry class, defined in terms of holding bureaucratic

positions either in the central court or in representing the imperial government in the provinces. Education, not inherited position, was in principle the source for this class. Under the Han dynasty the vast majority of government slots were given to sons or other relatives. However, the Han did sponsor extensive training centers for bureaucrats, supplemented by private academies, and began to introduce an examination system as the basis for some recruitment. Talented peasant sons, often sponsored by a generous local official or landlord to gain access to education, might occasionally win through in this system. This created a constructive tension between the general Confucian assumption that most people should emphasize the obligations essential for their social station and the opportunity for limited aspirations to mobility.

Changes over time The broad outlines of the classical social structure would last into the 20th century, marked by the ups and downs of various dynasties with intermittent periods of invasion or civil war. During the Mongol period the invaders mixed scorn for Chinese hierarchy with a willingness to work with it in the management of the empire. Over time, two main changes occurred. First, from the Tang dynasty onward, the educational and examination system steadily expanded, ultimately embracing tens of thousands of candidates every year – far more than could find bureaucratic posts (though by the time of the Song dynasty 1.3% of the population belonged to the scholar gentry). Unsuccessful aspirants might nevertheless gain local jobs or serve as tutors. Mobility aspirations, though still restrained, tended to expand; so, on occasion, did efforts to cheat the system, for example by hiring substitutes to take the examination or simply trying to guess what the test questions would be in a system that was highly stylized. The second change reflected the growth of Chinese manufacturing and trade, spurring expansion of urban social classes from the Tang dynasty through the 18th century, even as the vast majority of the population remained rural (urbanites were about 12% of the total under the Song dynasty). Merchants increased in numbers and wealth. Some women gained new opportunities through service as courtesans and urban entertainers – and some parents tried to groom their daughters for this kind of success. However, several later dynasties, including the Ming, worked to make most categories of commoners hereditary, particularly for soldiers, craftsmen, and peasants.

Kinship groups Official Chinese social structure was always complemented by the importance of elaborate kinship ties among members of extended families. Children were carefully taught the names and prestige status of various relatives. Indeed, the combined importance of kinship and hierarchy defined proper Chinese manners, with little attention paid to strangers unless they had identifiable social prestige.

Study questions

1. What were the distinctive characteristics of the Chinese upper class?
2. In what sense was the Chinese government unusually important in shaping social structure?
3. What were the major tensions in Chinese social structure, and how did these increase over time?

Further reading

Ch'u T'ung-tsu, *Han Social Structure* (University of Washington Press, 1972)

Susan Naquim and Evelyn Rawski, eds., *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Yale University Press, 1989)

Li Yi, *The Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification* (University Press of America, 2005)

Chapter 14: Communist Revolutions and Social Structure: China

Overview China's communist takeover dates to 1949, after decades of struggle complicated by the invasion of the Japanese before and during World War II. Implications for social structure were similar to those in the Soviet Union. They were complicated, however, by the twists and turns of industrial policy under Mao Zedong, who initially sought to foster a standard type of industrialization and then turned to an effort to develop a distinctive national variant with an emphasis on small-scale production. This was a failure, at least in the short run, though it exposed more peasants to some manufacturing work; but the result somewhat delayed the more normal rates of urbanization and working-class formation. These developed with extraordinary rapidity, however, from 1978 onward, with the adoption of new policies of

industrial promotion. The Mao era was also noteworthy for the “cultural revolution” (1966-76), introduced in part to distract from economic problems: here, Chinese policy aimed at a more thorough eradication of the social and cultural bases of traditional social structure than had ever been attempted in the Soviet Union. Here too, however, patterns changed after 1978, as Chinese economic development began to create an urban middle and upper class rather different from its counterparts under the Soviet Union. Like the Soviet Union, Chinese social structure under communism proved very different from its pre-revolutionary counterpart; however, at the same time, the specifics varied considerably.

Initial moves Communist leadership immediately turned against the remnants of the old landlord-bureaucratic class, eliminating the landlords through land reforms. As in the Soviet Union, collectivization was imposed to prevent the emergence of a new rural propertied class, but the policy severely reduced food production leading to massive rural famine. Members of the Communist Party (drawn disproportionately from the ranks of urban workers) became a new elite, provided with special benefits (including superior housing) and opportunities for training – fairly quickly threatening some reproduction of the old bureaucratic class simply with new membership. The government worked to expand the educational system at all levels, but urban residents had disproportionate access, creating a growing educated middle class. Further development of the urban working class was complicated by state policies requiring permission to leave the countryside. Like his Soviet counterparts, Mao claimed that the revolution had unified the prerevolutionary social classes into one social whole, but this was not the case.

Cultural Revolution This move involved a number of features, but attacks on both the new hierarchy and the older Confucian principles of social structure were central. Many schools and universities were closed, with students sent to the countryside to perform manual labor in social and economic solidarity with rural workers. Bands of youths were authorized to attack older cultural monuments, symbolizing wider rejection of the authority of elders. New attention was paid to peasants, though overall they remained the lowest and poorest social class.

After 1978 New economic and demographic policies not only reversed the cultural revolution, but led to China’s extraordinary, decades-long industrial growth (often at 10% annual rates). This had a number of predictable effects on social structure, including the rapid growth of a host of mega-cities, while also significantly modifying, without eliminating, any special communist features. Poverty declined substantially, though this was clearest in the cities and in the coastal regions, leaving some inland villages behind. Communist party membership was still an important social as well as political differential, but economic change created new mobility opportunities partially independently. Rapid expansion of higher education, and interest in higher education, had similar effects, though by the 21st century there was some danger of over-producing university graduates in relation to available jobs. The professional and middle classes expanded, along with a new elite of the very wealthy. By 2019, for example, a middle-income group constituted at least 30% of the overall population, and 71% of Chinese families owned cars – suggesting a familiar kind of middle class based on income and consumer habits. At the same time, however, communist principles prompted recurrent concern about growing inequality, particularly at the upper end of the economic scale. After 2013, under the more severe political regime of Xi Jinping and with some renewed emphasis on the importance of Party membership, anti-corruption programs and other measures were introduced with the professed purpose of bringing the upper business and bureaucratic groups under greater control. A few leading tycoons were actually arrested, leading to interesting questions about the future of the higher end of the Chinese social scale in the future.

Peasants and workers Rapid industrialization steadily increased the size of the working class, and while working conditions were often severe (with little outlet for complaint), pay tended to improve, along with a greater degree of social mobility. A large number of industrial workers were rural migrants, often leaving family members back in the village and often enduring severe housing constraints and marginal legal status in the cities. These same developments steadily reduced the relative size of the rural population, and increased its average age. Many younger peasants, if they did not migrate outright, began to express growing aspirations for greater independence and, often, education – further shattering many traditional features of the peasantry. Changes of this sort arguably added some of the standard social consequences of industrialization to any remaining special features of communist society.

Study questions

1. What were the implications of the cultural revolution for social structure?
2. What was the impact of policy changes from 1978 onward on social structure?
3. Does China's current social structure reflect any significantly distinctive communist features?

Further reading

Li Yi, *The Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification* (University Press of America, 2005)

Peilin Li, "China's Class Structure: changes, problems and policy suggestions – a study of class development since 1978," *International Critical Thought* 8 (2018)

Xueyi Lu, *Social Stratification and Social Structure in Contemporary China* (Routledge, 2020)