Dual System of Social Mobility

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H161: Lee and Tsuya

In the course of the social modernization we have to carefully inherit the best achievements of the civilization, the ones which were created by our predecessors, to inherit the best achievements of the entire humanity, to borrow and study progressive scientific and technical achievements.

-Jiang Zemin
Pravda, August 7, 2001

China's breakneck crusade to modernize and cultivate a new socialist order in the midst of an overwhelmingly market driven society has revealed a slew of contradictions: maintaining the "two systems, one country" approach to Hong Kong's reunification, the courting of Taiwanese capital while denouncing any talk of sovereignty, and the condemnation of "money worship, hedonism, ultra-egoism and other decadent ideas" of the West while courting the WTO (China Daily). A less dramatic but equally important contradiction is how to cultivate personal drive and entrepreneurship while preserving the Communist social order. This paper argues that China has incorporated its traditional dual social mobility system to create a system that presents more opportunities than other Communist systems. Moreover, China's egalitarian educational system offers a greater economic advantage to college graduates than regional neighbors like Japan.

In many ways, the modern state has inherited the patterns of the traditional society it supplanted. Day-to-day social structure, until the 1949 revolution, was centered upon the family unit; the family unit restricted mobility, directed marriage, and determined the future occupations of its members. Strict controls on migration, although loosened during the Manchu dynasty, still tied individuals to their family's plot of land (Campbell 2). Marriage and subsequent family formation was further constrained by Byzantine social traditions, and for those family members who did not assume control of the household, their fate usually hung on their position within the family unit.

While marriage and adoption did allow some social climbing, the household organization of late imperial China was relatively closed: 78 percent of eldest sons eventually went on to head a household of their own – leadership selection was defined primarily by patrilineal succession (Myers 198). Given the limited opportunities for non-stem family and the symmetry of marriage (Feng 370), the only option for the vast majority of the population was the civil service examinations, which were open to virtually the entire male population.

Obtaining such a service position was almost entirely a function of ability. While some families had a large number of individuals with positions within the meritocracy, they still had to demonstrate their competence (Myers 202). In other words, there were many instances of meteoric rises and falls: "50 per cent of these men came from unknown origins and that roughly 80 percent of their descendants beyond the grandson generation were also unknown" (Wang 844). While nepotism dominated the control of households and family enterprises, the control of the civil sector was primarily a meritocracy – those unfortunate to be born in a poor family without connections still had opportunities to succeed.

The end of the civil service examination system in 1905, continued Japanese intervention, and the Communist Revolution all disrupted the traditional systems of social attainment. The new economic and social paradigm imposed upon China, which sought to "undermine the old order family system," decreased the magnitude of family power, decreasing the draw of house headship (Chen 5). Given the origins of China's new leadership, it would be only natural to expect systems similar to those of Eastern Europe

and Soviet Russia. It is therefore surprising that such radically different systems emerged given the striking similarities between the Soviet and Chinese revolutions.

The pre-revolution Russian system was analogous to that of China: a sprawling nation with strong central authority, small social units – *mir* – that defined the village organizational level, and emerging industrial and intellectual elites separate from the hereditary nobility (McNeill 615). The 1917 revolution forcibly destroyed the nepotism and hereditary positions that comprised a sizeable portion of the Romanov government, but the new nascent social hierarchy was hardly egalitarian.

The divisions between members of Soviet society remain divisive (Gordon 45), and few would dispute the existence of well-defined social strata despite dogma asserting otherwise. Commonly, the upper class in the Soviet Bloc was called the *Intelligentsia,* denoting the implicit educational requirements of the ruling class. Someone near the top of the academic elite could hold considerable political power as well, as "an individual with critical skills and a bent for the arts of governance might shuttle back and forth" (Connor 81). Yet education was not the sole requisite, as intellectuals without political muster were often paid only slightly better than the laboring class. Moreover, those who opposed official policy were, likely due to their influence and visibility, dropped to the "social bottom" (Timasheff 16).

Therefore, it seems that both ideological and educational requirements are necessary for moving up the social ladder in the Soviet Union, i.e. a combination of university degrees and party membership. Moreover, entry into the intelligentsia was largely hereditary; the social composition of universities and the ruling elite is inconsistent with the makeup of the general population (Filippov 255). While the

communist revolution opened the doors for many previously excluded from power, there was little downward mobility.

Yet relatively recent studies have demonstrated that party membership is not the only path to elite status in China. Like its European counterparts, the Chinese Communist system relies upon party membership and educational achievement, but either path is a possible path of social mobility. While authoritative careers in Eastern European communist systems are, like China, allocated according to ideological constraints (party membership), there is no differentiation in social strata between the highly educated and political movers in the Bloc states (Connor 76).

In China, bureau officials, factory directors, department heads, foremen, and workshop heads must pass review by the relevant Party committee prior to employment (Walder 313). Eventually, as an individual ascends the career ladder, she finds it increasingly difficult to progress without having Party membership to testify to her loyalty. Moreover, as she climbs, more and more of the individuals around her will have Party memberships. Consequently, party membership provides not only certification of loyalty but also a means to forge valuable connections and gain access to needed information.

Indeed, seventy-six percent of leading cadres were Party members, and most of those were Party members before promotion (Walder 315). In contrast, only six percent of the lowest level were party members, compared to fifteen percent of the working population. While Party membership is clearly essential to obtain elite positions of authority, Wader posits that there is an analogous path for the academic elite that does not

require the same political credentials as long as one has fulfilled corresponding educational requirements.

Even before the Communist take-over, education was promoted by the government as a path to "fame and power" (Wang 844). To a certain extent, this picture of the academic process remains. In the "professional elite" of doctors, scientists, lawyers, athletes, artists, engineers, and academics, educational credentials play the same role as party membership in the administrative hierarchy. However, Walder found that not only does

> a college degree significantly increases the odds of becoming both a professional and administrator verses a less desirable occupation, but it also makes it more likely that one becomes a high professional than an administrator. (Walder 319)

This indicates the suggested dual path hypothesis is indeed valid. While the administrative path does indeed carry additional educational requirements in addition to political fidelity, someone pursuing higher education is less likely to ascending the administrative hierarchy.

This could be a sign of decreased interest in the administrative hierarchy, or a more rigorous academic screening process in the professional elite. Moreover, this increase in credential screening is balanced by a diminished importance of political credentials. Party membership was unrelated to the chances attaining professional status, while Party membership was inextricably tied with administrative positions. While the Chinese communist party "recruited preferentially those whose first jobs were in administrative and office staff positions, but not professionals" (Walder 317), the Soviet Bloc recruited intelligentsia primarily from educational institutions (Filipov 241).

These positions are generally held in high regard by the population. In a 1983 survey, professionals were found to have higher prestige ratings that administrators, while the highest echelons of the administrative strata were more prestigious than similarly well placed academic positions[1]. However, given both categories carry high prestige relative to the rest of the population, these effects are negligible. In addition, both education and Party membership are associated with comparable salary increases. This seems to hold true for the entire career arc, as the salary premium for high and low professionals as well as administrators are equivalent (Walder 320).

Even before the Communist take-over, the educational system served as a replacement for the civil service examinations, which were abolished in 1905 (Wang 844). The slow development of inexpensive education within China, however, limited the development of an educational system that could offer the same social mobility as the civil service examinations. The exorbitant costs of higher education and the preference for international degrees created an environment where only the wealthy could secure the top education, instituting a self-perpetuating elite in early 20th century China (Wang 853).

However, one of the goals of the ill-fated Cultural Revolution was to prevent a closed system similar to intelligentsia of Eastern Europe. The low cost of education within China, as well as the examination system for entrance into Chinese Universities, reinstituted after 1977 (Surowski), created the same universal opportunities as the civil service examinations. Like the civil service examinations, anyone can take the entrance

[1] **Prestige scores** for professional and administrative divisions.

	High	Low	Aggregate
Professional	87.4	85.4	85.8
Administrative	93.3	78.3	80.1

Data from 1991 Lin and Bian from a 1985 survey
Reproduced in Walder

tests to be considered for college admissions. This, in conjunction with a relatively open professional atmosphere, has prevented the development of a Chinese *intelligentsia*.

The Party system resembles the patrilineal social structures that were ostensibly cast aside by the Revolution. In Walder's logistic regression for party membership verses a variety of variables, only gender and college degree were greater positive predictors (317). Like individuals in the Imperial China, there are multiple paths for advancement. If an individual is in a family that has a history of party membership and loyalty to the state, he has the opportunity advance up the administrative ladder. Even when such a route is closed to an individual, however, the route of education still exists, which can be parlayed into administrative power later.

It could be argued, however, that the differences between the Soviet-style nations and China are a product of culture. The situation could not be unique to China – perhaps a regional culture of upward social mobility independent of background exists, creating an illusory upwardly mobile dual Chinese system. The cronyism and the patrilineal succession pattern of Communist North Korea suggest that this is not the case, but there is too little information about the aggregate society to support to make a broad statement about social structure. Japan, on the other hand, has a great deal of information that could be used to support such a claim.

Like China, Japan has a strong patriarchic family structure that persisted until the early twentieth century. Likewise, social and spatial mobility were limited by household control of its members – permission had to be granted by the household head for marriage, migration, etc. Social mobility seems to be primarily a function of mercantile success – creating a small business or creating a new cottage industry (Tsuya 13).

Therefore, social mobility seems to be a less universal phenomenon in pre-modern Japan, which did not have a civil service examination system, than in pre-modern China.

Social mobility in Japan has increased, however, since the restructuring of society following World War II. The increased opportunities for men and especially women are more the result of imposing Western patterns on Japanese society rather than the development of longstanding native social systems. Nevertheless, despite these trends, Japan is less upwardly mobile than other nations of similarly developed Western nations despite an increasing emphasis on educational attainment.

While the occupational labor market is segregated by educational credentials, the reward for educational attainment is superceded by the effects of social background (Ishida 127). There are stringent educational hurdles that have to be jumped before landing a good job, but those who have the resources to get the job are those that have the necessary social and occupational family cachet. For example, in Japan the apparent income increase from a four-year degree is $2,162, but after controlling for background, the benefit decreases to a paltry $1,411 (Ishida 115) – around 5% of 1991 per capita GDP (Choi).

On the other hand, in America – Japan's closest Western counterpart - educational credentials play a greater role independent of background. Ignoring racial differences, there is little bonus from coming from an advantaged family; therefore, the primary arbiter of success and simultaneous proxy for ability is education. Using the same methodology as before, the income benefit of a college education is $6,356. After controlling for background, there is a slight decrease in the benefit, but the increase still

is substantial – over $5,000, which is close to twenty-five percent of 1991 per capita GDP (Choi).

Consequently, Japan remains a more structured society that passes social and occupational resources through a traditional family structure. While there is considerable social mobility, education is not as effective as an equalizer in Japan as it is in the United States. The pattern of Chinese social mobility is neither a product of traditional East Asian social structure nor the communist system. The former places family over society as a conduit for the flow of social capital and the latter creates the unified Technocrat elite that demands simultaneous political and economic qualifications. In some situations, China has emulated America's origin blind social system.

	Soviet Union	Japan	United States	China
Data	Average Monthly Income	Annual Income	Annual Income	Total Monthly Income (OLS Coefficient)
Higher Education / vs. Secondary	2.53	1.90	3.13	4.5

Sources: Soviet Union[2]: Gordon 28, 42 Japan and US: Ishida 110 China: Walder 321

[2] The Japan and US ratios were calculated by dividing the sum of total income effects from high school and college by the total income effects for high school, since high school is an assumed prerequisite for college. China's ratio came from Walder's model 5, which accounts for bonuses and seniority.

SOVIET INCOME	Classification	Average Monthly Income	Frequency	Weighted Average
Secondary / Vocational Training	Skilled Workers	69	?	69
	Highly Skilled Workers	72		
	Unspecialized employees (agriculture, service)	66	20	
Higher Education	Teachers, scientific, medical specialists	81	14	79.68
	Engineering-technical personnel in industry	79.68	11	

Note: The Managerial and Administrative income category was excluded, as it is primarily a Party controlled sector (this category's income was over fifty percent higher than scientific specialists). Since there was no data on the distribution of unskilled, skilled, and highly skilled workers, I took an arithmetic average for secondary training. Unskilled labor (62 roubles per month) was then used as a baseline for comparison.

Indeed, from this information, it seems that China's system is even more upwardly mobile than that of the United States. This simplistic comparison ignores the overall distribution of wealth and the availability of educational opportunities, but it does suggest that China has fostered an environment that rewards motivation on a scale comparable to that of the United States while simultaneously protecting social institutions through Party membership.

The path to power, however, in China is not as open to those without a family background of loyalty. Housing, often passed within families even in the communist system, is often assigned preferentially to those with party membership:

> In none of the models is education a significant predictor of housing space. In fact, other than seniority, the only individual level variables that are significant predictors of housing space are Party membership and being an administrator. (Walder 322)

Party membership, which is in part a function of lineage, therefore endows those families with strong loyalty to the state superior household accommodations, analogous to the traditional household structure of Imperial China. Once given to these families, it remains a hereditary asset, further perpetuating the advantage of the linage.

The pattern of Chinese social attainment, therefore, is therefore neither a product of a shared regional culture nor communist ideology, but an evolution of the social system that has formed the foundation of Chinese culture for hundreds of years. By enshrining the ruling class in self-perpetuating social strata, China has ensured a stable authority. However, by providing alternate routes to power, a select few from the disenfranchised can climb the social ladder, thus providing new blood to enter the social elite. Such a system simultaneously preserves itself while offering hope to the poor and preventing stagnation at the top.

However, this social system is under assault by the precarious state of China in the world market. The professional elite does not receive the same return on their educational investment that they would receive in a full market economy (Walder 324). With the globalization of China's economy, this trend can only continue until it becomes clear that the contributions of the administrative elite are far less valuable than that of the professional class. The dual system could place greater and greater emphasis on professional advancement until the Party looses its preferred status in society, thus disrupting the already tumultuous social balance.

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