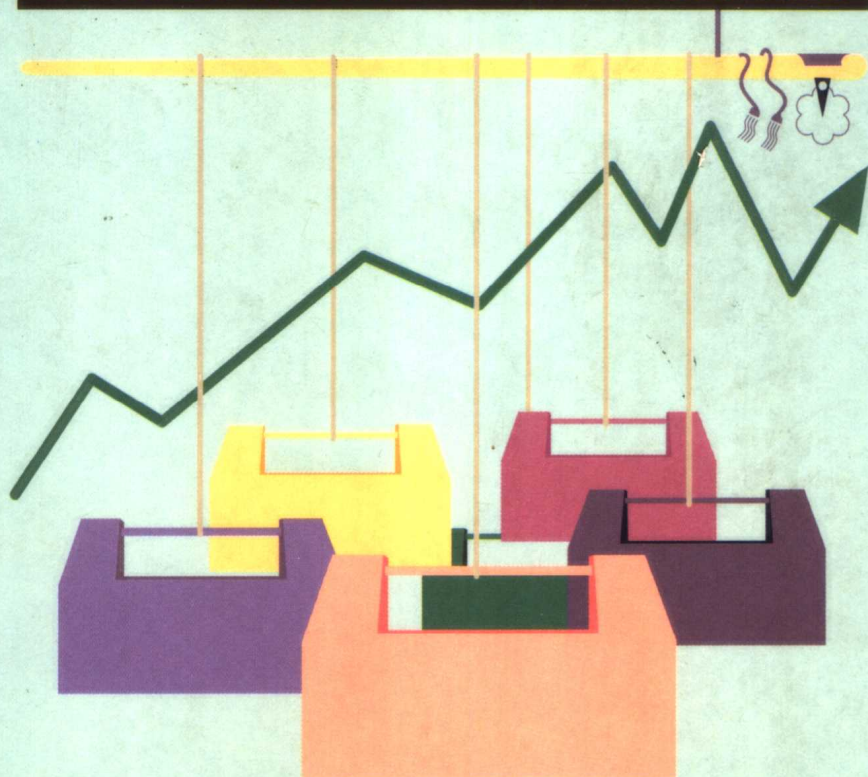


Inequalities and Development

Social Stratification in Chinese Societies



Edited by

Lau Siu-kai Lee Ming-kwan

Wan Po-san Wong Siu-lun

Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies

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Preface

Is the concept of "class" useful for understanding social inequalities in Chinese society? Can economic growth and social equity be attained at the same time? In terms of policy, what is the optimal balance between these two goals? Which should be pursued first and with what consequences? In the process of modernization, what new types of social strata and attitudes emerge? What similarities and differences exist among the patterns of social inequalities found in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore? Is there a Chinese model of social stratification and mobility?

Until quite recently, it was not possible to have genuine intellectual debates on these issues. As sociologist Robert M. Marsh pointed out in the 1970s, mainland China and Taiwan adopted different approaches to alter the traditional Chinese stratification system. The former sought revolutionary transformation while the latter opted for evolutionary change. During the Cold War era, political confrontation and ideological fervour rendered the issue of class and inequality into a very sensitive and emotionally charged topic. In Maoist China in particular, with the Marxist paradigm ruling supreme and class analysis enshrined as dogma, theoretical exploration and empirical research on the subject were tabooed.

But since Deng Xiaoping launched economic reform in mainland China in the late 1970s, the situation has changed. The slogan

of "Never forget class struggle" has been replaced by that of "Let some people get rich first." Ideological control has been relaxed. Sociology as a discipline has been revived. Rapid economic growth has ensued and new social disparities have appeared which call for investigation. Meanwhile, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore as three of the "Little Dragons" have reached a level of affluence that directs attention to the dramatic rise of the middle class.

Early last year, we felt that the time was ripe to bring together scholars who have been working on the topic of social stratification in different regions to exchange ideas and to compare notes. Subsequently over thirty scholars were invited from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the United States of America to present papers at a conference on "Social Stratification in Chinese Communities" held on 10-11 December 1993 at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. The conference was jointly hosted by the Department of Applied Social Studies of the Hong Kong Polytechnic, the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Department of Sociology of the University of Hong Kong, and the Guangzhou Academy of Social Sciences. The stated objectives were to provide a forum for intellectual exchange on social stratification studies, to consolidate research experiences, to promote this line of research in Chinese communities, and to serve as the basis for further exchange and collaboration. As organizers, we suggested three main areas for exploration, namely theoretical and methodological considerations, regional case studies, and comparative studies.

This book contains the papers presented in English at the conference, most of which are concerned with the situation in Hong Kong and Singapore. The papers presented in Chinese are collected in another volume which deals mainly with the situation in mainland China and Taiwan. As a whole, the papers are strong on empirical case studies in different regions, with several theoretical enquiries. Although there is no paper attempting an explicit comparison among the various communities, we hope that the scene is now set for such comparative studies to be made in the future.

We wish to thank the T.Y. Wong Foundation and the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies of The Chinese University of Hong Kong for their financial support which has made the publication of this book possible.

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November 1994

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1

Class Analysis The Relevance of Weber

Thomas W. P. Wong
Lui Tai-lok

My wife's studying sociology. She comes home from the lectures and teaches it to me over dinner, and one of the most interesting nuggets of sociological information I've been tossed across the cheese and biscuits so far is that my wife (a doctor's daughter) has married beneath her.

"It hadn't really struck me before," she said. "Journalists are lower-middle class."

"Don't talk tripe," I replied, with my usual scientific detachment.

"I'm not using the term with any emotive connotations," said my wife. "It's just a simple sociological fact. I had it from the lecturer less than an hour ago."

"Class is a matter of supreme indifference to me personally, as you know, so leave me out of it. But are you trying to tell me that people like the editor of the *Spectator* with his £40,000 house are lower-middle class? You take a look at the lads soaking up the hock in El Vino's and you won't go round screaming 'lower-middle class' like that."

(excerpted from Michael Frayn's
"A Question of Downbringing")

Introduction

We do not know if the above scene, in its overall thrust rather than in its details, has been repeated among our friends here today and their spouses. We do, however, feel that the exchange will strike a resonant chord among those of us who teach sociology and who have on more than one occasion harboured the layman's doubts (and be frustrated for that) about the concept of class. For behind Frayn's velvet glove of disarming humour lies the inescapable fact that, however hard one tries to expunge the concept of its "emotive connotations" and turn it into a "simple sociological fact," it is never a simple issue on which consensus could be easily reached. Substitute Frayn's "journalist" with probably any occupation, and one could see how controversial and cumbersome the whole exercise could be. Personal reactions are always, so to say, round the corner, however "sanitized" our formulation is. And perhaps this is because "class" has always carried with it a strong evaluative element; it conjures up both a given natural order and a sense of exploitation and indignation, both hierarchy and mobility, both great fears and great hopes. But that is no reason for us to call it a day and say that class is a useless concept or that it is purely a matter for empirical adjudication or, more sophisticatedly, that there are different "classes" for different enquiries/situations. What needs to be done, in our view, is to aim for a conception of class which would take individual differences seriously — so that, for instance, both the technical job content and the status claims of a "journalist" will be taken into account — and yet will also be theoretically consistent and plausible. The appropriate starting point for approaching the myriad of empirical differences in conditions and opportunities (which any conception of class must necessarily refer to and characterize) is analytical precision.

In the following, we attempt to put forth several claims. First, we will argue that in our interpretation of Weber's writings on class and related concepts, the conventional view of Weber as proposing a multi-dimensional framework (and as an alternative to that from Marx) for social stratification is generally inadequate,

and, in some respects, misleading. Our view is that the relations between "class" and "status" are best treated at different levels, and that a full appreciation of the importance of "class" in Weber is inseparable from a knowledge of the specific modes of relations between it and "status." We would further claim that a Weberian class analysis is in fact part and parcel of a general theory of social action and social order. We shall substantiate our claim by discussing various studies which are explicitly or implicitly influenced by Weber's ideas. Secondly, following our more general claims, we regard some more recent studies of class and social mobility as broadly a Weberian social analysis in the guise of class analysis. Goldthorpe's work on class formation, and on the relation between social inequality and social integration, is, in our view, an excellent exemplar of such kind of analysis. The usefulness of a Weberian approach has to be judged to a great extent by the theoretical rigour and empirical insights one could adduce from these studies. Thirdly, we want to demonstrate, at a more technical and empirical level, the relevance and indeed the superiority of the Weberian approach by comparing and adjudicating the Goldthorpe and the neo-Marxist class schema. Survey data from the Hong Kong Middle Class Project are coded to the respective class schema, and the two resulting class maps are cross-tabulated. We find the Weberian schema to be theoretically more consistent and robust; by comparison, the neo-Marxist schema is theoretically impoverished and practically unviable.

Weber on Class and Status

Analytical precision is something that one expects from Weber. In particular, his formal statements on class and status are part of his attempt to lay down precise distinctions and typologies for understanding economy and society. In a sense, all the analytical components of "class" or "status" are already defined in the sections (in *Economy and Society*; hereafter E&S) on social action, social relationship, organization, community, and so forth (E&S,

vol.1:22-31, 43f.). It is therefore imperative if one were to understand the Weberian meaning of class that one connects "class" to the larger context, with the related component concepts, such as the instrumental-rational type of action, the economic type of social relationship and the market. Before we turn to this issue, let us address the conventional interpretation that Weber has proposed a multi-dimensional approach to social stratification.

In such a view, "class" is seen as one of the three possible dimensions of stratification, the other two being "status" and "party." Elaborations then follow and typically argue that "class" captures the economic dimension, while "status" focusses on the social aspect, and so on. The message is often that Weber basically has supplemented the material or economic approach of the Marxist with factors pertaining to the social (status honour) or the normative-cultural (life-styles and values). Notwithstanding the fact that such an interpretation lends to an overly empiricist tendency to see social position as an aggregate (or rather, some amalgam whose internal integuments remain unelucidated) of socio-economic indicators, it is unfortunate, but perhaps natural, that false dichotomies between the "economic" and the "social," between the material and the cultural/valuational, are being erected. These dichotomies obfuscate two important issues, which, we believe, are central to Weberian scholarship. First, the separation of the economic from the social serves only an analytic or heuristic purpose; such separation could not possibly be found in reality, not to mention specific structures of social stratification. Even in the simplest economic action (other than the "Robinsonade" situation, where the action of the single and isolated individual is directly and purely oriented to considerations of material utilities; more of this later), the social is invoked and implicated. While Durkheim said, "in a contract not everything is contractual," Weber put it in a far more analytical way: "[A]n economic act which took no account of third parties was not social." Most acts are both social and economic. And yet, the limiting case of a non-social economic act is essential, for it, and it alone, brings out the essential characteristics of the "economic" (see Albrow,

1990:ch.13). It thus means that, as an example of Weber's concept formation, "class" and "status" must be seen as both "antithetical" (with the essential difference between them drawn to the full limits) **and** inter-related. The concepts are made "antithetical" so that the truly significant and essential in each is separated from the superfluous, and yet, at the same time, the phenomena they characterize are admixtures or configurations of the two, with one fettering, dominating or subserving the other, depending on historical and social circumstances. In the words of Albrow, "[this] intricate intermeshing of concepts was achieved by an initial separation" (Albrow, 1990:262). From this perspective, knowing the nature of what Schluchter called the Weberian research programme ("Max Weber brought forth his work in the vibrant tensions among historico-empirical research, **concept formation**, and political practice"; our emphasis) is crucial for understanding the analytical meaning and usage of the concept "class" (Schluchter, 1989:xiii-xiv).

If, in reality, class and status are inter-related, then it is essential to ask, at a theoretical level, in what sense (what kinds of meaning or value could we, as observers, attach to the mutually-oriented types of action?) are they connected? Weber's answer is that they are "phenomena of distribution of power within a community" (E&S, vol.2:927). In other words, they represent different bases of control or power. It is here that the conventional false dichotomy between the economic and the social again rears its head and turns Weber's class simply into a positional notion on the economic scale. The latter is in turn conceptualized as determining that aspect of one's life-chances where the distribution of rewards is roughly in proportion to the market value of one's goods and services. This view then counterposes a Weberian "distribution" to the Marxist "production" and often comes away with a feeling of superiority. It is again a false dichotomy. Because for both Marx and Weber, class is about power. The difference between them is that for Marx, what is important, indeed crucial, for his theoretical purpose, is **control** over the means of production, regardless of the basis. For Weber, on the other hand, given

his distaste for collective concepts and historical teleology (see Hekman 1983:57 and *passim*), "the basis of control is crucial; [for class] it must be economic, not political" (Burger, 1985:39, fn.13; our emphases). The conventional formulation is thus misleading in the sense that, in purporting to adopt a Weberian position, what is central for Weber to the "meaning" of class (and status), viz. class as that uniquely or purely economic aspect or basis of power, and class relations as relations of power claims and exercise, is divested out. In our view, a Weberian class analysis must always regard the issue of power as central, from general theoretical orientations down to the operationalization of the concept. Let us now examine in detail Weber's concept of class and its relations to status.

For Weber, "[C]lass situation means the typical probability of (1) procuring goods, (2) gaining a position in life, and (3) finding inner satisfactions, a probability which derives from the relative control over goods and skills and from their income-producing uses within a given economic order." And, "[C]lass means all persons in the same class situation" (E&S, vol.1:302). In the relevant sections in Volume Two of *Economy and Society* (which actually represent the earlier formulation of his ideas), Weber put it this way:

... classes are not communities; they merely represent possible, and frequent, bases for social action. We may speak of a class when (1) a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, insofar as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labour markets. This is "class situation." (E&S, vol.2:927)

Here Weber specified the role of the market, and part of the purpose is for him to highlight the uniqueness of the modern form of class struggle, which increasingly takes the form of wage disputes on the labour market, rather than competitive struggle in the commodity market. But the core idea in class remains the

same: it is a matter of relative control, and the interests involved are economic in nature. Let us deal with each one in turn. Weber said "property" and "lack of property" are the basic categories in class situations. He meant this in a special sense. He is not so much, *contra* conventional interpretations, subscribing to the Marxist theory of the nature of capitalist mode of production where the appropriation of means of production plays a pivotal role, as highlighting the purest type of class situation. Property confers direct monopolies over opportunities for profitable deals, for those who, already provided with goods, do not need to exchange them. In other words, he is not simply agreeing to the production (as contradistinct from consumption) side of class; he is, again, bringing out the core element and the purest categories. That is why he immediately distances himself from those who would make more substantive, if not ideological, sense of these basic categories. For him, it is an open question as to whether these categories become effective in the competitive struggles of the consumers or of the producers (*ibid.*). And, "the mere differentiation of property classes is not "dynamic," that is, it need not result in class struggles and revolutions" (E&S, vol.1:303).

Weber then turned his attention to the further distinctions within both the propertied and non-propertied classes. These distinctions are, as it were, variations on the pure type of control: "property – non-property." Thus, "[I]n principle, the various controls over consumer goods, means of production, assets, resources and skills each constitute a particular class situation" (E&S, vol.1:302). The limiting case is a "uniform class situation," and it "prevails only when completely unskilled and propertyless persons are dependent on irregular employment." In typical cases, where there is a multiplicity of class situations, "[m]obility among, and stability of, class positions differs greatly; hence, the unity of a social class is highly variable" (*ibid.*). That is why, with reference to the role of the market, class situations are ultimately market situations. This, to Weber, is the generic connotation of the concept of class: "that the kind of chance in the market is the decisive moment which presents a common condition for the