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New Social Classes in the Early Modern Period

The economic changes experienced by China during the early modern period went hand in hand with far-reaching changes in society. In late imperial times, the nation's social hierarchy had been dominated by just one class—the scholar-officials. But during the early modern period, society became more diversified. By the 1920s and 1930s, and to some degree earlier, successful merchants, military officers, and men of the professional classes enjoyed a prestige that was no less, and in some cases greater, than that of scholars and governmental bureaucrats. A new class of commoners, the urban proletariat, also came into existence with the development of modern industry in the cities. This diversification of society, along with the accompanying transformation of social values, was even more revolutionary in its effect than were the often violent, more dramatic, political upheavals of the time.

Social Elites in Late Imperial Times

The social and political leadership of late imperial China consisted of three distinct strata: the upper gentry, the lower gentry, and the nontitled local elites. Of these, the best known are the first two, the gentry *(shenshi),* also translated as "scholar-officials."

The upper gentry—the most prestigious of the three by far—were those who held bureaucratic office in the government or *were qualified* to hold such office. Before the mid-nineteenth century, most upper gentry acquired that status by earning the *juren* and *jinshi* titles—academic degrees awarded on passing (in the case of the *juren*) one of the provincial examinations or (in the case of the *jinshi*) a provincial examination and then the metropolitan (or national) examination in Peking. Other members of the upper gentry either had succeeded in the military examinations or had purchased their academic titles or bureaucratic ranks, al-

though they did not enjoy the same prestige as those who had passed the civil-service examinations.

The lower gentry, holding the academic title *shengyuan,* were also scholars, but they were not officials. They had passed the preliminary, or first-level, civil-service examinations. This qualified them, however, to be officially recognized as only students and thus recipients of a governmental stipend, but it did not qualify them for bureaucratic office. Their status, while above that of commoners with the same socioeconomic background, was substantially below that of the upper gentry. But they did enjoy some of the same legal privileges as the upper gentry, such as permission to wear distinctive robes and caps, exemption from certain forms of punishment if convicted of a crime, and avoidance of the labor-service tax.

Social historians have long regarded the upper and lower gentry as the only leadership group in late imperial society that merited serious study. During the past fifteen years or so, however, a new generation of historians has focused its research on levels of society below the national and provincial levels, and it is becoming increasingly evident that leadership roles were not restricted to the scholar-official class. During the nineteenth century, the scholars and officials numbered fewer than 1.5 million—or less than 1 member of the gentry for every 300 commoners. Many of them, moreover, resided in the larger towns and cities, and thus there simply were not enough of them to fill all the leadership positions in the empire. Especially as one moved down the administrative ladder, to the lesser towns and villages, and particularly in the poorer and more remote regions of the country, the gentry population became progressively sparse. In such places, even the *shengyuan,* or members of the lower gentry, were seldom seen. At the lower reaches of society, therefore, leadership roles were frequently taken up by non-gentry—men who enjoyed local prominence and authority as a result of their wealth, age, wisdom, or some other attributes of status and leadership.

In Anhwei Province, for example, several lineages dominated affairs in Tongcheng *Xian* uninterruptedly for several hundred years, even though these lineages frequently failed to produce, in every generation, successful candidates in the civil-service examinations. The persisting source of these families' power and prestige was not academic degrees, but wealth derived largely from landholding. "Academic degrees and office were [not, therefore,] the sole precondition of wealth; rather, they were the occasional results of it."[1]

Wealth, therefore, was an important factor in the formation of the late imperial elite. Yet every ambitious youth, whether wealthy or poor, dreamed of passing the civil-service examinations, which since the Song Dynasty had served as the main gateway to official position. In power, prestige, and legal privilege, therefore, the officials and degree holders, were the *crème de la crème* of Chinese society.

The New Elites

The growth of the commercial sector beginning in the 1500s had markedly increased the size and wealth of the merchant classes. And, after 1644, the Manchus constituted a new leadership stratum in the political hierarchy of the empire. For

the most part, however, the structure of China's social elite did not change radically from the Song Dynasty until the mid-nineteenth century, when during the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion (1851–64), the old social structure began to crack. And by the second and third decades of the twentieth century, the top layers of the old society had been displaced by new social classes that reflected the growing complexity of a fast-changing economy and of a political system exposed to the pressures of revolution.

Initially, the changes resulted largely from internally generated forces. During the great mid-nineteenth-century uprisings, the Manchu government was financially hard-pressed. Seeking to increase its revenues, it began to sell academic degrees and official posts. Whereas no more than 30 percent of government posts had been filled through purchase before 1850, at least half of the officials in the postrebellion period had risen through purchase, the so-called irregular route. During the same period, the total number of those who obtained academic degrees through purchase also increased by over 50 percent. The result was a major change in the nature of the top stratum of the social structure. Money, rather than academic achievement, was becoming the principal determinant of gentry status.

The long-term significance of this growing importance of wealth in Chinese society, if China had remained in relative isolation from the West, can only be speculated. Perhaps the entire value system would gradually have been transformed, leading to a greater appreciation of commercial and industrial entrepreneurship. We will never know, of course, because shortly thereafter, the Western presence and Western ideas in China imparted their own impetus to social change.

The New Merchant Class

Merchants were the chief beneficiaries of the Qing government's policy of selling academic degrees and official posts; it became common for wealthy businessmen to purchase titles. They did this for the prestige, of course, but gentry status, even when purchased, also made them eligible to enjoy lower tax rates, the privilege of meeting with government bureaucrats on virtually an equal footing, and exemption from many forms of criminal punishment. So attractive was this prospect that in Hankow during the latter half of the nineteenth century, for example, one-half or even more of the major wholesale merchants and large brokers held purchased titles.

At the same time, there was a movement in the opposite direction, regular gentry increasingly engaged in business. Particularly after the 1870s, as commerce and industry in the treaty ports expanded under the influence of the West, scholars and officials began to invest less in land and more in the new entrepreneurial undertakings that were growing up in the treaty ports. Investments in farmland were neither so profitable nor so secure as they had been, whereas Western-stimulated enterprises in the cities promised large returns on investments. Many literati, moreover, were becoming disillusioned with the scholarly life. After many years of preparing for the civil-service examinations, they discovered that their talents were not in great demand and that the majority of the government jobs were going

to people who were relatively uneducated but who had the wealth to purchase title or rank.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, therefore, the gentry came to view mercantile activity with a less jaundiced eye. In some gentry circles, too, investments in Western-style ventures even acquired a special respectability because they contributed to the goals of national strength and prosperity. Although the compradors were, as noted in Chapter 8, the largest investors in China's modern enterprises, by the turn of the century most gentry residing in the urban centers were engaged in some form of entrepreneurial activity. Emblematic of the changed attitude of the gentry toward commerce is the fact that of twenty-six Western-style textile mills established between 1890 and 1910, twenty had been backed primarily by men who were active or retired officials or were members of the scholar class.

Despite the considerable intermingling of and crossing over between the gentry and the merchant classes in the late nineteenth century, many of the traditional biases against commercial activity persisted. Until almost the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, China remained a gentry-dominated society, and merchants—for all their wealth and influence—were still not fully accepted, socially or politically, unless they purchased ranks and titles so that they could garb themselves in the clothes and aura of scholar-officials.

Particularly between 1890 and 1920, however, the composition of the nation's social and political leadership shifted decisively from the gentry to the new elite classes being spawned by the accelerating process of economic and political change. In the 1890s, the gentry's monopoly of leadership at the upper levels of society began to weaken, but the critical turning point was in 1905, when the Qing government finally abolished the civil-service examinations. Thereafter, the ranks of the old scholar-officials were no longer replenished, and those who had become members of the gentry class before 1905 gradually aged, lost vigor, and died. This was, however, a gradual process. Even in 1909 and 1911, for example, when the Qing government convoked representative assemblies at the provincial and national levels, almost 90 percent of the delegates were members of the gentry class. But the passing years took a toll, and by about 1920, the old gentry constituted only a small minority in such political bodies. In Chekiang, for instance, the number of upper gentry in the provincial assembly fell from 46 percent just prior to the Revolution of 1911 to 6 percent in 1918 to 1921.

At the same time, the merchants, who were long accustomed to subordinating themselves to gentry leadership, gradually moved into positions of social and political leadership and gained confidence with added experience. The entrepreneurial classes were, of course, a heterogeneous group that continued to be highly diverse in economic values and political outlook. Petty tradesmen, for instance, were frequently conservative in outlook, while their more successful and cosmopolitian brethren were acquiring the attitudes of a modern bourgeoisie, favoring economic rationality, free enterprise, and an ideology of economic growth. (Perhaps, when speaking of the merchant classes, one should distinguish between the "upper" and the "lower" bourgeoisie, much as one does in discussing the upper and the lower gentry.) And even among the relatively modern bourgeoisie, there

was significant diversity of opinion—especially in the emotionally charged atmosphere of the May Fourth Movement (1919), when more and more of them felt the pull of nationalism and were becoming involved in the political struggles of the time.

Merchants first appeared prominently on the national political scene in 1905 when they led an anti-American boycott to protest the United States ban on the immigration of Chinese laborers. During the following years, they participated in the agitation against the Manchu autocracy, adding their voice to the call for constitutional government and giving financial aid to both the reform and the revolutionary parties. Despite some claims that the Revolution of 1911 was a "bourgeois" revolution, however, the merchants' economic base in 1911 was still too weak, and their political and psychological subordination to the gentry still too strong, for them to have assumed an independent and leading role in national politics.

The rising status of merchants in the early twentieth century was most evident in their role as civic leaders. This was not a wholly new experience for them. Through their guild organizations, they had long participated in various philanthropic undertakings, and during the turmoil of the Taiping Uprising had in some cities taken over such administrative tasks as collecting taxes and directing the police and militia. Increasingly during the twentieth century, merchants assumed a leading role in the governance of the cities. In 1905, for example, when the Shanghai City council was established—this was the first modern, Western-style municipal administration in China—fully twenty of the thirty-eight representatives came from merchant backgrounds.

The merchants usually exerted their growing powers through the chambers of commerce. In 1902, hoping to promote trade and industry as a means of strengthening the nation, the Qing government officially approved the creation of merchant-run chambers of commerce. By 1908, the chambers had been established in 31 major cities and 135 other urban centers, and by 1912, 1,200 chambers of commerce had been organized. The chambers also assumed political and administrative functions in their cities, becoming "the key organization in the urban life of Republican China, central to the running of many cities."[2] They were prime movers, for example, in urban modernization, promoting such public projects as lighting, waterworks, schools, sewage systems, and harbor improvements. They also supported various social-welfare projects and maintained militia for local defense.

The chambers of commerce reached the peak of their influence and prestige during the early and mid-1920s—also, significantly, the high point of the warlord era. The formal administrative powers of government were much diminished, and the merchants—by this time having gained considerable self-confidence—moved at least partly to fill the political void. They assumed leadership in local representative organizations and even, on occasion, as in Shaoxing (in Chekiang Province) in 1922, assumed the duties of the *xian* assembly. Taking a cue from the students in the May Fourth Movement, the increasingly nationalistic merchants were becoming conscious of themselves "as a major, perhaps the major, force around which a new China could be built."[3] They therefore assumed the leadership of the anti-imperialist boycott movement, which remained a potent force from 1919 to 1926.

Following the revolutionary victory of Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang in 1927 to 1928, the political pretensions of the merchants were shattered. The new regime, rather like the Qing Dynasty during the first decade of the twentieth century, was a modernizing bureaucracy; it desired commercial and industrial development of the nation, but it could not tolerate an autonomous merchant class. The turn of events after 1927 seems to bear out the view that Chinese officials felt a permanent hostility toward the bourgeoisie, which could flourish only when central state power was weak.

On the eve of the 1927 revolution, however, the bourgeoisie had welcomed Nationalist rule. Confronted during the preceding years with the depredations of the warlords, the increasing militancy of the labor unions, and the specter of Communist revolution, they willingly accepted, and even helped pay for, the establishment of a political regime that promised to restore political and economic stability. By 1930, however, the new Nationalist government had reorganized the chambers of commerce, arrested or removed most of the former leaders, and effectively broken the power of the once-powerful merchant organizations. The government even wrested control of the antiforeign boycotts from merchant hands. And by using the pretense of enforcing the boycotts to imprison and fine the merchants, the government turned the boycotts into "an instrument of intimidation and terror, another means of subduing the bourgeoisie to the power of the state."[4]

The significance of the new merchant class was not limited, however, to their economic and political roles, for its members were also leaders in China's modern social transformation. Many of the merchants were cosmopolitan and progressive: the most successful of them were usually well educated, and many of them had studied or resided abroad. More than most Chinese, they welcomed innovations from abroad and had a relatively realistic understanding of China's place among the nations of the world. They tended instinctively to be liberals, supportive of government by law, of representative political institutions, and of the preservation of local liberties. They were proponents of industrial growth and economic rationality. In their life style, too, they were among the most Westernized: they often lived in foreign-style homes, dressed in Western-style suits, listened and danced to Western music, drank coffee, and smoked cigars. Many were Christians.

During the early twentieth century, therefore, the new merchant class gradually replaced the gentry as the leading social class, particularly in the cities. Its social status, if not its political power, continued in the 1930s and 1940s to be higher than it had been in, say, the 1870s and 1880s. The merchants' progress and Westernization had, however, been earned at a price. For by the 1930s, the bourgeoisie was profoundly isolated from the peasants and the villages, where beat the true pulse of Chinese life. In this, as in other social characteristics, the new merchant class was remarkably similar to the new intellectual class.

The New Intellectual Class

The new intellectual class, as it had developed by the 1920s and 1930s, was a far more diverse group than its predecessor, the gentry; it was imbued with no common ideology or political outlook, and its social roots were in the cities and in the wealthier strata of society. The new intellectuals were trained specialists—engi-

neers, lawyers, doctors, journalists, and so on—who worked and lived in the cities. Most of them, as a consequence, had lost touch with village life and the common people. Like the gentry, they often aspired to government office, but gone was the traditional commitment to public service.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, China's educational system began to accommodate the needs created by China's interaction with the West. In 1862, the government established the Interpreters' College, the Tongwenguan, in Peking to teach European languages; soon, engineering, science, mathematics, and international law were added to the curriculum. Similar schools were founded in Shanghai and Canton in 1863 and 1864, and in 1866 the Foochow Arsenal opened a school with instruction in navigation and engineering as well as in English and French. Beginning in 1872, 120 boys, aged 10 to 16, were sent to Connecticut, where they studied in American schools and lived in American homes. Five years later, the Foochow Arsenal sent 30 youths to France and England to learn ship construction and naval strategy.

These various educational efforts during the late nineteenth century were ancillary, however, to the traditional system, which produced candidates for the civil-service examinations; and their products were mostly marginal men in a society that was still predominantly traditional. Perhaps they spoke a foreign language or understood the dynamics of a steam engine, but they gained little or no respect for those achievements. As even Feng Guifen, a prominent reformer, wrote, "Those who study with foreigners are called interpreters; they are all frivolous townspeople . . . their nature is rough, their knowledge slight, and their motives base."[5] Not until after the abolition of the examination system—a measure that proclaimed the disavowal of traditional learning and of the social system built on it—can one truly speak of the emergence of a new intellectual class.

Until 1895, most Chinese literati and members of the upper classes were content with society as they knew it and thus sensed no need to change the traditional educational system. But the military defeat by the Japanese in that year, followed closely by the surge of imperialism that climaxed in the humiliating events of the Boxer episode in 1900, convinced all but the most ignorant or reactionary that China needed new knowledge and new skills if it was to survive as a nation. The result was a pell-mell rush, often poorly planned and badly implemented, to create a new generation of leaders who would understand science, mathematics, and the ways of the West.

The first concerted attempt to revamp the entire educational system—introducing Western subjects into the curriculum and creating a national network of schools, starting with the elementary grades at the *xian* level and culminating in the Imperial University in Peking—was made during the Hundred Days Reform Movement in 1898. That attempt to remake overnight the nation's political and educational system quickly ended, of course, with the emperor a prisoner and the reformers either dead or in flight. The Imperial University survived the Empress Dowager's coup d'état and subsequently became Peking University, the gem of higher learning under the Republic; most of the other reforms, however, were aborted.

The true beginnings of a new educational system, and hence of a new intellectual class, thus began only after the Boxer Uprising, when even the Empress Dowager became convinced that the Qing Dynasty could survive only if the traditional system were girded up with Western ideas and institutions. In 1901, pulling pages out of the 1898 reformers' playbook—without, of course, giving credit to the emperor or the other now-discredited reformers—she called for the creation of a national system of schools that would teach Western subjects as well as the Confucian classics. She urged that youth be sent abroad to acquire Western learning. And the venerable civil-service examinations were henceforth to be altered by abolishing the "Eight-Legged" form of answers (a highly formalized and stilted form of essay writing) and by adding questions about Western government and science.

Revolutionary though these reforms of 1901 were in theory, actual changes in the educational structure came slowly. There was little money to implement the reforms; teachers who were qualified to give instruction in the new Westernized curriculum were scarce; much time was needed to prepare new textbooks; and schoolhouses were usually obtained by expropriating temples and converting them to the use of the new education.[6] Even by 1909, therefore, a national system of education had not really been brought into existence. Many officials interpreted the imperial policy to mean that there need be only one elementary school in each *xian* (whose average population was about 300,000). And even where the form of schools had been modernized, the content of the education was often dismayingly like that in the past.

Because the new schools were few in number and were not distributed uniformly across the nation, and because many families remained suspicious of the new education (some hoping that the old Confucian emphasis would be restored, and many thinking that Western learning was too fancy and impractical), the old-style private school *(sishu)* continued in existence with astonishing pertinacity. Even until about 1920, the majority of students still studied in these traditional schools, which were "little affected by government decrees or the theories of the educationalists."[7]

The Qing educational reforms, however slow and limited, nonetheless had far-reaching social consequences. As a result of changes in the system of civil-service examinations, culminating in their abolition in 1905, the youth in the nation's better schools ceased to immerse themselves in the study of Confucianism, thus never acquiring the ideological orientation of that profoundly moralistic philosophy. Instead, they devoted themselves to branches of learning that were, in comparison with Confucianism, relatively devoid of moral content. The results of this change should, no doubt, be measured cautiously; ethical change in a modernizing society is inevitable and is attributable to many factors. Still, many Chinese have felt that the jettisoning of Confucianism in the early twentieth century and the failure to replace it with any comparable form of moral training created an ethical vacuum. China's intellectuals, it is claimed, became amoral, devoid of social responsibility, and concerned with only personal advantage.

While it would perhaps be a mistake to overemphasize the amorality of China's educated elite, it does appear that Chinese, during the second, third, and fourth decades of the twentieth century, were no longer part of a moral community, as had existed in earlier times; they were no longer participants in a common

culture, sharing values and outlooks. Now there was a sense of cultural confusion, an uncertainty about the conduct and the attitudes that would earn the approbation or censure of their fellow Chinese. The result was that the educated elite in the twentieth century were guided, more often than in late imperial times, by considerations of self-interest and self-enrichment. The ethic of public service and noblesse oblige, which was at least an ideal of the Confucian-educated elite, was sorely attenuated. The official corruption and self-aggrandizement that so marred the rule of the Nationalists in the 1930s and 1940s was doubtless attributable, at least partly, to that attenuation.

Another social consequence of the Qing educational reforms was that the educated elite progressively came from urban and wealthy backgrounds, and became ever more isolated from the rural and impoverished elements of society. Under the old system, education was relatively inexpensive. The *sishu,* the old-style private schools, were generally found in the villages, so that students could live at home; and the price of a set of the Confucian classics and of brush, ink, and paper was within the financial reach of many young peasant boys, especially because relatives, lineages, and villages often assisted bright but needy youth. Limitation of time, rather than of money, was usually the primary obstacle preventing a youth from obtaining an education, because the poor often needed their sons to help in the fields.

Under the new educational system, money became the primary factor determining whether a boy received the kind of education that led to social eminence. Because government policy favored higher education, it provided minimal resources to establish elementary and secondary schools. There were, as a result, few new schools at the village level; the best of those that did exist were located in the cities. This naturally favored the urban youth. Rural youth could attend the new schools only if their families were wealthy, able to afford the expense of boarding at the urban schools, where the cost of living was invariably far higher than in the villages.

Tuition and other costs of the new schooling, moreover, were far more expansive than those of the old private schools. No longer could a student get by with just the basic Confucian canon; the new schools required graduated series of textbooks, reference works, libraries, and laboratory equipment. The new primary education, as a consequence, cost about twice that of the old form of education, and secondary schools and universities cost four to five times as much. Because of the prestige and the high cost of the new education, the wealthy elite stopped providing funds for the village and lineage schools. Thus the poor were losing access to even those schools, and a modern education was becoming a luxury that was available to only the well-to-do.

The most severe social consequences of the new education resulted, however, from the inordinate prestige attached to study abroad. Actually, the first youths to study in Europe and the United States in the 1870s and 1880s came largely from poor families. Those from relatively well-off families, who could afford to study for the civil-service examinations, generally were loath to go abroad and study foreign languages, engineering, and other barbarian subjects. It was, therefore, usually poor boys whom the government or philanthropic Westerners sent to study

overseas. After the Qing reforms began in 1901, when the government began concerted efforts to send students to Japan, poor students were not particularly disadvantaged, because government fellowships were readily available. In 1906, for example, when the number of Chinese students in Japan reached a peak of about 15,000, fully 8,000 of them were there under government auspices.

After the dynasty fell in 1912, however, government support for study abroad dwindled quickly. Although the total number of students overseas increased steadily—the number in Europe rose from 565 in 1914 to about 3,180 in 1923; in the United States, the increase during the same period was from 847 to 2,600—the percentage of those studying on fellowships declined. In the United States, for instance, 61 percent of the students received government support in 1905, but that figure fell to 32 percent in 1910, about 19 percent between 1925 and 1935, and down to only 3 percent in 1942. This meant, of course, that most youth who obtained their educations abroad did so with private funds. And because the cost of study abroad, particularly in Europe and the United States, was exceedingly high by Chinese standards, an overwhelming number of these students came from wealthy families. Indeed, the largest single category of students abroad in 1947—over 30 percent—came from merchant backgrounds; 27 percent were sons of professionals (lawyers, journalists, engineers); and 17 percent were sons of government officials. Most of those studying abroad, moreover, came from the most Westernized, urbanized, and prosperous regions of the country. Between 1903 and 1945, for instance, approximately two-thirds of the Chinese students in the United States came from the three provinces (Kiangsu, Chekiang, and Kwangtung) that were close to and centered on either Shanghai or Canton.

Whatever the combination of circumstances that enabled a youth to obtain an education at a foreign university, he would return to China as a member of the upper stratum of the new intellectual class. He was customarily offered high-status positions and good pay, almost without regard for his level of academic achievement and personal merit. By contrast, graduates of China's own universities, and especially of the provincial universities, were consigned to second-class status among the intellectuals. Whereas the foreign-educated youth became university professors or bureau chiefs in the national government, home-bred graduates typically had to settle for teaching positions in middle schools or low-level administrative posts in government. Unemployment among the Chinese-educated was also markedly higher; in 1935, for example, only some 2,000 of 7,000 college graduates found jobs—a particularly explosive situation in any society. The relative prestige accorded those who had been educated abroad is suggested in the salary scale of the Commercial Press in Shanghai, China's most prestigious publishing house (Table 9.1). Although the Commercial Press adopted a more flexible system after 1927, this reveals, in an unscientific but amusing way, the status distinctions within China's new intellectual class.

The favored status of Japanese- and, especially, Western-educated intellectuals had profound social and political consequences during the Republican period. Here was a group that automatically became a leading segment of the national elite. Fully 71 percent of the persons listed in a 1939 *Who's Who,* for instance, had been students at foreign universities. The majority of the high- and middle-level

Table 9.1. Commercial Press Salary Scale (c. 1912–27)

Education	Monthly Salary (Ch$)	Perquisites
Chinese College (with experience)	80	3′ × 1½′ desk
Japanese College	100–120	3′ × 2′ desk
Japanese Imperial University	150	4′ × 2½′ desk; book shelf; crystal ink stand; and rattan chair
Western College	200	same as the preceding
Harvard, Yale, Oxford, or Cambridge	250	custom-made desk; book shelf; crystal ink stand; and rattan chair

Source: Y. C. Wang, *Chinese Intellectuals and the West, 1872–1949* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), p. 90.

government officials in the Nationalist government after 1927, too, had studied in either Europe or the United States. Yet they were largely ignorant of, and often indifferent to, conditions in the "real China," in the villages and among the peasants. They were for the most part urban and wealthy in background; their studies were oriented to Western rather than to Chinese issues; and, on their return from abroad, they settled in the major cities and rarely ventured into the interior of the country. By comparison with the 41 percent of *jinshi* who had lived in rural China during the latter half of the nineteenth century, for example, not one alumnus of Tsinghua College, after returning from a period of study in the United States, lived in a city smaller than a *xian* capital in 1925.[8] A vast social and intellectual gulf thus separated much of China's social and political leadership from the common people.

The breadth of that gulf varied from individual to individual, of course, as is suggested by a comparison of the social and educational backgrounds of the leadership elites of the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist parties. Leaders of both parties tended to be young and to be drawn from upper- and middle-class families. Both were also relatively well educated. By contrast with the Russian revolutionaries and the leaders of the Nazi movement in Germany, Chinese revolutionary leaders were typically university graduates and had often studied abroad.

Within these similarities, however, were marked differences. Although both the Communist and the Nationalist leaders tended to come from well-to-do families, the typical Communist leader was the son of a landlord or rich peasant and had been reared in the rural hinterland. The typical Kuomintang leader, by contrast, was the son of a merchant or an urban professional and came from the coastal provinces, such as Kwangtung, Kiangsu, or Chekiang, which had been relatively exposed to Western influences. Furthermore, of the leaders who had studied abroad, those in the Kuomintang had usually studied in the United States or Japan—which tended to make them relatively conservative—while the Communists had typically attended universities in either the Soviet Union or France.

While the factors affecting the fates of these two political parties were far more complex than simply social and geographical backgrounds of their leaders, these differences do suggest that the economic and educational changes in the early modern period did significantly influence China's social structure and leadership.

The New Military Class

Most studies of traditional Chinese society suggest that the soldier was a despised figure who barely clung to the lowest rungs of the social ladder. In the traditional Confucian listing of the social classes—scholar, farmer, artisan, and merchant—the soldier did not even warrant mention. One of the most popular proverbs, too, declared, "Good iron is not used to make nails, and good men are not used to make soldiers."

Yet just as the status of the merchant in traditional times was ambivalent, so was that of the soldier. Most founders of the dynasties had won the empire as leaders of armies, and many of the most revered and popular figures in Chinese history—such as Cao Cao, Guan Yu (later canonized as Guan Di), and Yue Fei—had been generals and military strategists. Works of literature featuring the military and heroic tradition, ranging from the great novels of the Ming Dynasty *(Water Margin* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms)* to the common tales of knights-errant *(wuxia xiaoshuo),* had been enormously popular for many centuries. In the theater, too, actors who depicted military characters were perennial favorites with both audiences and performers.

In real life, among those living at the lowest economic levels of society, the life of the sword also held a powerful attraction. Life on the farms was grueling and boring, and for many men of ambition, the army often beckoned with the promise of a better and more adventurous life. Thus like the relationship of *yin* to *yang,* the military was a constant complement to the civilian side of Chinese society. In the official ideology and in the more orthodox of popular perceptions, however, it was always less esteemed than were the more peaceable professions.

The first intimation of change in the valuation of the military came during the Taiping Rebellion. In opposition to that great popular uprising, the regular armies of the Qing Dynasty were largely ineffectual, and various officials and gentry, concerned about the security of their homes and native regions, formed and served as the commanders of anti-Taiping militia. Many of these commanders—not only the creators of the armies, such as Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang, but also their subordinate officers, such as Cen Yuying, Zhang Shusheng, and Liu Bingzhang—gained national reputations for their military exploits. That these scholars and officials, who indisputably possessed literary talents, would serve as military commanders removed much of the stigma from those holding officers' commissions in the military. Yet most of them left the army and petitioned for posts in the governmental administration after quelling the rebellion, which demonstrates that even in the late nineteenth century, scholar-officials still enjoyed markedly higher status than did members of the military elite.

After about 1895, however, and especially during the last decade of Qing rule, the prestige of the military rose sharply. The concerns of many Chinese had changed.

No longer could they be complacent about the Confucian-dominated agrarianism of old; following the disastrous and humiliating defeats in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and the Boxer Uprising (1900), they feared for the very existence of China. They had become, in other words, nationalistic, and military defense of the nation was central to that sentiment. A new esteem was inevitably felt for those whose job it was to defend the nation.

The type of men who became military officers also changed. To replace the now-discredited and corrupt traditional armies, the imperial government in 1895 approved the formation of Western-style armies—the Newly Created Army of Yuan Shikai, in north China, and the Self-Strengthening Army of Zhang Zhidong, in central China. Subsequently, following the Boxer fiasco, the central government ordered the creation of the "New Army," to be Western-trained and Western-equipped and, ultimately, to consist of thirty-six divisions. The quality of the officers in these new forces was far higher than in the old imperial armies. No longer were officers' commissions given to men who could demonstrate physical strength by lifting a heavy stone and whose intellectual capacity required no more than memorizing about 100 characters in the *Sunzi,* a traditional text of warfare and strategy. By contrast, the educational level of officers in the new armies was high; even many of the common soldiers were able to read and write. By 1906, 36 provincial military academies with over 6,000 cadets were in existence; by 1911, there were nearly 70 military academies. Besides military subjects, these academies gave instruction in science, foreign languages, and even cultural subjects.

As a result of the higher educational level of the officers in China's modernized armies, and because the army symbolized the nation's resistance to imperialism, the social status of military officers improved. Now it became common for sons of gentry families to opt for the army as their first career choice, and even scholars who had won the *shengyuan* and *juren* degrees before 1905 (such as Feng Guozhang, a future president of the Republic, and Cai E, a famous revolutionary leader) turned their backs on the civilian world in favor of careers in the army. Because the army was a leader in the adoption of Western technology, military officers also basked in the admiration that society had begun to feel for things modern and Western.

During the Revolution of 1911, political power fell into the hands of these military officers. Most of the modern army units, especially in the south, had been permeated with anti-Manchu sentiment, and they therefore quickly sided with the revolutionary movement. Amid the political upheaval of the time, they were manifestly the best organized and most powerful forces in the provinces. They were thus in a favorable position to seize control when the dynasty's administration collapsed at the local level. Civilian elites, for the most part, supported this seizure of power because they recognized that the army commanders, most of whom were from gentry and landlord families, would tolerate no radical, popular uprisings against the existing social and economic order. Soon after the outbreak of the revolution, therefore, eleven of the fourteen provinces that declared their independence of Manchu rule were governed by military officers.

Yuan Shikai restored a semblance of civilian authority after he became president of the newborn Republic. During 1913 and 1914, in an effort to lessen provincial autonomy and strengthen the powers of the central government, he stripped the military commanders of their civilian responsibilities and posted civilian governors to direct the provincial administrations. Yuan never succeeded, however, in reducing the power of the military to its pre-1911 level. And by early 1916, during Yuan's ill-fated monarchical movement, the generals reasserted their control over the provinces. The era of warlordism, a dozen years (1916–28) during which regional militarists controlled and fought over the political and fiscal fruits of the nation, had begun.

Militarism, sadly, begat further militarism. During the warlord era, no political party could reasonably hope to attain to national power without a military arm. Thus when the Nationalist revolution nominally unified the nation after 1927, it was Chiang Kai-shek, a military man by training and instincts, who headed the new government. Under his leadership, the Nationalist movement was transformed into a military-authoritarian regime in which the civilian branches, the party and the government, languished and the army served as the regime's principal base of support. Military tasks—suppression of Communist revolutionaries and regional militarists and resistance to Japanese aggression—received top priority. The locus of power within the regime, consequently, resided in such offices as the Military Affairs Commission.

Military officers acquired a prominence during those years that was unparalleled among any of the other major nations in the world. "Among the stable cabinets in the West," it has been observed, "the role of army officers in Germany [was] far greater than in Britain, France, or the United States, although even in Germany they were only about one-third as frequent as in either party [the Nationalists and the Communists] in China." The result was that "in China, revolutionary chaos gave the specialist on violence (i.e., the military careerist) a larger role than anywhere else . . . , and the role of the symbol specialists (lawyers, journalists, teachers) was considerably reduced."[9]

This enhanced role of the military in government and society had consequences for all Chinese, in every walk of life. Military leaders, such as Chiang Kai-shek, instinctively sought military solutions to political problems. Economic, social, and political reforms therefore received only slight attention during the years of Nationalist rule. And warfare cost money, which had to be extracted from peasants and merchants, industrialists and bankers. There was also little security for either person or property. Thus the entire society felt and suffered the effects of militarism. Young men who, in more tranquil times, might have turned to jobs in science, education, industry, or some other constructive career, often chose instead to become military officers; in turning to the profession of violence, they "ultimately destroyed the chances for stable evolution [of government and society]."[10]

Despite the deeply pernicious effects of militarism, the social status of military officers reached its apogee during the era of Nationalist rule, although common soldiers continued to be scorned and often feared. Even more than at the beginning of the century, young men from the "best families" were joining the army, and especially during the early years of the struggles with Japan, they were treated

as heroes by an increasingly nationalistic public. "Respect and affection were reserved for them. It was quite common for the young ladies of upper class families or of a women's college to go out with young officers of the army, air force, or the navy, for social functions. Many of the new generals married girls of college education."[11] Not all segments of society shared this adulation for military officers; intellectuals, for example, retained much of the traditional disdain for military men, whatever rank they held. The reputation of the Nationalist military class gradually turned sour, too, as gross corruption spread through the army in the last years of the war against Japan and as the army proved to be almost totally ineffectual in the civil war against the Communists. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, however, the military wielded predominant political power and influence. The power of the military, together with the rise of the new merchant and the new intellectual classes, which were based largely on wealth, revealed how profoundly China's social structure had been transformed during the early modern period.

The Urban Proletariat

The greatest changes in social structure during the early modern period were evident at the top, among the wealthy, the educated, and the governing classes. Most commoners, such as the peasants, continued to live much as they had 100 or 200 years earlier. One new social group, however, did appear among the commoners during the process of modernization—the industrial proletariat.

The industrial laborers—those who worked in shops and factories using power-driven machinery—were actually but a modest step away from the traditional craftsmen of the past. The levels and sophistication of technology in the factories tended to be low, especially in those factories owned by Chinese, and most factory workers still maintained roots and, often, families in their native villages. But they were also incontestably different from their predecessors, the traditional artisans, because their relations with employers were more impersonal, the output demands on them were more severe, and they were concentrated, as never before, in an urban environment. Moreover, because they became the objects of intensive interest from political agitators (particularly the Communists) during the 1920s, they acquired a significance in China's political revolutionary process that was out of proportion to their relatively small numbers.

China's first industrial workers were those employed in the ship-repair yards and other enterprises established by foreigners in Canton and Hong Kong following the Opium War. Later, in the 1860s, Chinese officials like Zeng Guofan and Zuo Zongtang recruited craftsmen from among these skilled Cantonese to train workers in the shipyards and arsenals that they were then establishing in central and north China. By the 1920s, the industrial work force had grown, by very rough estimate, to 1 million and was concentrated mainly in just six areas: Shanghai, Canton–Hong Kong, Wuhan, Tsingtao–Tsinan, Peking–Tientsin, and southern Manchuria.[12]

The living and working conditions of these industrial workers were remarkably similar to those depicted by Charles Dickens in the early phases of the Industrial

Revolution in England. There was the pallid and undernourished woman laboring at the looms, while her infant lay nearby on the factory floor. Boys just ten to twelve years old labored for twelve hours a day around gears that could, should their attention stray, easily crush a hand, or worked near machine belts that could in an instant rip off a limb. And when the workday was done, they returned to their dormitory quarters to a meal of cold rice gruel and a few vegetables, and to sleep on bug-infested pallets that they shared with others who worked the alternate shift. China's artisans and apprentices in the past had also worked long hours in cold, dank shops, but managers in the modern factories were less paternalistic toward the workers, so that the conditions of employment were probably harsher and more unfeeling than they had been in the small handicraft shops.

Most factories in the 1920s, both those owned by Chinese and those owned by foreigners, operated on shifts that were close to twelve hours each. A survey of twenty-three textile mills in Tientsin in 1923 revealed, for instance, that the workday was fifteen hours in one factory and fourteen hours in two others and that the average among all of them was eleven hours and fifty-five minutes. That was typical of conditions everywhere, except that highly skilled craftsmen, such as trained machinists and printers, tended to work fewer hours, often in shifts of only ten or even only nine hours. The overwhelming majority of China's factory workers, however, were unskilled. The technology in most factories was relatively basic, so most workers were required to perform only simple, repetitive operations that, with more advanced technology, would have been performed by machine. This was especially true of China's major industries, such as cotton and silk mills and tobacco and match factories. In these, a disproportionate number—often 60 to 70 percent—of the workers were women and children who, because their incomes were merely supplemental to their families' main incomes, acquiesced in working for the barest minimum wages.

The conditions of factory labor may be inferred from a reform proposal made in Shanghai in 1924 recommending that no children under ten years of age be employed in the factories, that children ten to fourteen years of age work no more than twelve hours a day, and that children be given twenty-four hours of rest a week. This recommendation for reform was, however, never enforced. The malevolent effects of long hours of work were worsened by the lack of safety precautions around the machines, by poor ventilation, and by malnutrition. Statistics tell something of the situation: of 880 workers in a Shanghai cotton mill, 6 percent of the men, 14 percent of the women, and 22 percent of the boys and girls suffered from tuberculosis. Medical care was, of course, virtually nonexistent.

Factories usually employed one of three forms of recruitment to obtain their workers. Probably the majority of the unskilled workers were hired either as apprentices or as contract laborers. These two systems reduced the workers to semi-slavery. Apprenticeship was a traditional system that had originated in the craft-shops, whereby boys customarily contracted to work for three to four years. During this time, they received little or no remuneration other than their food and lodging, but when they graduated, they were usually able to obtain employment as trained journeymen because the guilds strictly regulated their numbers. In the new factories, this system became corrupted. Apprenticeship ceased to be a method

of teaching a trade and became simply a means of employing children at minimal cost. And because the "apprentices" were hired without restrictions on their numbers, few of them had any hope of being promoted to journeyman status after completing their apprenticeships.

In the contract-labor system, which apparently came into existence only in 1928, a labor contractor traveled to the villages of the interior in order to seek out potential workers, usually girls aged fourteen to eighteen. He enticed the girls with promises of a good life in the city—plenteous food, the opportunity to learn a skill, and, as one put it, the chance to enjoy the "strange, amusing foreign sights of Shanghai."[13] The contractors' chief enticement, however, was to the girls' parents, paying them a fee—typically Ch$30 or so—in return for which each girl was obligated to work for a specified period of time, usually three years.

The girls thus "sold" into contract labor rarely had a chance to enjoy the "amusing" sights of the city. In Shanghai, the contractor hired out his girls to various factories. The girls, however, continued to be virtually his property. He collected their wages from the factories and kept most for himself; he forced the girls to live in dormitories or accommodations that he provided, usually not even allowing them to stroll freely outside for fear that they would slip their bondage. Because of overcrowding, exhaustion, inadequate food, and beatings, the girls were often injured or became ill. Any time lost from the job because of illness or other causes was then added to the girls' total contract time, so that many of them worked for four or five years merely to fulfill a three-year contract. The girls were also often exploited sexually, the contractor or his henchmen perhaps forcing them to have sex with them, or sometimes sending them out to work as prostitutes rather than in the mills.

Studies of the Chinese industrial proletariat usually emphasize the brutalizing features of the workers' living and working conditions. The conditions of workers employed under the third system of hiring—the free-labor market—were, however, rather more tolerable. The free laborers, of course, worked in the same insalubrious factories as the contract laborers; they, too, were subject to beatings by the bosses; and their wages were also often wretchedly low, although the wages of skilled technicians were higher than the incomes they would have earned back on the farms. But free laborers customarily received wages directly from the employers—rather than receiving them from, and having to share them with, a contractor—and they thus achieved a degree of economic independence. Many women workers, as a consequence, found that working in the factories was preferable to other alternatives confronting them. Many thus refused to marry when and whom their parents wanted, and they tended to marry later in life than did their rural cousins. When a woman worker did marry, she tended to be—as a Chinese sociologist phrased it in 1935—"a new kind of wife," less willing to be subjugated by her husband and mother-in-law, and likely to bear fewer children.[14] Male workers, too, displayed a more individualistic attitude, and the often suffocating hold of the traditional family on them tended to weaken. The most far-reaching social changes among the lower classes of China during the early modern period were, therefore, found among the industrial workers.

Yet the majority of industrial workers remained close to their peasant roots.

Many had left the countryside to escape hunger and hardship on the farm, but they often left both their families and their hearts back in the villages. Young women, after completing the terms of their contracts, frequently returned home to become peasants' wives. Many male workers who were married lived in factory dormitories, but they returned to visit their wives and children in the villages at least once a year, usually at the New Years. Others returned to their homes in the country in the spring and fall to help with the planting and harvesting. The villages were also the workers' best "unemployment insurance" because when out of work or on strike, they could return to live and work with their families.

Industrial workers were not easily organized into trade unions. With their strong rural orientation, they were slow to develop a distinctive class consciousness. Moreover, many of them were women and children who were, in effect, merely transients in the factories, and industry was fragmented into numerous, small enterprises. As a consequence, the workers often had no sense of a shared destiny or common problems, and there was always a large reservoir of unemployed outside the factory gates waiting to replace "troublesome" workers. Despite these obstacles, the Chinese labor movement became, for a few brief years in the 1920s, a potent political force.

One of the first industrial strikes in China occurred in Shanghai in 1868; between 1895 and 1919, 152 more such strikes were recorded. Most were simply spontaneous protests against hunger and poverty, however, because the proletariat during that early period lacked an organization to formulate labor strategies and to represent its interests exclusively. Instead, the worker organizations then in existence, such as the traditional guilds and a newer breed of "industrial-promotion associations," were usually headed by employers and ostensibly represented the interests of employers and employees alike.

The political potential of the industrial workers did not become evident until the May Fourth Movement of 1919, when urban workers joined young intellectuals and the merchants in a great outburst of resentment against the Versailles peace settlement, Japanese imperialism, and the pro-Japanese Peking government. Participating in the nationwide boycott of Japanese goods and going out on strike in a show of support for the students who had been arrested in Peking, the industrial workers revealed for the first time a hitherto unimagined potential for action that transcended narrow craft and economic issues. Still, the organizational and political immaturity of the labor movement was evidenced by the fact that although the workers often felt genuine outrage at the events culminating in the May Fourth Movement, they remained merely followers. The leadership and organizational work in the movement was supplied by members of the intellectual and merchant classes, not from among the workers.

In the wake of the May Fourth Movement, during 1920 and 1921, the first genuine industrial unions were formed, their purpose being to represent purely working-class interests. At about the same time, young, radical intellectuals who represented diverse political ideologies—anarchists, labor syndicalists, and Marxists—began to look to the proletariat as the driving force in the movement of history. These two factors—the growing class consciousness of the workers and the organizational work of outside agitators—combined to transform the industrial

workers into a force that significantly influenced political events leading to the Nationalist revolution in 1927.

The new labor movement first manifested itself in a series of strikes during 1922 and 1923, which began with the Hong Kong seamen's strike in early 1922. In that strike, some 30,000 seamen were joined by sympathetic dock workers, coolies, tram workers, electricians, and domestic servants. By March, the total number of strikers reached 120,000, and they virtually halted shipping in the British colony. After almost two months, the strike ended in a substantial victory for the seamen.

This strike imparted a sharp impetus to the labor movement throughout China. In April 1922, the All-China Labor Congress convened in Canton. At the congress, the Chinese Labor Organizations Secretariat (which had been organized by Communists, probably in 1920 or early 1921) was named to coordinate trade-union activities—evidence that the workers were developing an organizational capability with nationwide implications. Also, Sun Yat-sen, then serving in the revolutionary government in Canton, had been deeply and favorably impressed by the political potential of the Hong Kong workers, which encouraged him to form the first united front with the Soviets and the Chinese Communist party. This historic alliance between the Kuomintang and the Communists was formally consecrated at the Kuomintang's first party congress in January 1924.

The first wave of labor agitation came to an abrupt and tragic end on February 7, 1923, when troops under the command of the warlord Wu Peifu in north China massacred thirty-five striking railway workers. One of those murdered was a union secretary, who was beheaded in front of other workers for having refused to give the order to go back to work. Warlord repression of the labor movement continued during 1923, forcing many of the recently formed unions to disband.

After an interlude of nearly two years, the labor movement revived during 1925. The recent economic depression, which had marked the end of the golden age of Chinese industry, had hurt the livelihood of the workers and had bestirred anti-imperialist sentiment among the bourgeoisie. Thus when a series of labor strikes, beginning in January 1925, culminated in May in the murder of a Chinese striker by a Japanese foreman in a Shanghai mill and then in the shooting of thirteen protesting workers and students by policemen led by British officers, the nation erupted into a paroxysm of antiforeign frenzy. This May Thirtieth Movement, as it was soon called, was a repeat, on a grander and broader scale, of the May Fourth Movement, in the sense that students, merchants, and workers joined in a nationwide, patriotic alliance. This time, however, the students and the bourgeoisie played the supporting roles. It was now the workers, who had grown in number since 1919 and who had a stronger sense of class consciousness and more mature political organizations, who constituted the dominant force in and assumed the leadership of the movement.

The May Thirtieth Movement, whose momentum continued through most of 1926, significantly altered the balance of political forces in China. In the electrified atmosphere generated by the movement, worker and peasant organizations sprouted everywhere in south China, enormously facilitating the Kuomintang's consolidation of its revolutionary base in Kwangtung. Membership in the Communist party also multiplied sixfold, to 60,000. These events, in turn, set the stage for the Northern Expedition, which brought the Kuomintang and Chiang Kai-shek to national power.

The force evinced by the labor movement in this chain of events had, however, provoked a powerful reaction. On April 12, 1927, Chiang Kai-shek—with the backing of the Shanghai bourgeoisie, the foreign authorities in the city, and the Mafia-like Green Gang—began a reign of terror against the Communists and their allies among the workers, killing an estimated 5,000 people in 2 days of fighting. Obviously, the labor movement had badly frightened Chiang Kai-shek and his cohorts.

Throughout the remainder of Chiang's rule on the mainland, therefore, the Nationalists worked sedulously to ensure that the urban proletariat could not again coalesce into a revolutionary force that would threaten their leadership or their conception of the proper ordering of society. Industrial unions were disbanded or their leaders were replaced by the appointees of the government. The purpose of these "yellow unions," as their critics called them, was no longer to represent workers' interests, but to control and supervise the workers. "Cooperation" between industry and labor now became the operative word. The labor movement ceased to be a significant factor in the politics of Nationalist China.

This did not necessarily mean that the workers were repressed economically. Indeed, during the postwar years 1945 to 1949, when inflation was rising uncontrollably and intellectuals and most salaried classes were being reduced to penury, the Nationalist government gave especially favored treatment to the industrial work force. The real wages of Shanghai's industrial workers in 1946 (according to a government report) were more than three times higher than they had been in 1936, and the average workday during the same period had shrunk from eleven to ten hours. To protect these advances, even in the face of the inflation, industrial wages were pegged to a commodity-price index. Industrialists bitterly complained about this kid-glove treatment of their workers, warning that the high wages jeopardized the very existence of their factories. By 1947 and 1948, however, the economy was disintegrating everywhere, and even the workers' standard of living dropped sharply. Then worker dissatisfaction broke to the surface again. Nonetheless, the government's labor policy over the previous twenty years had fully revealed that the Nationalists greatly feared this new class, which had formed during the course of economic modernization.

The Political Consequences

The emergence of these new social classes had profound effects on the politics and exercise of state power during the early twentieth century. In late imperial times, the political system had been remarkably stable and long-lived, in large part because of the structure of the relationship between state and society. On the one hand, political power above the local level had been concentrated in the imperial bureaucracy, which was elitist, paternalistic, and authoritarian. On the other hand, the broad masses of the commoners were politically powerless above the

village and town level. Their normative role was to be subservient, orderly, and taxpaying. They had no input to the policy decisions of the imperial bureaucracy, and a broad social and political gap separated these two spheres—state and society.

Bridging this gap were the gentry, who served as brokers between the state and the commoners. At base, however, the gentry's loyalties lay with the state, for they had been indoctrinated in the official orthodoxy and they owed their status to the government by way of the civil-service examinations. The result was a marvelous political chemistry because—despite changes of dynasty and the normal vicissitudes of a traditional agrarian society—the political system functioned without fundamental change for approximately 1,000 years.

During the early modern period, however, that political system suffered severe shocks and dislocations. The first tremors had been felt during the mid-nineteenth century, when wealth began to displace learning as the route to elite status. The tremors intensified as a result of the impact of foreign influence, which hastened the formation of the new social classes. Within just one generation, between about 1895 and 1920, the old gentry and the imperial bureaucrats lost their former dominance of politics above the local level, and the newly emergent social groups—the merchant, intellectual, and military classes—came to constitute the social and economic elite. But these groups did not identify as closely with the state as had the traditional gentry. They had, in most cases, gained their status and careers independently of the government, and no longer did they spend their youth immersed in the study of an officially sanctioned doctrine that encouraged acquiescence to the state. All the new social classes, moreover, had become infected with the emotion of nationalism, often leaving them frustrated by the nation's weakness in the face of imperialist bullying and angered by the government's impotence and ineffectuality. Progressively during the early twentieth century, therefore, the traditional polity was breaking up, and from its ruins was rising a new constellation of political forces, which were diverse in economic interests and political loyalties and which progressively demanded a role in the political process.

The consequences of this politicization of the new social classes were far-reaching. First, some members of those classes joined the government and gained positions of leadership. The effects of these we have already discussed: being drawn almost exclusively from the wealthier strata of society and being urban in orientation, they were poorly informed about and largely indifferent to the conditions of life in the vast rural areas. They were, therefore, less capable than the traditional gentry of mediating between state and society, and the gap dividing the polity yawned even more widely than in late imperial times.

Second, the leaders of government in the early modern period, regardless of their background, were no less elitist and authoritarian—although perhaps less paternalistic—than their predecessors. As a consequence, they were unable or unwilling to institutionalize the participation of the newly politicized social classes in the political process. The Manchu princes who wielded governmental authority in the last years of the dynasty, followed by Yuan Shikai and Chiang Kai-shek, were forced to accept representative assemblies and other accouterments of democratic government. But nothing in their early socialization or political experience had prepared them to accept popular participation in governmental decision making, which, to them, was as unnatural as if a son were to wield authority over his father. The new social classes thus never gained an institutionalized role in the political process, and so they did not strongly identify with the government. Increasingly, therefore, the army became the government's main pillar of support.

A government whose principal source of support is the military is invariably weak. Ultimately it lacks, as political scientists say, legitimacy. Thus the Chinese government's inability to admit the new social classes into the political process was an important cause of the political instability and weakness that beset China during the decades before the Communist revolution in 1949.

The Challenge to Familism

Amid the proliferation of new social classes and the spread of economic modernization during the early modern period, the values of the old society came under attack. A spirit of individualism and a movement for the liberation of women began to challenge the values of the traditional familism.

Among the educated classes, this attack on the old social ideals began in the wake of the military defeats in 1895 and 1900, the disestablishment of Confucianism as the official ideology in 1905, and the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty in 1912. These events, for many politically aware Chinese, shattered their confidence in traditional ways. By the 1910s, intellectuals like Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi, who cringed at the humiliations inflicted by the foreigners, had become convinced that the source of China's shame and impotence lay in the anachronistic ways of the old society. To achieve a national renewal, China had to emulate the ways of the West. Thus was born the New Culture Movement. This movement, which reached its apogee during the years 1915 to 1922, rejected the familistic ideals of respect for the aged regardless of ability, of supremacy of men over women, and of the sacrifices of the individual to the fortunes and good name of the family. The morality of the old society, declared Lu Xun in his powerful short story "Madman's Diary," was cannabalistic, consuming and destroying the lives of all Chinese in the name of Confucian righteousness. Lu Xun saw hope for the future in the nation's youth, who had not yet been tainted by the false morality of the past. And it was to the youth, to the students and young intellectuals in the universities and middle schools, that the call for a new culture most appealed.

The laboring classes were untouched by the New Culture Movement, but in the cities, they, too, began breaking with tradition. Whereas the old patriarchal family had been a product of and helped perpetuate the traditional agrarian economy, the development of industrial manufacturing imposed strains on the old social arrangements and generated many of the attitudes toward generation, gender, and individualism that young members of the elite classes were acquiring.

In the Chinese peasant economy, where technologies changed slowly, the chief qualification for family leadership was experience. Under these conditions, dominance of the family had fallen naturally to the elders. In the early twentieth cen-

tury, by contrast, especially in the industrial sector, where technologies and ideas flooded in from the West, reliance on the experience and methods of the past could be an obstruction. The premium there was on new ideas, innovativeness, and a willingness to break with the ways of the past. And these were the virtues of the youth. Youth educated in the new schools were also exposed to a whole universe of thinking and learning that had been a closed book to their fathers' generation. The abandonment of traditional ways, in other words, threatened to leave the older generation behind, and in some areas of society, a new "youth culture" was coming into being. There developed an intoxication with things new and exotic, and a corresponding disdain for the old and the commonplace. Whereas pharmacists had once attracted customers with assurances that their medicines had existed in hoary antiquity, now the allure was provided by the words "science" and "foreign." Students were attracted, John Dewey reported, by any and all ideas, "provided only that they were new and involved getting away from old customs and traditions."[15] Youth who had been influenced by such ideas regarded the older generation with a barely concealed contempt, and they thus challenged the fundamental precepts of the old family structure and values.

A spirit of individualism evolved out of this revolt of the youth. Educated youth acquired their new sense of individual worth and independence largely by reading and talking about Western concepts of freedom and self-reliance, which were propagated in the many new publications of the day. This is called "individualism by ideal." The urban laboring class at the same time was developing "individualism by default," which occurred when young men and women left their villages to work in the cities, living away from the daily dominance of their parents, making decisions for themselves, and earning wages of their own. Such youths developed a spirit of independence to a degree that was inconceivable when they worked every day side by side with their fathers in the fields or with their mothers or mothers-in-law in the kitchens. Whereas in traditional society, children had been regarded primarily as a necessary means to attain familistic goals, the new view stressed that they were important in and for themselves, with concerns and rights that transcended those of the family. This rejection of the basic precepts of familism was revolutionary in its implications. No longer must the son sacrifice his desires to the will of the older generation or his personal well-being to the welfare or reputation of the larger family. And the older generation, perceiving these changes, became fearful that their world was becoming unglued: no longer could they expect absolute obedience or could they feel secure in the knowledge that their sons would remain in the household to care for them in their old age.

Under the impact of the new individualism and the revolt of the youth, the status of women began to change. In the society of late imperial times, most men thought that a woman's proper place was in the house or beside the loom. Although some upper-class women received a modest, literary education—a few of them, indeed, even becoming poets, calligraphers, and artists—the conventional wisdom continued to be that "a woman without talents is virtuous." In the mid-nineteenth century, Christian missionaries began to promote girls' education. Their accomplishments, however, were quantitatively small—in 1877, after 33 years, there were still only 524 students in the 38 schools for girls. By the end of the century, however, some male intellectuals with progressive views took up the cause of women's education, largely on the grounds that ignorant women nurtured ignorant sons. Concerned for the fate of their nation, which was being assailed by the imperialists, these progressive thinkers realized that China could become strong and prosperous only if its citizens were enlightened. They therefore advocated that both boys and girls receive modern schooling.

Footbinding, too, came under attack—again largely for the nationalistic and utilitarian reasons that women, crippled through footbinding, produced physically inferior children. Even the Manchu court in 1902 supported the growing anti-footbinding movement by urging the upper classes "to abstain from the evil practice and by this means abolish the custom forever."[16] Especially after the Revolution of 1911, the practice declined. Yet in China today, one can still see elderly women with bound feet, so it is evident that footbinding was still practiced to some extent, especially in remote areas, even during the 1920s.

The major onslaught on the traditional subjugation of women began only after 1915, when leaders of the New Culture Movement made women's emancipation a major goal of their struggle against the old society. Articles on "the women's problem" in all the progressive magazines of the time deplored the suffering caused by arranged marriages, the prejudice against remarriage, and the submission of women to men. The radical cause proclaimed the revolutionary message that women, too, were individuals.

Women of the lower classes usually remained ignorant of the feminist movement among the intellectuals, but in the cities, they began straining at the bonds of their subjugation. Women and young girls working in the new factories, for example, became economic assets to their families. As a result, they began to acquire a voice in family affairs, and their parents were no longer so eager to marry them off at a young age.

But we ought not exaggerate. All these changes—the emphasis on youth, the development of individualism, and the emancipation of women—were evident in only a small percentage of Chinese families. The professional and educated classes, who were most susceptible to the arguments of the New Culture Movement, represented but a tiny segment within society as a whole. And the number of young men and women who left their villages and became industrial workers was small relative to the total population. Moreover, not all the educated youth and urban workers who were exposed to the new social currents actually changed their behavior and attitudes within their homes. Men and women of the professional class in Shanghai and Peking, it is true, had largely abandoned the old form of arranged marriages and sought out their own mates. A survey in the 1930s, for example, found that eight of ten members of the professional class in Peking, and 16 of the 23 in Shanghai, had married in the modern way; but fully 37 of 46 marriages among members of Peking's middle class, and 98 of 124 marriages among Shanghai's industrial workers, had been arranged in the traditional manner. Among the peasants, tradition remained virtually undisturbed. Only 3 villagers of 170 surveyed, for example, had even heard of "modern marriages."

Politics and governmental legislation had only a marginal effect on the posi-

tion of women and on relations within the family. In 1930, the Nationalist government proclaimed a new civil code, which provided a legal basis for social change. Women were, for instance, granted the legal rights of selecting their own husbands, of owning property, and of inheriting property from their parents. These laws, however, were seldom put into effect.

In the Communist areas, too, legislation and political pronouncements during the 1930s and 1940s signaled what might have been revolutionary social changes. Women were assured of the freedom of marriage and divorce, mobilized into mass organizations, and often given a rudimentary education. But even here, social change encountered resistance, not least because leaders of the Communist party feared that too strong an emphasis on the movement for sexual equality would detract from the struggle for political and economic revolution. Still, just as factory employment in the cities increased the economic value of women, so the Communists' mobilization of women in war production helped at least marginally to improve women's status in the Communist areas.

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(See also the works cited in the notes)

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10

The *Yin* Side of Society: Secret Societies, Bandits, and Feuds

Thus far, this book has dealt largely with the legal and orthodox aspects of Chinese social life—what might be called the *yang* side of society. But there was also a *yin* side—the shadowy world of the illegal and the heterodox.[1] This is a realm not easily entered; little is known about it because it was disreputable. It did not fit the Confucian elite's image of society the way they thought it *ought* to be, and thus they rarely recorded it in their histories. To the common folk suffering from poverty, insecurity, and injustice, however, this was a real and often attractive alternative to the gentry- and official-dominated way of life. For by banding together in secret societies, turning to banditry, or participating in huge, sanguinary feuds, they could often attain the riches, the solace, or the retribution that the *yang* side of society denied them.

Secret Societies

The term "secret society" is a neologism when applied in the Chinese context. Westerners in China during the mid-nineteenth century, observing a form of organization that seemed to resemble European secret societies, such as the Freemasons and the Carbonari, applied the term "secret society" to the Chinese phenomenon. Subsequently, that term, translated as *mimi shehui*, established itself in the Chinese language. Chinese scholars who have studied what the Westerners called secret societies have, however, generally shunned the term. They have preferred instead to retain two traditional terms, *jiaomen* (folk sects) and *huitang* (secret brotherhoods), that distinguish two distinct species of secret societies. Indeed, the distinction between folk sects and secret brotherhoods is fundamental to an understanding of China's so-called secret societies. Significantly, a form of secret society that shared some of the characteristics of both the folk sects and the