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Social Class Transformation in Urban China

Training, Hiring, and Promoting Urban Professionals and Managers after 1949

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The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) structural transformation of urban society in the first years of the People's Republic is well documented and not often subject to debate. As early as 1953, state enterprises were the primary employers, and industry dominated commerce. Three years later, private business had been effectively eliminated, and entrepreneurs and independent professionals had disappeared as legitimate economic actors (see Table 1 at the end of this article). Equally central to the CCP's radical transformation of urban society were the deliberate—and successful—efforts to redefine the economic and social significance of urban residence (Solinger, 1999). Through rationing and migration controls, the communist leadership divided the population into a rural majority tied to the land who were responsible for raising their own food and an urban minority who had the right to buy state grain. As a result, urban residence in and of itself guaranteed a privileged status, and Chinese cities became economically, politically, and socially cut off from their rural hinterlands and suburbs.

Despite these profound discontinuities between Chinese society of the 1950s and that of the 1940s, several historians have questioned the

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establishment of the PRC as the most critical rupture of the first six decades of the twentieth century. For example, in analyzing state-society relations, Marie-Claire Bergère (1989: 10) concluded that the key break was not the establishment of the People's Republic but the "restoration of the authoritarian state" in 1927. Lloyd Eastman, while not as explicitly arguing against 1949 as the critical turning point, also identified central continuities between the Nationalist and Communist eras. Particularly supportive of Bergère's conclusion is Eastman's (1991: 169) argument about the emergence of "state capitalism" during the Nanjing decade and the Guomindang's (GMD) persistent hostility to the bourgeoisie. Even among economists, some argue against seeing 1949 as the decisive watershed or turning point. For example, in his study of Shanghai during the 1950s, Christopher Howe (1971: 89, 134) was impressed with the similarity of GMD and CCP labor bureaus as well as with the inability of the CCP to make radical changes until 1957. Tracking both aggregate and per capita growth rates over the first eight decades of the twentieth century, Thomas Rawski (1989: 348) observes a pattern of steady expansion reaching back to 1914, if one excludes the war years of 1937 to 1949.

Against this body of evidence, how does one argue for rupture in 1949? The Nationalists and Communists were both authoritarian Leninist parties. They shared a dream of rapid industrialization led by state monopolies. For years, they were both tutored by Soviet advisers, and uneasy collaboration under the United Front often merged their leaderships. Both distrusted a free intelligentsia and enforced policies of political control and repression. Within the broader society, continuities were even more self-evident and persistent. People waking up 2 October 1949 as citizens of the People's Republic had spent their entire lives up to that day as citizens of other polities. Even among the communist revolutionaries, deeply embedded cultural mores guided not only private behavior but also organizational routines in public agencies. Nevertheless, in this study of the managerial and professional stratum that draws primarily on local newspapers of the early 1950s and interviews with men and women from Wuhan and Shanghai active in the urban labor force in the early 1950s, I argue that 1949 represents rupture.¹ In particular, I show how CCP programs for hiring and promoting professionals and managers adopted in the early 1950s and quickly implemented in two of China's metropolises

radically departed from those of the GMD. As a result, to get jobs and secure promotions, members of this socioeconomic class quickly became dependent on employment in the state sector and advanced professionally only by remaining politically untarnished. Within just three years of the CCP victory, the professional and managerial strata had been totally incorporated into the party-state's civil service. Resignation was impossible, and professionals and managers had stepped onto a single escalator for career advancement.

Bureaucratic control over managerial talent is not peculiar to the communist regime or to the twentieth century. As Jerry Dennerline (1981: 21) showed in his study of the Jiading County Ming dynasty loyalists, imperial bureaucrats also effectively supervised promotion of managerial ranks:

Every promotion or demotion within the bureaucracy required a recommendation from two officials: the minister of personnel and the director of the Bureau of Investigation. Their recommendations, in turn, were based on reports from three other officials: the immediate superior of the man in question, the chief of the Department of Evaluation in the Ministry of Personnel, and the investigator whose jurisdiction included the man's post. If the man wished to appeal the decision he needed the approval of the chief censor in the Personnel section of the Office of Scrutiny.

However, what differentiated the CCP practice of the early 1950s from those of previous regimes was the degree to which lucrative or powerful positions were monopolized by the state sector and the inability of the highly educated to exit voluntarily from state employment. In earlier decades, educated men moved between sectors—sometimes by choice, sometimes by necessity—and such occupational flexibility gave this stratum a critical degree of autonomy from the state. After 1949, legitimate professional activities were limited to the public sector. Not only were disaffected professionals and managers unable to retreat to private lives, but they were also not even permitted to resign from their jobs without securing approval from the very superiors from whom they wished to escape. This drastic constriction and centralization of the urban opportunity structure distinguish the 1950s from earlier decades of the twentieth century.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE SUBJECT

Who belongs to the upper middle class, and how does one distinguish this stratum from others? Given the CCP's frequent use of class background as a criterion for categorizing individuals and allocating work opportunities, one might expect that the task would be easy. But this is not the case. When class labels were applied to the urban population in the early 1950s, the primary distinction among those who were not peasants or manual workers was between the capitalists (*zichan jieji*) and the petty bourgeoisie (*xiao zichan jieji*). The former were subdivided into three subcategories (commercial capitalist, industrial capitalist, compradore capitalist) and the latter into six (pauper, peddler, small shop owner, small factory owner, office employee, and liberal professional) (Kraus, 1981: 185-86). Middle-level professional ranks—which grew explosively after 1949 as a result of the rapid expansion of tertiary education (see Table 2 at the end of the article) and the managerial stratum of state cadres that grew equally fast as the result of new state industries and social welfare services—did not find an obvious class position. Thus, at the outset, official class labels in urban China were not closely tied to an individual's actual occupational position but were instead grounded in CCP interpretations of pre-1949 history and contemporary politics. For example, the head accountant of a large textile mill and his children could officially have the class status of worker if his father had been a manual laborer before 1949. By contrast, the chief economist in this same mill and his children could officially be members of the "petty bourgeoisie" if his father had been a shopkeeper. And an engineer who was branded a "rightist" passed on the rightist class status to his children. Thus, despite efforts of some Marxist intellectuals to recognize the "complexity" of middle-class origins and subdivisions based on different occupational status, class identity became increasingly politicized.²

Even in less politicized societies than the PRC, definitions of middle class are imprecise or even contested, ranging from simple descriptions that place all those with average incomes in the middle class³ to highly elaborate schema that require the middle class to have certain levels of advanced education as well as employment in particular occupations and supervisory obligations at the workplace.⁴ It is also routine to subdivide this stratum into new and old middle class or

lower middle class and upper middle class. In addition, some sociologists (e.g., Brint, 1994) insist that within the top decile of income, it is necessary to separate managers from professionals if one wants to speak of an identifiable class or stratum.

In this article, I take a position halfway between the highly politicized and occupationally undifferentiated distinctions used in urban China in the 1950s and the rigorous (but competing) definitions used by contemporary sociologists. Here, upper middle class is defined primarily by current occupation and includes salaried professionals with postsecondary education and middle-level managers who occupy positions of authority within the workplace. Thus, I will not discuss the fate of bookkeepers, nurses, and secondary and primary school-teachers but rather will focus on the changing status of urban physicians, engineers, university professors, and managers who are identified as leaders of the firm (*lingdao ganbu*) or assume major supervisory duties.⁵ The lower level of inclusion are those occupying jobs equivalent to the rank of section chief (*ke zhang*), and the upper boundary consists of those with positions equivalent to factory heads or party secretaries. Although frequently embroiled in political struggle, members of this group did not take leadership at the municipal, provincial, or central level or hold jobs as high cadres (*gaogan*). Thus, despite incomes and material comfort above the average standard of living of their era, they perceived themselves to be in a middling position. And in contrast to the capitalists described by Bergère (1989), they were not property owners. Also, in contrast to capitalists, the upper middle class of the 1950s—as defined by income and occupational status—expanded rather than contracted as a percentage of the urban population after 1949.

TRAINING AND HIRING

Through 1952, the private sector generated the majority of new urban jobs, but by 1956, opportunities outside the collective sector had virtually disappeared, and state employment was the norm (see Table 1). Among the professional-managerial stratum, however, the shift to public-sector jobs was occurring even more rapidly than the urban population as a whole. This was because the new regime urgently needed the highly educated to fill the many new technical and

TABLE 1: Structural Transformation of the Urban Economy

	<i>Urban Workforce (in millions)</i>	<i>% State Workers</i>	<i>% Privately Employed</i>	<i>% in Industry^a</i>	<i>% in Commerce^a</i>
1949	15.3	32	67	38	16
1952	24.8	43	50	32	19
1953	27.5	67	32	33	18
1954	27.4	69	27	32	18
1955	28.0	68	23	30	18
1956	29.9	81	0.5	30	20
1957	32.1	76	3	30	20
1958	53.0	86	2	51	10
1959	53.8	85	2	44	12
1960	61.1	82	2	43	11
1961	53.3	78	3	38	13
1962	45.3	73	5	36	15

SOURCE: *Zhongguo laodong gongzi tongji ziliao 1949-1985* (1987: 26-27); *Zhongguo tongji nianjian 1993* (1993: 97).

a. Percentage within state sector employees.

managerial positions created within the state sector. Between December 1949 and December 1952, the number of state employees in the fields of education and medicine grew by 280,000, those in banking by 40,000, and those in government and party administrative offices (*jiguan*) by 27,000. Over the next three years, the rate of growth slowed, but the number of positions steadily increased. A total of 140,000 new posts were added in public education and medicine, 10,000 in banking, and 7,000 in party and government *jiguan* (*Zhongguo laodong gongzi tongji ziliao 1949-1985*, 1987: 33). In 1949, there had been 16,000 university professors; by 1952, there were 27,000 and by 1957, 70,000, a figure four times the pre-1949 peak of 17,000 (*Zhongguo shehui tongji ziliao 1993*, 1993: 136). Nevertheless, despite the clear need for the CCP to manage this growing stratum of professionals and administrators, the speed and thoroughness with which the infant communist party-state effectively monopolized its hiring was impressive.

College graduates. For professionals trained in universities, both official publications of the era and the life histories of those attending college document a rupture with past practices. Less than six months after the founding of the PRC, the central government announced a

TABLE 2: Expansion of Educational Opportunities

	<i>Senior High New Entrants (September)</i>	<i>% Junior High Grads (June)</i>	<i>University New Entrants (September)</i>	<i>% Senior High Grads (June)</i>
1949	71,000	32	30,573	49
1950	108,000	46	58,330	94
1951	91,000	40	51,689	86
1952	141,000	76	78,865	99
1953	161,000	40	81,544	145
1954	195,000	34	92,280	135
1955	221,000	25	97,797	98
1956	374,000	48	184,632	119
1957	323,000	29	105,581	56

SOURCE: *Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian 1949-1981* (1986: 969, 1001).

national policy for allocating jobs for college students graduating in 1950, and by spring they had established the administrative apparatus (1950 *xiaqi gaodeng xuexiao biyesheng gongzuo fenpei yuanwei*) for allocating jobs to 10,800 of the 17,607 graduates of that summer (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jiaoyu dashiji 1949-1952, 1983: item 5027). In Maria Yen's (1954: 198) account of students in Beijing, the process began in late spring. After a month of political study, each graduating senior completed an employment form wherein they stated their job preferences but primarily described their past leisure activities and social backgrounds of family and friends. After a student tribunal reviewed the materials, individuals were asked to revise and then submit four copies: one to be retained by the university, two to be forwarded to "the government," and one to be placed in a personnel dossier to be kept by future employers. On July 12, students who were members of the CCP or Youth League received their job assignments; on July 29, the remainder was contacted. According to Yen, few were told precisely when or where they would begin work. Thus, theoretically, it was still possible for students to try to find work on their own. Yet both Yen's account and official publications indicate that most graduates from the best national and private colleges in Beijing, Shanghai, and Wuhan willingly accepted the public-sector jobs arranged for them by their universities. In part, new graduates complied because it was already obvious to them that the best jobs were in the public sector. In addition, few had the information or contacts outside the university to "shop" for better jobs (Changjiang

TABLE 3: Urban Population 1952-1962: Size and Annual Natural Growth Rates (ANGR)

	National ANGR Size		Guangzhou ANGR Size		Shanghai ANGR Size		Wuhan ANGR Size	
	%	Number (in millions)	%	Number (in millions)	%	Number (in millions)	%	Number (in millions)
1952	1.9	34.9	2.6	1.3	2.9	5.1	2.3	1.4
1957	2.8	54.1	3.8	1.7	3.9	6.1	3.5	2.1
1962	2.3	64.1	3.1	1.9	1.8	6.3	2.9	2.1

SOURCE: *Guangzhou sishi nian 1949-1988* (1989: 90); *Shanghai tongji nianjian 1992* (1992: 60, 80); *Wuhan sishi nian 1949-1989* (1989: 249, 251); *Zhongguo chengshi sishinian* (1990: 40, 118).

ribao, 15 July 1950: 4; 22 August 1950: 4; 25 August 1950: 4; 30 August 1950: 4).

Over the next two summers, the government extended the system of unified job assignment (*tongyi fenpei*) across the nation,⁶ and by 1953—the first year when all university students were post-1949 matriculants—the system was a standard routine of university life from which no graduate was exempt.⁷ Each department established a small group that reported to a university-level fenpei committee, and all major universities worked within a national framework whereby job assignments were sent down to the schools from the central government and provincial ministries. For local technical, finance, and normal colleges, the assignments were negotiated with municipal or regional employers through either the personnel bureau (*renshi chu*) or education, public health, or city government bureaus (*Zhongguo laodong renshi nianjin 1949-1987*, 1989: 855-56).

Some students did try to choose their own jobs or at least reject those to which they had been assigned. Universities responded with intensified political study for seniors. Students were reminded how much better off they were from pre-1949 graduates for whom graduation had meant unemployment. At the same time, they were informed that it was “forbidden” (*Renmin ribao*, 7 August 1952: 1) for someone to act according to personal wishes or preferences by refusing a job on the frontier or a position as a teacher. In this way, political education and mobilization became an integral part of the fenpei system to

guarantee that graduates "obediently followed" their instructions (Changjiang ribao, 13 July 1951: 4; Renmin ribao, 7 August 1952: 1).⁸

Ideological work and administrative experience, however, did not eliminate dissatisfaction. Engineers and scientists protested assignment to administrative jobs that had no relationship to their training (Renmin ribao, 22 May 1955, 25 May 1955, 27 April 1955; Guangming ribao, 29 May 1955). New employees reported that they were treated as the "private property of the office" or held hostage by their supervisors. Others complained that despite a promise that new hires could apply for reassignment after six months at their posts, it was virtually impossible to transfer after an initial assignment ("Can only enter, cannot exit"; *Zhi neng jin, bu neng chu*) (Guangming ribao, 29 May 1955: 1). Employers also complained that the system promoted overstaffing in the context of overall shortage because firms felt the necessity to hoard university graduates in anticipation of future need (Zhongguo laodong renshi nianjian 1949-1987, 1989: 878). According to Christopher Howe (1971), neither the publicized complaints of unhappy graduates nor the glowing reports of success in government publications reflected actual practice. Howe's study of Shanghai in the early 1950s led him to conclude that the system of unified job assignments existed only on paper and that because the demand for professionals so exceeded the supply, the government exercised no effective control over university graduates until 1957. My interviews with new graduates of the 1950s during the 1970s and 1980s, as well as documentary evidence on cities other than Shanghai, leads me to disagree with Howe's assessment. Rather, my data confirm the observation of Kenneth Lieberthal (1980: 182), whose study of Tianjin indicated that by 1952, "highly skilled people could no longer rely on personal connections to find employment after they had finished their training."

After the universalization of tongyi fenpei, some graduating students still relied on family connections to find posts, and others simply refused their assignments. Still, only a minority actually dared to reject the system. Few new graduates had more effective contacts in the fields for which they had trained than did their department and university fenpei committees. In addition, graduates of the early 1950s tended to be idealistic and patriotic, and in interviews that I have conducted with men and women of these cohorts, they stress their

enthusiasm to "serve the nation" regardless of where they were assigned. No doubt, equally important were the *san fan* and *wufan* (three and five "anti") campaigns that made clear that positions of authority and leadership in the PRC would only be open to those who worked within government monopolies and according to party policy (Lampton, 1986: 115-23; Changjiang ribao, 20 July 1952: 3).

Another element of political and administrative reform that facilitated the early routinization of the fenpei system was the policy to link university admissions to subsequent job assignments. Even though actual hiring patterns fluctuated from year to year in response to economic or political upheavals, ideologically the CCP did not waiver in its commitment to link student recruitment with national development plans. As middle-school students and their parents prepared for university entrance exams, they were explicitly told that recruiting students to higher education was equivalent to "cultivation of high and middle level cadre talent" (Changjiang ribao, 22 July 1952: 1). Graduating college students often chafed at the pressure to accept jobs in rural areas far from their homes or in factories rather than scientific research institutes (e.g., Renmin ribao, 7 August 1952: 1), but even before they entered college, students knew that universities would control their occupational futures.⁹ Such knowledge produced neither universal compliance nor satisfaction, but it did mean that students, their families, and college faculty all knew that admission to university meant employment as a state cadre and that occupational decisions were public, not private, choices.

Higher education reforms in 1953 reinforced the ability of schools to decide students' careers (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jiaoyu dashiji 1949-1952, 1983: 72-90). In May 1953, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) announced extensive regulations to standardize rules for switching majors, quitting school, or taking leave. First implemented at Shanghai's Huadong College, they henceforth became national practice. In September, curricula were regularized, and most private schools became public institutions. At the same time, the MOHE announced that most colleges would be reorganized into more specialized institutions. By October 1953, the initial post-1949 reform of higher education was complete. Nationwide, 182 institutions were authorized to give college diplomas. Of these, only 14 were

to be comprehensive universities offering degrees in humanities and sciences.¹⁰ The rest were to have specific vocational curricula, thereby further tightening the link between placement in college and occupational future. In such an environment, it should come as no surprise that the government press equated the administrative practices of *tongyi fenpei* with parallel efforts to create an effective "monopoly of roof tiles" in construction work (*Changjiang ribao*, 10 July 1953: 2). Like scarce bricks, scarce doctors, engineers, and teachers were to be distributed by a rational state plan, not by personal preferences or the capitalist code of supply and demand.

Middle-level managers. For middle-level managers, 1950 also marked a rupture with the past.¹¹ As with the new college graduates, the CCP's goal was to implement a policy of "planned allocation" (*you jihua de tiaopei banfa*) as quickly as possible. And as in the universities, the process relied on political screening and on-the-job political mobilization. In part, this was a necessity imposed by the need of the new regime to rely initially on former employees of Nationalist organizations to carry out day-to-day administration.¹² In part, party control was necessary to maintain the vanguard position claimed by the CCP. Between 1950 and 1953, the frequency of newspaper advertisements to recruit managerial staff declined, and by 1954, they had disappeared (e.g., *Changjiang ribao*, November 1949 to July 1957). Even as early as November 1949, the CCP party-state was supervising and vetting managerial recruitment by requiring all applicants to present letters of introduction from government offices at the district level or above, and by early 1951, it was routine to require applicants to verify their class backgrounds (*Changjiang ribao*, 12 July 1951: 6).

Managers themselves were also constrained in terms of their ability to hire and assign subordinate staff (*Changjiang ribao*, 12 August 1951: 1). In theory, a private labor market for manual workers existed well into 1955. However, between 1951 and 1952, the CCP imposed administrative constraints on managers in public as well as in private firms. In May 1951, the National Labor Ministry established comprehensive guidelines for all new hiring. By October 1952, while still permitting the urban unemployed to seek jobs wherever they could on

their own, the National Labor Ministry prohibited employers from hiring any staff from outside their city (*Zhongguo laodong renshijian* 1949-1987, 1989: 187; Solinger, 1999: 38-39).

PROMOTION OF PROFESSIONALS AND MANAGERS

The later years of the Nationalist regime and the early years of the PRC were turbulent decades in which it was impossible for individuals to realize professional or managerial careers in an orderly fashion. The sources of disorder and the repertoire of responses to disruption, however, were so different before and after 1949 that the establishment of the PRC marks a clear turning point for the upper middle class. Under the Nationalists, the exigencies of war created the greatest uncertainty, and yet during the Japanese and civil wars, the urban economy continued to offer a range of occupational scenarios. A physician could work for the government, but he or she could also set up private practice, work for a charity organization, or leave medicine entirely and work as a journalist, teacher, or private entrepreneur. Individuals juggled multiple roles and frequently moved between occupations or employers to maximize earnings or security. If family resources permitted, an educated urbanite might, as did the subjects of Po-shek Fu's (1993: 37-41) study of Shanghai between 1937 and 1945, retreat into hedonistic pleasure when unable to prosper in his or her career.

Under the CCP, occupational derailments were quite different. Political upheaval more directly sabotaged professional advancement, and the elimination of the private sector forced educated professionals and managers into narrower occupational channels. Without an option to try entrepreneurship or employment outside of state organs or simply to resign and seek solitude at home, the urban upper middle class of the 1950s confronted a qualitatively different world than their peers of the 1930s and 1940s.

Published sources do not specify precisely when the prohibition against voluntary resignation began, but as early as 1952, one finds evidence of the constraint in editorial columns of the regional press. For example, during the summer of 1952, there were several letters from young cadres and teachers who wished to change jobs or to

resign to go back to school. The answers to their queries were uniform: you are needed at your current post, and only with the permission of your superior can you resign (Changjiang ribao, 22 July 1952: 1; 2 August 1952: 3). In May 1954, the personnel practices of the first years of "transition" were codified into a state council directive. Drafted primarily to protect manual workers, the directive served just as effectively to restrict movement by managers and professionals. Henceforth, all requests for a transfer or resignation required system (*xitong*) approval as well approval from immediate superiors (Zhongguo laodong renshi nianjian 1949-1987, 1989: 1639-40). Should an employee defy the regulations, employers could and did punish the ambitious or dissatisfied individual (Howe, 1971: 112). Other indications of the degree of constraint—either on an individual's initiative or that of the employer—were the low rates of job mobility among skilled technicians as well as charges by the official press that managers in established enterprises who refused to release skilled labor had delayed the opening of new production facilities, thereby seriously slowing the pace of economic growth.¹³

These restrictions, of course, did not mean that once assigned to a plant or office, professional-managerial staff never moved. On the contrary, labor histories of those working during the 1950s reveal that this stratum was more mobile than manual or routine white-collar employees.¹⁴ However, nearly all the professionals and managers I interviewed about their job transfers during the 1950s said that transfers for professional advancement were initiated by superiors, not by the individuals themselves. Only when they were able to claim some special family or health need were they able to initiate a resignation.

The more than 1,000 occupational histories I gathered among Shanghai and Wuhan residents confirm the strong bureaucratic controls over managerial and professional careers in the early 1950s. For example, among fifteen Shanghai male college graduates employed between 1950 and 1957, six changed jobs before 1958. None, however, claimed (in 1990 interviews) that they resigned to advance their careers. Instead, they told me that they had changed jobs because another unit in their *xitong* sought a particular skill they possessed. Equally telling was that half of these men were southerners working in North China who were reassigned to Shanghai for their health.

Among the non-college-educated managers, there was even less mobility between enterprises and locales. In my Shanghai sample, only three male managers out of twenty changed units during the 1950s. Instead, most rose to managerial positions from within the very factory where they had once been manual workers or apprentices. In my Wuhan sample, the pattern was the same if they had begun their careers in industry. Among these men, only one of nine left their first factory before retirement. On the other hand, non-college-educated managers working in government or party organizations changed employers more frequently. In fact, mobility for government employees required that they move from one unit to another. All nine of these men changed jobs at least once before 1958.¹⁵

HOW DYNAMICS OF CLASS CLOSURE CHANGED AFTER 1949

Because measurement of class reproduction requires comparison of parent-child occupational histories before and after 1949, a focus on events in the 1950s cannot speak definitively to the issue of how CCP policies altered precommunist patterns of class closure. However, examining changes in education, recruitment, and promotion of professionals and managers in the early 1950s allows us to see how CCP policies established a new dynamic of social stratification and class closure.

Before 1950, competitive scholarships allowed a few impoverished but brilliant students to complete secondary school, and many college students relied on government stipends rather than their parents. Overall, however, university students in China came from the wealthier minority. To illustrate this, of all the eminent individuals listed in Howard Boorman's (1967) *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China* born between 1895 and 1915, for whom fathers' occupations were listed ($N = 38$), not a single college graduate had a father who was a manual laborer, and only two came from impoverished rural families. Equally telling was the academic background of leaders who were children of the manual laborers or poor peasants. These men had not graduated from Chinese universities but had either studied overseas or entered the military in their early teens. To the extent that

biographies of a few famous men identify which social strata used university education as the pathway to leadership or fame, it appears that Republican-era universities were used primarily by men with ties to the rural gentry and urban merchants.

After 1949, the CCP moved quickly to change this pattern and to recruit children of the poor into universities. As early as July 1950, Hubei Normal College offered tuition plus living stipends to 75% of entrants. By 1952, the government had eliminated tuition payments by individual students and granted the majority a basic living stipend (Changjiang ribao, 22 July 1950: 6; 12 July 1952: 4). Students still needed above-average family resources to remain in secondary school long enough to take the university entrance exams, but even in the first years after 1949, it was clear that the new state was already recruiting students from among more social strata. Thus, the social class background of the professional and managerial husbands among the Shanghai and Wuhan families I interviewed includes a broad range. Among the sixteen who held professional jobs in the 1950s, two came from peasant families, six from urban working-class background, four had fathers who were shopkeepers, two came from landlord families, one had a father working in Hong Kong, and only one, a physician, had a father who was himself a professional.

Among those with managerial posts, there is even greater social openness. Of the 45 for whom I have information on their own fathers' work status, 18 fathers farmed the land, 3 were rural artisans, 10 were urban manual workers, and 9 were shopkeepers or clerks. Only 3 fathers were professionals, and only 2 had lived off land rents before 1949.

By 1953, recruitment into university was tied explicitly to personnel policies of the First Five Year Plan. Rapid routinization of unified allocation for college graduates allowed CCP officials to control the linkage between college education and career "choice" (Changjiang ribao, 7 July 1953: 4). At the same time, bureaucratic and political policies exerted greater influence on the timing of entry, selection of major, and initial job. For example, new CCP policies prohibited those who were admitted to college in 1952 but had not entered that year from retaking entrance exams in 1953 (Changjiang ribao, 27 July 1953: 3). Individuals who had once been dismissed from college or middle school could be denied readmission, and in some cities, they

were even prohibited from applying to other schools (Changjiang ribao, 27 July 1953: 3). Students wishing to shift majors had to make special appeals to the Education Bureau, and if they were enrolled in much-needed fields such as teaching or industrial engineering, such requests were denied (Changjiang ribao, 5 August 1953: 3). Already employed individuals were free to register for university entrance exams if they met the age and educational standards, but they could only accept an offer of admission and enter the university if their employer gave them formal approval to resign (Changjiang ribao, 27 July 1953: 3).

Although the institutional transition to socialism was not complete before 1956, by 1952 the diminished role and legitimacy of the market was obvious.¹⁶ Private-sector employment could not offer as good a future as the public sector, and membership in the CCP would be necessary for most positions of any authority.¹⁷ Individual wealth could no longer establish an individual in a supervisory or professional position either by buying a place in college or by creating a private firm or professional practice. Prestige, power, and material comfort henceforth would go to those who succeeded within the public sector as state cadres.

Another major shift that radically departed from pre-1949 practice and altered the social mobility patterns was the CCP migration policy (Solinger, 1999). Prior to 1949, the Chinese urban population was subject to intense surveillance. Household membership was posted at each doorway, and residents carried identity cards that were tied to the rationing system. Compared to what the CCP instituted during the 1950s, however, the Nationalist efforts to control the urban population were ineffective. In part, this was because the CCP registration system covered rural as well as urban areas and therefore monitored and controlled movement in and out of cities. And in part, this was because the CCP tightly linked household registration with food rationing. Rural residents could get work in the cities, but without official approval, they would lead a marginal existence, and their children could never enter the mainstream of urban society.

To understand why this system of household registration decisively shaped social class reproduction, it is useful to review the evolution of this system.¹⁸ In the two years after October 1949, little was done to restrict movement either from villages to cities or between cities.

Article 5 of the Common Program issued in September 1949 by the Consultative Conference guaranteed freedom of migration, and millions of people relocated in an effort to find steady work or better accommodations. Movement became somewhat more difficult after Public Security Bureau regulations governing the urban population were issued in July 1951 (*Changjiang ribao*, July 1951: 4). Henceforth, all urban residents were to notify the local public security office of any change of residence. Thus, in some ways, 1951 marks the first significant step toward systematic control over the size and distribution of the urban population.¹⁹ In practice, however, regulations issued before 1958 did little to stem the flow of migration from the countryside because rural officials were eager to rid themselves of surplus labor, and urban employers needed cheap manpower. As a result, over the decade of the 1950s, the urban population grew more from in-migration from the countryside than by natural increase.²⁰ As others have noted, it was only after the Great Leap Forward collapsed and famine threatened that the official restrictions on migration and household registration really took effect (e.g., Howe, 1971: 65-66).

Although the new directives seem to have had little immediate effect halting migration, they did have a profound effect on the character of urban society and the ways in which a rural-born child could advance occupationally. As early as 1951 with the issuance of the Labor Insurance Regulations (LIR) for full-time employees in state industrial enterprises, it became clear that urban Chinese who found LIR-protected jobs would be privileged. They would receive free medical care, lifetime pensions, and disability pay. Subsequently, in 1955, this same group began receiving subsidized public housing and favorable access to day care and schools for their children. Thus, even though the state directives of the early 1950s did not stop the "blind flow" of rural residents into cities, they did—unlike Nationalist regulations—exclude the rural majority from directly competing with urban residents.

Before 1949, rural migrants could use a job as a temporary day laborer or peddler as stepping stones into commercial or industrial work and as a strategy to get a child into secondary school or job as a clerk. In contrast, rural migrants coming after 1951, especially those who came after 1954, found it far more difficult to change their occupational class for themselves or their children. They and their family

members could temporarily enjoy some of the financial rewards of city work, but they could not establish themselves permanently and rise up the urban hierarchy. Just as the elimination of private employment narrowed the gate for alternate pathways to material security or social influence for the professional and managerial stratum, CCP migration and registration restrictions constrained the flow of talent into those ranks. By segregating rural and urban citizens, the CCP eliminated competition from rural residents and therefore fundamentally altered the social consequences of place of birth.

Restrictions on domestic migration also affected the world of the urban middle classes in ways that have no obvious parallel in the Nationalist era. Before 1949, urban professionals and administrators had multiple ties to the countryside. Rural rents funded urban careers, and profits from the city could be invested in rural land. Men living in the city returned to the countryside to marry, and children were sent to stay with rural grandparents. Country residence also provided an escape where politically or financially ruined members of the urban middle class could recuperate, regroup, or simply survive. During the 1950s, the ever tighter controls over domestic migration and the dramatically different life chances between those who ate "state grain" and worked in state enterprises and those who fed themselves and worked in rural collectives eliminated the unregulated flow of people and resources between rural and urban areas. Millions of educated urban residents would periodically be "sent down" to the villages, but few returned to work or invest in their native place, and fewer still returned by choice. After 1949, returning to the countryside became a punishment by the party-state, and the urban middle classes were forced to conform to the script the CCP wrote for them.

THE UPPER MIDDLE CLASS AND THE CHINESE PARTY-STATE

In terms of developmental ideology, there are surprising similarities between the Nationalist regime of the 1940s and the Communist party-state of the 1950s. Trends in per capita income over the first eight decades of the twentieth century show that 1949 does not mark the most critical turning point in recent Chinese economic history.

CCP policy and socialist institutions evolved substantially after 1949. Moreover, had there not been a Korean War or had different individuals gained leadership within the CCP in 1956, continuity rather than rupture might have characterized the 1950s. But in fact, events on the international and domestic scenes worked against gradual reforms or engagement with the non-Soviet world, and CCP leaders moved decisively to create an urban society distinct from that of the Nationalist era.

Most fundamental for the life chances of the urban middle class were the CCP decisions to monopolize employment of the urban-educated strata, eliminate private ownership, and outlaw any organizational activity not controlled by the party. Critical to the rise of an upper middle class in Europe was the security of new wealth that could not be confiscated by the nobility or the state (Earle, 1989). Similarly, in late imperial China, it was independence from the court that nurtured new urban elites. Even if ultimately the weakness of the state prevented this emergent bourgeoisie from developing into a significant stratum on a national level, the ability to secure resources independent of the state and to engage in associational activity funded by private wealth was critical to the limited success it did achieve (Bergère, 1989). After 1949, CCP leaders acted quickly and deliberately to monopolize both economic and social capital. As a result, the rupture with the past was especially swift and complete for the urban professionals and managers.

Within weeks of the establishment of the PRC, the party-state defined the rules for occupational advancement and monopolized the venues for professional activity to a far greater extent than had the Guomindang. During the 1930s and 1940s, professional careers had been precarious, and GMD leaders had consistently tried to eradicate nonparty authority. However, despite authoritarian goals, they were not in an overtly adversarial relationship to those who sold their skills directly to customers or those who moved between private and public practice. Moreover, vast stretches of the nation were simply outside their control. Professionals who had a scarce skill could establish practices and accumulate some personal wealth. They also could transform one form of capital into another. Money made in Wuhan or Shanghai could be used to buy land in any city, in one province or several. Expertise as a draftsman, accountant, physician, or civil engineer could be sold as private tuition or as a personal service. After 1949,

there was neither the same “fungibility” of different forms of capital nor the same relative freedom to acquire personal caches of social and symbolic capital. The urban middle class almost immediately became a stratum of salaried civil servants who needed to be obedient to CCP superiors and were not encouraged to develop horizontal ties to nonparty peers. In the initial years of transition and then during the Korean War, all those with advanced education or industrial skills were needed for national mobilization. Market exchange was quickly criminalized, and the initial class label of “free professional” (*ziyou zhiyezhe*) was replaced by the far more inclusive label of ordinary state cadre (*yiban ganbu* or *zhiye*).

After 1949, the urban middle classes lost private resources and physical mobility; they also lost the ability to accumulate the social and symbolic capitals that define and defend distinctive class boundaries.²¹ In wartime Sichuan under the GMD or in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation, professionals congregated together and established associations to exchange information about job prospects or simply maintain friendships. Alumni groups and religious organizations survived, providing graduates of the same school or parishioners of the same faith critical social linkages when the larger urban society was chaotic. The communists were more energetic and determined than the Nationalists in eliminating any competition from civic society, and they moved quickly to eliminate nonstate organizations. As a result, citizens from all strata lost the potential to build personal, unofficial networks of confidants or peers, but the middle class experienced a relatively greater loss because they had previously enjoyed more unregulated leisure. For example, university students frequently considered this associational life their first curriculum, and after graduation, they built on these friendships and contacts in their public as well as private life. After 1949, the CCP deliberately curbed such independent associations, channeling the energies of university students and state cadres into official organizations sponsored by the CCP. Unable to establish professional organizations or even recreational clubs outside of the party-state, middle-class professionals and managers found it difficult—even impossible—to build linkages across the boundaries of their work units.

With the expansion of public housing and the allocation of urban apartments through the workplace, it became more difficult to

maintain friendship networks with those not at the same enterprise than had been the case under the GMD. Once the CCP launched campaigns of class struggle that used style of dress or home furnishings as evidence of bourgeois "crimes," urban residents could not even risk displaying symbolic capital or distinctive patterns of consumption. For well-educated professionals and managers, the prudent reaction was to merge with the proletariat, adopting the plainest, most utilitarian lifestyle possible. During the Cultural Revolution, this tendency reached its most extreme manifestation, but as early as the sanfan and wufan campaigns of the early 1950s, it was clear that cultivating a distinctive lifestyle made a family vulnerable to censure rather than signaling membership in a desirable social class. Without these opportunities to accumulate and display cultural refinement and social networks that previous regimes had left relatively unrestricted, the professional and managerial stratum lost important resources with which to define and reproduce themselves socially.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the twentieth century, no Chinese regime fostered an independent middle class, and from this perspective, 1949 need not have represented the rupture that most Chinese and non-Chinese scholars have assumed. Yet when the years immediately surrounding 1949 are reviewed in terms of the experience of urban professionals and managers—the social stratum that in some ways is most critical to economic development and the emergence of a modern state and civil society—one can make a case for rupture. Never fully economically or politically independent under the GMD, after 1949, this social stratum became fundamentally dependent on the party-state in every sphere of life. Under previous twentieth-century regimes, there had been more physical and social space where such professionals and managers could escape state control and supervision, but during the early 1950s, the new party-state systematically worked to dominate virtually every dimension of life. A potentially multifaceted, semi-independent urban middle class was reduced to a politically subordinate stratum of the civil service, systematically denied the irregular and unsupervised social spheres that had earlier served as the

incubators of political and intellectual diversity and heterodoxy. For this segment of the population then, 1949 marked a critical departure from social and economic practices of the preceding decades.

NOTES

1. Between 1987 and 1990, I gathered more than 1,000 occupational histories from 200 Shanghai and Wuhan households. In 1991 and 1992, I focused on the local press accounts of the early transition to socialism in these two cities to see whether the pattern and pacing of the socialist transformation differed from that recorded in the national press and statistics and whether there was also significant regional difference. See Davis (1990, 1992) for more on these materials.

2. See the group of essays first published in 1955 by Wu Jiang, Hu Xianwu, and Fan Baichuan (republished in *Jindai zhongguo zichan jieji yanjiu*, 1983: 98-115, 180-206, 207-16). Also see Mao Tse-tung (1977: 103).

3. A front-page *New York Times* article (10 March 1994) identified anyone with a median income as a member of the middle class. For sociologists Reginald Farley and William Frey (1994: 23-46), it is more specifically those with incomes twice that of the poverty level.

4. See, for example, Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao's (1993: 1-22) review of those used by Kim Yong-mo, Hagen Koo, and Jia-you Sheu.

5. This generally means I am discussing those between ranks 13 and 18.

6. See *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jiaoyu dashiji 1949-1952* (1983: items 5133, 5201, 5218, 5229), *Renmin ribao* (7 August 1952: 1), and *Changjiang ribao* (3 July 1951: 5; 13 July 1951: 4; 14 July 1951: 4; 20 July 1952: 3).

7. In August 1953, 34,480 students, a number slightly in excess of the number admitted in 1950, were assigned jobs via planned distribution (*tongchou fenpei*) (*Zhongguo renmin gongheguo jiaoyu dashiji 1949-1952*, 1983).

8. This concern reached the very top of the government. In August 1950, Mao Zedong (1987: I/463) sent a short note to Zhou Enlai asking him to see that the responsible people take care of three Qinghua graduates who had refused their assignments. Thanks to Shaoguang Wang for bringing this restricted circulation publication to my attention.

9. A classic piece of propaganda in the summer of 1952—as upper middle school students waited for the results of university entrance exams—featured a brilliant young mathematician in Wuhan wholeheartedly participating in the “two preparations” to accept whatever the state provides—in his case, either a slot in an engineering college that is everyone’s first choice or a slot in a provincial normal college that is everyone’s last choice (*Changjiang ribao*, 26 July 1952: 3).

10. These were People’s University, Beijing University, Nankai University, Fudan University, Nanjing University, Shandong University, Xiamen University, Wuhan University, Zhongshan University, Sichuan University, Yunnan University, Xibei University, and Lanzhou University.

11. In December 1950, there were 1.75 million state cadres at all levels, of whom only 180,000 had had college-level education. Nearly half had been recruited since October (*Zhongguo laodong renshi nianjian 1949-1987*, 1989: 872-79).

12. An estimated 400,000 former employees of Nationalist state organizations were employed by the PRC state in 1950 (*Zhongguo laodong renshi nianjian 1949-1987*, 1989: 872).

13. For analysis of problems with transfer of skilled employees, see *China News Analysis* (12 August 1955: 1).

14. Studies of Shanghai labor movement between December 1953 and May 1955 and of national press reports in *Renmin ribao* also confirm a higher rate of mobility among the most skilled (*China News Analysis*, 12 August 1955: 1).

15. For women in my sample who worked in the 1950s, there were too few cases to generalize. Only 4% ($n = 8$) attended college before entering the workforce, and none held a job with managerial duties during the 1950s. Nor was there a single section chief or factory head among those women who began in worker ranks. Instead, the highest positions women held ($n = 5$) were those of neighborhood committee head or primary school party secretary of a primary school.

16. A good illustration of the process and the consequences in one particular market is found in Watson, Findlay, and Yintang (1989).

17. In 1952, *Renmin ribao* (7 August 1952: 1) carried an article describing a national problem of university-trained engineers resisting assignments to private firms on the grounds that such positions offered no future.

18. Except where noted, my chronology and description of the evolution of the household registration system draw from Cheng and Selden (1994).

19. Controls were imposed even earlier on some urban residents. For example, in the summer of 1950, all people living on boats in Wuhan were to register with the municipal Public Security Bureau, those permanently moored were to report to one office, and those who moved about had to report to another (*Changjiang ribao*, 9 August 1950: 3).

20. The net rate for 1951 to 1960 was 30/1,000 into the city, as opposed to 18/1,000 out of the cities for 1961 to 1965 (Lavelly, Lee, and Feng, 1990: 814).

21. In both England and the United States, shared patterns of residential living and domestic consumption were important means by which the middle class defined themselves in contrast to both upper and lower strata. Similar arguments have also been made about the strategies of the new middle class in contemporary United Kingdom (Blurain, 1989; Davidoff and Hall, 1987; Savage et al., 1992).

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