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Social Mobility

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Many countries are interested in improved social mobility for two quite different but related reasons. First, the perception of high social mobility, concretely meaning that children can do much better in their life path than their parents did, stimulates imagination and effort by both parents and children. It replaces resignation or despair with hope. Second, high social mobility permits the emergence and development of unusual talent, which can be found in any stratum of society, that otherwise would be buried in social stasis and inertia. Every society has prodigies among the poor and the disadvantaged, whose talents too often go unrecognized and undeveloped.

China's communist revolution was ideologically designed and expected to raise social mobility for ordinary peasants, by taking land from hereditary landlords and distributing it to tenant farmers. Along with an early emphasis on rural education, the redistribution was expected to give them and their children a better chance in life.

Did it succeed? A new book by Gregory Clark and his associates, *The Son Also Rises*, addresses that question quantitatively for nine different countries. The answer for China is mixed: there has been some increase in social mobility recently compared with the late Qing dynasty and the KMT-dominated China of the 1920s, but much less than one might have hoped or expected.

How should one measure social mobility, especially over several generations or even longer periods? And how does one compare social mobility across countries? Clark's approach is to identify unusual surnames in an elite part of a country's population, and then to trace these names over generations to discover how much they retain their high social status. In China's case the basis for this approach is to identify fifteen unusual surnames among those who passed the examination (*jinshi*) to become high officials in the 19th century Qing period. Lists of those who passed the examination go back at least to 1820. Lists of senior officials in the Republican government (1912-49) are also available, as are professors currently at leading universities, board members of corporations, and senior government officials. Thus unusual surnames in these lists can be traced for nearly two centuries, roughly six generations. More recently, we also have lists of the students of the leading universities in China.

The fifteen surnames are rare, accounting for only 0.4 percent of the 9363 men who passed the national examination between 1820 and 1905. But they were eight times rarer among the total population, and four times rarer among the population of the lower Yangzi region, from which most of them came. These names were disproportionately represented among Republican Chinese officials over the period 1912-1949, among professors at the ten leading universities in 2012, among Chinese corporate board members in 2006, and (most surprisingly) among senior Chinese officials in 2010,

although their over-representation declined over time. They were also over represented among university graduates in a comprehensive household registration in 2008: 4.1 percent of those with the rare surnames held university degrees, compared with 2.6 percent of the general population.

What does this information imply about inter-generational social mobility? Clark's analysis suggests that high status (as measured above) decays at the rate of about 20 percent per generation, with the exact rate depending on which particular measure is used. In other words, the son of a high status father has roughly an 80 percent chance of also being high status. On one of Clark's measures, student enrollment in Nanjing University, this chance dropped to about two-thirds, suggesting some increase in social mobility. Over time, high status families revert to the average; but it takes many generations to do so.

Perhaps surprisingly, this slow reversion to the mean – put another way, the high persistence of elite status – is roughly similar across most of the societies that Clark and his collaborators examine: Chile, England, Japan, South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, and the United States. The major exception is India, where social mobility is notably lower, presumably due to the continuing influence of the Hindu caste system, which very strongly restricts occupational mobility. Of course, the definition of “elite” varies from country to country, as does the choice of unusual surnames, but focuses on wealth at death, education, and high status occupations, such as physicians, for which lists are available. In late 20th century Britain and Sweden, two countries that as a matter of policy encouraged higher social mobility, the inter-generational coefficients vary between 0.7 and 0.8. Similarly for the USA, often called a “land of opportunity,” where they are slightly higher than in Britain and Sweden. Students at leading universities in Britain and Sweden show a lower coefficient of about two-thirds, as in China.

Clark's similar results across a broad range of societies, from staid England through socialist Sweden to revolutionary China, suggest to him that certain families have natural talents, and that these talents are passed from generation to generation with only slow reversion to average. Clark himself is inclined to believe these talents are genetic in origin, drawing on evidence from studies of identical twins that have been separated at a young age and raised by different foster parents. But his results do not actually establish a genetic connection; the “talents” could be conveyed to each new generation by well nurturing parents, and perhaps especially in China by extensive use of *guanxi*, which is not entirely absent in other countries as well.