

# Class and Gender



# Class and Gender:

## *Social Stratification of Women in Contemporary Urban China*

By

Yao Tang

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## PREFACE

The Chinese social structure underwent enormous change during the “socio-economic transition period” from 1978 to the present day with the reform and rapid growth of the economy. These changes have aroused huge interest among scholars and researchers. It is agreed that the economic restructuring—from a centrally-planned economy to a market-oriented economy, in conjunction with the retreat of the state administrative sphere from the labour market, has gradually transformed the mechanisms of resource allocation. The changes have led to large-scale changes in social stratification. The enlarging gaps between different social groups have led to an escalation in tensions between the higher and lower social strata. Ever more severe social problems will occur if this trend in polarization increases.

In addition to the transformation of the social structure, the situation of Chinese women has also changed. Contemporary Chinese women are in a quite different position from their “pre-communist,” “traditional” counterparts. Over the past several decades, more equalitarian policies have made a great deal of difference, not only to women’s own self-identification, but also to their social milieu. Moreover, women are also in a different position from where they were before the economic reforms, when China was a centrally-planned economy. According to Meng (2000), the female employment rate has gradually declined since the economic reforms began. This phenomenon has heralded further changes in the social status and conditions of Chinese women.

These social transformations and social changes between the genders have provided an unusual opportunity for scholars and researchers who are interested in social change and social differentiation, and I am no exception. In this book, I look into the social structure of contemporary China, how resources are distributed among the different social strata, and how the social strata have transformed with economic reforms and development. In addition, I also examine the current socio-economic circumstances of Chinese women, especially since many female workers were laid off (*xiagang*) by state owned enterprises (SOEs) and collectively owned enterprises (COEs) during the “industrial restructuring.” In confronting an ever more competitive market environment, has the situation of women degraded or progressed? Do all women face a similar

situation, or are there discrepancies that exist amongst them? What are the factors contributing to these divisions?

These questions can be summed up as the issues of class and gender, which are part of this book title. Why did I put the two issues of class and gender together? This is because class and gender are highly-related topics and the connections between the two can be established from various standpoints. For example, class relationships express a discourse of inequality and hierarchy, which is also the basis of research on gender issues (Skeggs 1997). The formation of social class can be seen as a process of socialisation in which resources are allocated and a corresponding hierarchical social position and status are produced (Bourdieu 1984; Fiske 2013). Gender issues and gender inequality are constructed in similar ways. Gender roles are regarded as being formed by various socialising agents (Eagly 2013). Through the socialisation process, resources are allocated discrepantly thus resulting in gender inequalities.

Additionally, linking gender and social class together is also important for an understanding of the social reality in China. Gender issues in China have never been purely an issue of a relationship between the two genders. On the contrary, these issues have always been connected with societal transformation and development, and even national emancipation (Moghadam 1992). This issue is apparent from a historical overview of the development of women in China. Similarly, social change cannot be fully understood without taking into account the situation of Chinese women. Changes in women's socio-economic position are not only a significant component of societal transformation, but they also impact on it. These combined issues can be described as "Chinese women in an era of Chinese social transformation" or "Chinese social stratification and the transformation of women." These questions are valuable because they highlight key problems which currently face China.

Most importantly, the issue of "class and gender" poses a methodological problem, which is how to measure social stratification, especially gender social stratification. On the one hand, there are vertical and horizontal segregations between the genders in the labour market, thus there are disparities in social stratification between men and women. On the other hand, the impact of the spouses on the individuals in terms of social stratification cannot be denied. This issue should be studied, especially in households where cross-class marriage has occurred. This methodological issue is discussed in great depth in this book and eventually resolved by creating a direct and indirect "social class index."

Although this book adopts some specific quantitative methods to analyse social stratification and gender issues, you do not need an advanced statistical background to read it. I hope readers of this book can obtain a comprehensive understanding of the current Chinese social structure, and how it has transformed, as well as its influence on gender differentiation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Finally, I would like to thank my family for their love and understanding. They are the source of my motivation to finish this study and their selfless love let me know that any time I needed it there was a warm home waiting for me.

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1949 Establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC).
- 1956 Completion of the "Socialist Transformation".
- 1966 Beginning of a decade of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution".
- 1978 The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the beginning of the "economic reforms" and the "opening up to outside world".
- 1989 "Tiananmen Square Turmoil" broke out.
- 1992 Deng Xiaoping's "Southern Tour"—reaffirms commitment to policies of reform and opening up.
- 1994 "New Labour Law" was passed sanctioning the right of employers to dismiss worker.
- 1995 Cancellation of university students' job allocation and the beginning of mutual-choice between graduates and employers.
- 1997 Reconstruction of the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) causes unemployment problems in urban China.
- 1999 Beginning of the expansion of student enrolment in universities and colleges.
- 2002 Hu Jintao is elected as general secretary of the Central Committee of the CCP in the First Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee of the CCP. He puts forward the Concepts of "Scientific Development" and "Harmonious Society."
- 2007 The First Plenary Session of the Seventeenth Central Committee of the CCP. Hu Jintao serves the consecutive term as general secretary of the Central Committee of the CCP.
- 2012 The First Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee of the CCP. Xi Jinping is elected as general secretary of the Central Committee of the CCP.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADB:	Asian Development Bank
CAS:	Chinese Academy of Sciences
CASS:	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CCP:	Chinese Communist Party
CFPS:	China Family Panel Studies
CGSS:	Chinese General Social Survey
CHFS:	Chinese Household Finance Survey
CHIP:	Chinese Household Income Project
COE:	Collectively Owned Enterprise
CPPCC:	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
EGP:	Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero
FA:	Factor Analysis
GCI:	Global Competitiveness Index
ICPSR:	Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research
ISSS:	Institute of Social Science Survey
MLSSC:	Ministry of Labour and Social Security of China
NBSC:	National Bureau of Statistics of China
NPC:	National People's Congress
PRC:	People's Republic of China
PCA:	Principal Component Analysis
RIF:	Recentred Influence Function
SCI:	Social Class Index
SOC:	Standard Occupational Classification
SOE:	State Owned Enterprise
UQR:	Unconditional Quantile Regression





# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### **1.1 Motivation for the Study: A Focus on Class and Gender**

During the “socio-economic transition period,” from 1978 to the present day, China followed the policies of “economic reform” and “opening up to the outside world” (Nolan 2005: 20). With the reform and rapid growth of the economy, the Chinese social structure has undergone enormous change. These changes continue to interest scholars and researchers, not only of China, but also the rest of the world. As Bian (2002) suggests, the economic development and consequent large-scale social transformations have provided an unusual opportunity for study by researchers who are interested in social change and social differentiation.

During this “transition period,” one of the most significant changes was the economic restructuring—from a centrally-planned economy to a market-oriented economy—where the market began to play an increasingly important role in resource distribution and economic development (Oi 1995). This change, in conjunction with the retreat of the state administrative sphere from the labour market, has gradually transformed the mechanisms of resource allocation and led to changes in social stratification (Wu 2004). The enlarging gaps between different social groups have led to an escalation in tensions between the higher and lower social strata (Whyte 2010). Evermore severe social problems will occur if this trend in polarization increases. What is the social structure of contemporary China? How are resources distributed among the different social strata? How have the social strata transformed with the economic reforms?

In addition to the transformation of the social structure, the situation of Chinese women has also changed. Contemporary Chinese women are in a quite different position from their pre-communist “traditional” counterparts. Over the past several decades, more equalitarian policies towards the genders have made a great deal of difference, not only to their own self-identification of women, but also to their social milieu. Moreover, women are also in a different position from where they were before the

economic reforms, when China was a centrally-planned economy. According to Meng (2000), the female employment rate has gradually declined since the economic reforms began. This phenomenon has heralded further changes in women's social status and conditions.

Therefore, the current socio-economic circumstances of women have come into question again, especially since many female workers were laid off (*xiagang*) by state owned enterprises (SOEs) and collectively owned enterprises (COEs) during the "industrial restructuring" (Chen 1991: 345). In confronting a more and more competitive market environment, has the situation of women degraded or progressed? Do all women face a similar situation or are there discrepancies that exist amongst them? What are the factors contributing to these divisions? These questions are valuable because they highlight key problems which currently face China. Moreover, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current Chinese social structure and its influence on gender differentiation, proper measures to study the social stratification and the gender issues of China are most important. A discussion of these methods is the focus of my research.

As discussed, Chinese society has experienced enormous social transformation and alongside these changes, the socio-economic status of women has also altered. Why put these two issues of class and gender together? This is because class and gender are highly-related topics and the connections between the two can be established from various standpoints. Firstly, class relationships express a discourse of inequality and hierarchy, which is also the basis of research on gender issues (Skeggs 1997). For example, research on gender issues emphasises "gender inequality" and has tried to explore the reasons behind patriarchy (*ibid*). Secondly, the formation of social class can be seen as a process of socialisation in which resources are allocated and a corresponding hierarchical social position and status are produced (Bourdieu 1984; Fiske 2013). Gender issues and gender inequality are constructed in similar ways. Gender roles are regarded as being formed by various socialising agents (Eagly 2013). Through the socialisation process, resources are allocated discrepantly thus resulting in gender inequalities.

Thirdly and most importantly, "class and gender" pose a methodological problem, which is how to measure social stratification, especially gender social stratification (Marshall, Newby, Rose and Vogler 2012). On the one hand, classical social stratification regards all members of the household as having the same social status and uses a husband's social stratification as a substitute for his wife's. This method has produced many problems, especially with the labour market participation of women. This method

eschews vertical and horizontal segregation<sup>1</sup> between genders in the labour market and covers cross-class marriage in households (Blackburn and Jarman 2006; Roberts 2011). On the other hand, the method which studies social stratification from an individual perspective theoretically denies the impact of the husband on his spouse in terms of social stratification. However, this impact exists in reality (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). The impact of the spouse and how the spouse impacts on the partner's social stratification should be studied in researching gender social stratification. This methodological issue is reflected in the debates on class and gender, discussed in greater depth in later sections and resolved in future chapters.

Fourthly, linking gender and social class together is fundamental to an understanding of the social reality in China. Gender issues in China have never been purely an issue of a relationship between the two genders. On the contrary, these issues have always been connected with societal transformation and development, and even national emancipation (Moghadam 1992). This issue is apparent from a historical overview of the development of women in China. Similarly, social change cannot be fully understood without taking into account the situation of Chinese women. Changes in women's socio-economic position are not only a significant component of societal transformation, but they also impact on it. These combined issues can be described as "Chinese women in an era of Chinese social transformation" or "Chinese social stratification and the transformation of women." It can be understood as an interactive process: on the one hand, the changes in the social stratification of Chinese women follow the overall changes in social stratification and these have their own characteristics. On the other hand, changes among Chinese women impact on the overall social stratification.

In this introductory chapter, the explanation of the core topic of "class and gender" is divided into two main parts. The first section is concerned with the realities of "class and gender" in China and reviews the history of social stratification and the development of women from pre-communist China until the initial stages of the economic reforms. A historical overview of "class and gender" is necessary because it provides a basic understanding of how Chinese social structure and the socio-economic position of women have evolved. At the same time, the focus of my research—the current social structure of Chinese women—is based on this.

The second section briefly discusses the theories of "class and gender"—the traditional Marxist and Weberian approaches to class analysis, gender analysis and the debates concerned with them. This introduction to class and gender theories is further developed in the third and fifth chapters when discussing the specific method of gender social

stratification. These discussions will pave the way for comparing the two social class schemas—the neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian theories, as applied to Chinese society in the third chapter, as well as the analysis of the impact of the household on the social statuses of both husbands and wives in the fifth chapter. After this, the overall structure of this book and each chapter's content is highlighted. The following sections provide a historical overview of the transformation of social class and gender.

## 1.2 A Historical Overview of Social Class in China

### 1.2.1 Social Stratification in Pre-Communist China

How did the word “class,” one of the key concepts of this book, enter the Chinese social sphere? “Class,” like some other social or political concepts was first taken over and given new meaning by the Japanese and then reintroduced into China (Guthrie 2012). Currently, the word “class” is translated as “social class” (*jieji*) or “social stratum” (*jieceng*). The term “*jieji*” in Chinese consists of two separate words. The first ideograph “*jie*” means steps, like rungs on a ladder; and the second “*ji*” is the order of threads in a fabric (Liang 1999: 179). As Kuhn (2010: 18) suggests, both “*jieji*” and “*jieceng*” connote hierarchical degrees on a continuum, linked to a system of social ranks.

In the earliest period of China, society was mainly divided into four large occupational groups by Guanzi—a thinker and politician who lived in the “Spring and Autumn” period (719 B.C. to 645 B.C.) of China (Fu 1996). These four large occupational status groups were called “*simin*” and consisted of scholars (*shi*), peasants (*nong*), artisans (*gong*) and merchants (*shang*), ranked in a hierarchical manner from high to low (ibid). Peasants were thought to be superior to artisans and merchants because agriculture was considered the root of society, as it provides food and enhances a state's economic potential. In contrast, the merchants were despised and ranked the lowest because trade was considered a subsidiary branch. In addition, this negative bias towards merchants in Chinese history was also a disadvantage as they were regarded as being corrupt and untrustworthy, and concerned only with money-making (Lin 1999).

These four occupational groups were thought to cover the entirety of human occupations and formed a complete and interrelated system (Kuhn 2010). However, in contrast to occupation and economic status in modern society, wealth and poverty in ancient China had nothing to do with a person's occupational status. Within every occupational group, there were huge economic disparities (ibid). There were those who were wealthy and

of high status. There were those who were wealthy and of mean status. For instance, peasants (*nong*) would include both the rich land owners and the poor tenants and the ancient Chinese social structure consisted of a broad and poor base and a very narrow elite top.

This occupational classification remained for millennia until the foreign onslaught at the end of the Qing dynasty in the nineteenth century. During the Republican period from 1912 to 1949, China experienced incessant fighting between the warlords as well as during the anti-Japanese war and the Chinese civil war (Sheridan 2008). People became destitute and homeless. Chinese society in the Republican era was turbulent and the original social structure and social order were transformed. In 1949, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), China began to move along a road of socio-economic restoration and a new social stratification emerged (Whyte and Guo 2009).

### 1.2.2 Social Stratification in Maoist China

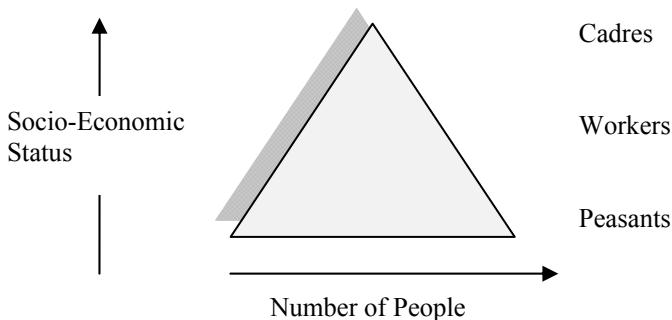
During the Maoist era, although the “class struggle” was much emphasised, “class” was more a political perception rather than a socio-economic concept. In addition, class stratification was based more on one's family background, political attitude and ideological stance, than on one's own private ownership of production assets (Nee 1989; Pow 2009). In 1956, the “three major reconstructions” were completed—the socialist transformation of Chinese agriculture, the handicrafts industry and the capitalist industry. From then on, until 1978, Chinese social stratification is commonly believed to have consisted of two social classes (*jieji*)—peasants and workers, and one social stratum (*jieceng*)—intellectuals<sup>2</sup> (Lu 2003).

However, some researchers observed a new privileged class emerging (Bian and Logan 1996). These were the cadres and officials (*ganbu*), who were in possession of great political and administrative power (Lee 1991). The division between the state cadres and rank-and-file workers could be detected in the “labour personnel system” or “cadre management system” (Edin 2003; Manion 1985). State cadres were designated and allocated by the government and were kept in reserve for preparation and promotion into upper leadership positions (Bian 2002). In addition to their greater career opportunities, the cadres were offered better rewards and living conditions, etc. (Djilas 1957; Zhou, Tuma and Moen 1995). By contrast, most rank-and-file workers lived ordinary lives and stayed in the same work positions for their whole lifetimes (Bian 1994).

The distinctions between state cadres and rank-and-file workers were subordinate to another notable structural division—the rural and urban division—through the household registration (*hukou*) system (Naughton 2007; Wu and Treiman 2004). People were firstly divided artificially into two main social groups—agricultural or non-agricultural, due to their geographical location (Chan and Zhang 1999; Yang and Zhou 1999). Although the living standard of rank-and-file workers could not be compared to that of state cadres, they were much better off than the peasants who were constrained to the countryside (Chan 2010; Mallee 1995). Under the “*hukou*” system, the rural population—the majority—were not allowed the rights and benefits conferred on urban residents.

The sharp differences between peasants and urban residents were expressed in almost every aspect of life, such as employment, housing, and social security including medical insurance, pensions, and educational opportunities for the next generation (Seeborg, Jin and Zhu 2000). As Li (2004) and Logan and Fainstein (2011) conclude, the “*hukou*” system—combined with migrant controls—made rural-urban disparities actually serve as a form of social stratification. Therefore, according to the divisions between the urban and the rural, and between the cadre and the rank-and-file worker, the pre-reform Chinese social structure was defined by the following three social groups as shown in figure 1-1: the cadre had the highest economic and social status; the worker in the middle was lower than the cadre, but much higher than the peasant (Parkin 1974; Solinger 1999).

Figure 1-1 The Class System in Pre-Reform China



Source: The author.

Note: This figure demonstrates the relatively simple social structure during Mao's era.

Generally speaking, the social structure during the Maoist period was relatively simple, sealed off and egalitarian (Schram 2010). For example, the identities of these three groups were almost fixed. Once a person was born a peasant, he/she might retain their peasant identity for their whole life, unless his/her village was expropriated by a city or he/she passed the university entrance examinations, which consisted of a very low percentage of people (Li 2005). Similarly, in order for a rank-and-file worker to change status to a cadre, long bureaucratic procedures would be involved (Bian 1994; Wu and Treiman 2004). In addition, society during the Maoist era was egalitarian with a Gini coefficient of 0.18 in the 1970s, below the absolute equalitarianism line of 0.2 (Schram 2010). However, this absolute egalitarianism was at the cost of extensive poverty.

With the implementation of the policies of opening up and economic reform, many concrete systematic and institutional reforms were carried forward, which made this simple and closed social structure differentiate and polarize rapidly (Fan 1997; Lu 2012; So 2003). Later sections discuss how social stratification changed in the initial period of the economic reforms. The content of this section paves the way for further discussions about the current social classification in later chapters.

### **1.2.3 Social Stratification in the Initial Period of the Economic Reforms**

At the very beginning, the initial period of economic reform in this book is referred to as the period from 1978 to 2002. Undoubtedly, the economic reforms started in 1978, when the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was held. Since then, massive economic and political reforms have unfolded and given rise to concurrent and significant social changes in China (Chen 1991; Mallee 1995). In addition, the focus of this book is on current social stratification in China and the data utilised are from 2002 and 2007 (a detailed discussion of the data is included in the second chapter), when Hu Jintao was elected for the first and second times as general secretary of the Central Committee of the CCP. Hu Jintao advocated the concepts of a “scientific development outlook” and “building a harmonious society.” These propositions heralded a new period of economic development which was characterised by people-oriented, comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable development (Lam 2006; Saich 2004). Therefore, the discussion of the initial period of economic reform is referred to as the period from 1978 to 2002.

During this period, the Chinese economy gradually diversified by allowing the private sector to grow and foreign investment to enter. The market mechanism was officially recognised and this changed the original single central planning model into a dualist model of state and market (Lin 2001; Nee and Matthews 1996). Social change and the differentiation of social stratification began with economic reforms and market development. Some new social groups emerged and the old social order was transformed. The egalitarianism that underpinned the planned economy diminished and the disparities between different social groups increased enormously (Brandt and Rawski 2008).

In addition, it is worth mentioning that the term “*jieji*” was infrequently utilised after 1978 because the priorities of the CCP government were reoriented from “class struggle” (*jieji douzheng*) to economic development. The term “*jieji*” has a highly political connotation, which reminded people of the violent class struggle during the Maoist regime. Therefore, the term “*jieceng*,” replacing “*jieji*,” was increasingly adopted. Furthermore, “*jieceng*” carries connotations of socioeconomic differentiation, and meanings which conform more to the new era of reform and opening up (Anagnost 2008; Guo 2013). The social differentiation of the initial economic reform period can be summarised in five trends as below:

The first trend encompasses the capitalization of the official and state manager stratum. In the government-led economic reform process, the roles of the central and local governors have been crucial. In the process of the restructuring and privatisation of SOEs and COEs, a large amount of state capital has been transferred into the hands of officials and governors or their relatives and families through informal and unregulated channels (Sun 2005). This process is somewhat comparable to the differentiation of the old bureaucrats and the formation of new business elites in Russia (Kryshtanovskaya and White 1996). High-level state officials in China have seized a large number of economic benefits by virtue of their political power and organisational resources and thus their leadership has extended from the Party-State administrative sphere to the economic sphere. Many offspring and relatives of these high-level state officials have become monopoly tycoons in industry (Lin 1999).

The second trend is the admittance of the private entrepreneur stratum into the political and legal sphere. During the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CCP on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2001, General Secretary Jiang Zemin gave a speech in which he emphasised that it was essential to absorb the excellent private entrepreneurs into the CCP (Dickson 2003). This was an important recognition of their political status. Consequently, in 2004, the

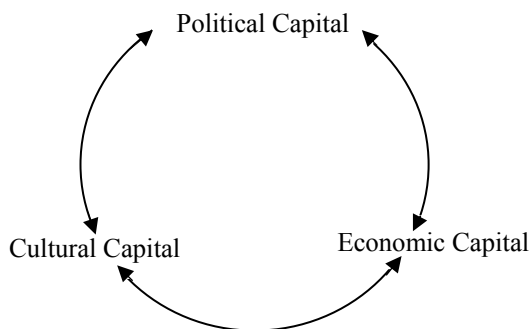


“legalisation of private property” was incorporated into a “Constitutional Amendment” and the “Property Law of China” was passed by the National People’s Congress (NPC) in 2007 (Zhang 2008: 346). These events confirmed property ownership rights for private proprietors and indicated that the period of the boycotting and exclusion of capitalists had ended. Currently, private entrepreneurs not only enjoy economic success as the “economic elite,” but also have become an important part of “the people,” some of them even elected as representatives of the National People’s Congress (NPC) or members of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (Yan 2012: 338).

The third trend highlights the improvement in the social status of intellectuals (*zhishi fenzi*). Intellectuals, cultural elites and technological experts experienced uncertain circumstances and a fluctuating status after 1949. In the 1950s, intellectuals were not trusted by the CCP and they were restricted in terms of participation in political and party work (Eddy 2009). In addition, they were often forced to accept the “socialist transformation” to cultivate the appropriate “proletarian attributes” (ibid: 611). Since the economic reforms, however, this situation has changed. Their technological skills and knowledge have been valued and have helped them to achieve material benefits. In addition, China’s political leaders have recruited and welcomed them into the political establishment (Wright 2010). The intellectuals have gradually changed into a “professional elite” or a “cultural elite” (Walder 1995).

These three trends obviously represent those who have benefited from the economic reforms. They have become successful and prosperous because they have resorted to using their political<sup>3</sup>, economic and cultural capital (Li 2013; Li, Meng, Wang and Zhou 2008; Liu 2003; Lu 2002; Raymo and Xie 2000). These resources are evidently of vital importance and can be interchangeable. For example, officials achieve their Masters’ or PhD degrees, which symbolise cultural capital, much more easily from top universities in China if they do their degrees part-time. Moreover, it is easier for them to acquire degrees if they are promoted within officialdom. The interchangeable relationship between these types of capital is shown in figure 1-2. In contrast, those who did not own these resources have been gradually marginalised. The following two trends delineate the changes in the socio-economic positions of these increasingly marginal groups.

Figure 1-2 Social Capital Interchange



Source: Research Report on Social Stratification in Contemporary China, by Lu, Xueyi (2002).

Note: “Political capital” also can be referred to as “organisation capital.”

The fourth trend is the fast descent of the working class. The working class was named as the leading class in Mao’s regime, but after the economic reforms, especially the restructuring of SOEs, they were rapidly marginalised (Lin 2009; Weil 2006). For example, in 1997, eleven to twelve million urban workers were laid off and massive cuts continued over the next several years (Benson and Zhu 1999). The income of retained workers dropped and those who were laid off lived only on small pensions and support from their family members. Although some workers were re-employed in private enterprises later, they had to endure very long working hours and humble working environments. In addition, amongst these, women have been severely disadvantaged (Dependence 2002). Women were the first to be asked to leave and comprised the majority of those who were laid off. Furthermore, these women have been disadvantaged in terms of finding new jobs because they lack certain skills and are old.

The fifth trend is the differentiation of peasants and the inferior condition of the “peasant worker” (*nong min gong*) in cities. Before 1978, peasants not only lived in the countryside, but they also made a living from agriculture. When the policy was enacted that allowed peasants to find jobs and to live in cities, hundreds of millions of peasants poured into cities. However, most of them gathered in low-skilled and labour-intensive industries, which urban workers were reluctant to do (Wong, Fu, Li and Song 2007). Peasants took jobs with low pay and low prestige, and they worked in unpleasant condition. Moreover, they were not able to benefit from any kind of national and local insurance because of the household

registration (*hukou*) system (Chan and Buckingham 2008; Ngai and Lu 2010). As Tomba (2011: 317) remarks, out-migration is often deemed as a way to escape the “peasant” identity and to garner better living standards, but the identity of “peasant worker” becomes another signifier once they have migrated to the cities.

In conclusion, confronting the social upheavals of the economic reforms, the formerly simple and relatively egalitarian social structure experienced rapid polarization (Lin 1999). Some groups got rich fast, such as the sub-groups, who owned political and social resources. The socio-economic status of some groups has improved, such as the entrepreneurs and intellectuals. In contrast, some other groups have to cope with greater uncertainty, such as the workers and peasants. They have split respectively. The laid-off workers who once worked in the state and collectively owned enterprises have had very difficult lives during the Chinese industrial transformation. In addition, numerous peasants have migrated to cities, participating in low level jobs and they have constituted a new group, the “peasant worker.” Corresponding to these drastic social transformations, the circumstances of Chinese women have also changed. What follows is a historical overview and discussion of the evolution of Chinese women’s socio-economic role, especially the changes after the economic reforms.

### **1.3 A Historical Overview of the Changing Socio-Economic Role of Chinese Women**

Generally speaking, the historical evolution of Chinese women has been a continuous process. It is hard to divide the development of Chinese women into certain phases according to particular ideological implications or a great significant event. In addition, Chinese women’s development has to a great extent been intertwined with Chinese national emancipation and socialist construction (Croll 2013; Wang 1999). Therefore, in this section, the changes in the socioeconomic role of Chinese women are divided roughly into three stages according to the Chinese social development process. Elaboration on this begins with a discussion of the transformation of the traditional Confucian women in the late Qing dynasty.

#### **1.3.1 The Change in Women’s Role from the Traditional Confucian Status**

For two thousand years before the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese girls and women abided by Confucian family doctrine, which

linked feminine virtue with being a faithful wife and devoted mother (Chang 2007). The requirements of Chinese women—such as the three obediences and the four virtues (*san cong si de*)—bore the imprint of feudal imperial values. Women had to be dutiful—obeying their fathers when they were children, obeying their husbands after they got married, and obeying their sons after their husbands died (Hong 2013; Li 1995).

However, the patriarchal system in which these feminine norms were embodied began to be challenged when China confronted the “great western powers” in the mid to late nineteenth century (Hong 2013: 195). With the Chinese national crisis and western invasion in the late Qing dynasty, Western thoughts on rights—from notions of natural rights to the awareness of women’s rights—began to infiltrate Chinese society. The advocacy of equality between the genders and the liberation of women became the banners raised by Chinese intellectuals in their pursuit of national emancipation, progress and civilization (Li 2013).

The de-Confucian cultural movement combated old Confucian institutions and changed the traditional role of Chinese women. In the period of the early Republic of China, women who opposed feudal ethics and left home to seek a western education and a new life in society were a beacon of change. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, the gender issue or women’s liberation in China has never purely been solely an issue of the relationship between the genders. Rather it was a fundamental part of overall Chinese national emancipation and modernisation. These ideological and social changes surrounding Chinese women’s development built a fundamental basis for their progress in a new historical era after the establishment of the PRC. Subsequent paragraphs elaborate how the circumstances of women changed after the PRC was established.

### **1.3.2 “Women Hold Up Half the Sky”: Women in Maoist China**

After the PRC was established in 1949, there were various political mobilisation movements launched under the Maoist regime—the land reform (*tudi gaige*), the great leap forward (*da yue jin*), and the Cultural Revolution (*wenhua dageming*), etc. (Granrose 2007). These mobilisation movements brought millions of women from the household sphere to the public sphere (Croll 2013). This was because women, as a productive force, were much needed by the state. They were an essential and irreplaceable part of Chinese socialist construction, and they were referred to as “holding up half the sky” (Leung 2003: 367). The CCP government not only encouraged and recruited Chinese women to participate in work

on a large scale, but also laid emphasis on the fact that women were equal to men (Hong 2013). The CCP undertook many actions to improve Chinese women's social status and to protect their rights.

To begin with, the principle of gender equality was written into State legislation. For example, the "Constitution" stipulated an equal entitlement to voting and to work, as well as equal pay for equal work, equal property inheritance and other rights (Croll 1983; Jordan 1994). Furthermore, the CCP government was active in promoting continuous struggles to break down male supremacy and woman-repressive customs or traditions. For instance, the marriage law, adopted in the 1950s, outlawed child brides and mercenary and forced marriages, which once were common phenomena in traditional Chinese society (Chun 1996).

In addition, many protective policies in favour of women were enacted, which included paid leave for childbirth and adjusted labour conditions during menstruation, pregnancy and nursing, etc. In the meantime, civil courts were instructed to side with women more than men in divorce disputes (Jordan 1994). Moreover, the State Federation of Women had local branches in every factory, street and village to ensure that women had an organisation of their own to turn to when gender-related problems arose (Howell 1996).

These policies, regulations and protective countermeasures for the rights of women represent the determination of the CCP government to improve women's social status. However, there were serious flaws in the justifications for claiming that women were equal to men in China at that time. Analysing the position of women in Maoist China, Stacey (1983: 261) argues that the revolution of Chinese women "reached backward to move forward." She points out that in the process of social revolution, the CCP prioritised class struggle over gender equality and made compromises with the patriarchal system to gain the support of peasants at the expense of women (*ibid*). Johnson (2009) makes a similar point in her study of the family in socialist China. She believes that the construction of a socialist society was based on a traditional family economy and this family solidarity further inhibited prospects for the development of an independent consciousness of woman (*ibid*).

Furthermore, on the one hand, women were forced to take the same low-level and heavy work as men. The compulsion of women to work as equal with men, not giving them the right to refuse this "sexless" or "degendered" way of living, was deemed as another type of oppression (Yang 1998: 211). This kind of "gender equality" reached the highest point during the Cultural Revolution. During that time, even the clothing and apparel of people with indications of gender had been removed (Chun

1996). On the other hand, gender discrimination existed in job assignments, as Zheng (2000) proposes that the allocation of jobs followed gendered lines. Some service and auxiliary work was regarded as suitable for women, while some technical jobs were seen as male work (ibid).

It is possible that the constant and unchanged concept of “son preference” can be used to verify that the status of women is not as high as people suppose. Female infant death has increased rapidly, especially since the policy of the “one-child family” has been carried out, because many parents choose to miscarry or abandon the girl babies under the pressure that they can only have one child (Johansson and Nygren 1991). In order to change this female infanticide circumstance, an extensive campaign has been embarked upon to upgrade the value of daughters in China’s history. This is an open recognition of the discrimination suffered by women, which was previously impossible to acknowledge since discrimination against women was largely and officially prohibited (Zheng 1994: 142).

In summary, the development of women in the Maoist period was mainly pushed forward by the intentioned activities and policies of government, and by way of slogans, catchwords and broadcasts. From this point of view, the awakening of female self-awareness and consciousness (in comparison to the early period of the Republic of China) was set back. In addition, the ideological cultivation of gender equality to some extent lacked a necessary economic basis to support it. The 1978 economic reforms and the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented economy gave rise to complex socio-economic surroundings. Following these changes, the status and conditions of women in society also transformed. The later paragraphs discuss the changes in the circumstances of Chinese women with economic reform.

### **1.3.3 The Change in Women’s Circumstances with Economic Reform**

With the rise of the market economy and economic growth, the initial assumption was that gender inequalities would decline (Zhang, Hannum and Wang 2008). This explanation was supported by “discrimination theory,” which suggests that gender discrimination entails extra costs, which will eventually be punished by the market (Becker 1957; Polachek and O’Neill 1993). Or alternatively, as the “classical modernisation theory” argues, the gender gap may initially expand, but ultimately will diminish when the gender gap reaches a peak (Jaquette 1982: 274). This theory attributes the persisting gender inequalities to the existing “socially