



The long-term impact of the Communist Revolution on social stratification in contemporary China

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The Chinese Communist Revolution that culminated in the 1949 founding of the People's Republic of China fundamentally transformed class relations in China. With data from a nationally representative, longitudinal survey between 2010 and 2016, this study documents the long-term impact of the Communist Revolution on the social stratification order in today's China, more than 6 decades after the revolution. True to its stated ideological missions, the revolution resulted in promoting the social status of children of the peasant, worker, and revolutionary cadre classes and disadvantaging those who were from privileged classes at the time of the revolution. Although there was a tendency toward "reversion" mitigating the revolution's effects in the third generation toward the grandparents' generation in social status, the overall impact of reversion was small. The revolution effects were most pronounced for the birth cohorts immediately following the revolution, attenuating for recently born cohorts.

intergenerational mobility | Chinese Revolution | class relation | social inequality

The Chinese Communist Revolution was a class-based revolution with peasants as its main supporters (1). To maintain class-based interests in the newly founded People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese government soon registered every citizen as belonging to 1 of 3 broad classes according to his or her presumed role in the revolution: "good class" ("red class" revolutionary cadres, revolutionary soldiers, and revolutionary martyrs as well as industrial workers and poor and lower-middle peasants), middle class (middle- and upper-middle peasants, urban routine staff, small businessmen, intellectuals, and professionals), and "bad class" (also called the "black class," including landlords, rich peasants, capitalists, capitalist roaders, counterrevolutionaries, rightists, and "bad elements," such as criminals) (ref. 2, *SI Appendix 1*). This classification scheme was largely property based, as it would classify essentially anyone with property at the time of the revolution as bad class. However, the presence of revolutionary classes also allowed persons from families with property to be classified as good class if they had contributed to the revolution in significant ways. Using this class scheme, the PRC government devised and implemented a series of class-based preferential social policies (1, 2).

One of the most visible and most consequential policies was the distribution of educational resources in favor of good-class children at the expense of bad-class children (2–5). Redistribution strategies included rapidly expanding education at all levels, opening special schools for government cadres only, and developing college admission policies that aimed to increase the enrollment of good-class students and restrict the number of bad-class students (*SI Appendix 2*). More than 60 y have passed since these policies were first implemented. Most grandchildren of the revolutionaries have now completed their educations. A natural question to ask is whether these preferential policies actually succeeded or failed to transform the social stratification order by favoring descendants of those disadvantaged classes who supported the revolution.

There are good reasons to suspect that these policies may not have worked. Bad-class citizens had relatively high levels of education and enjoyed social and economic privileges prior to the revolution. It is well known that family socioeconomic status (SES) has a significant influence on children's educational outcomes in almost all societies (6, 7). Prior research has shown that family SES has persistent large effects over time, and this is true even in Eastern European countries that experienced a transition to socialism similar to that in China after World War II (7–9). Through both economic resources and noneconomic means, the latter of which include parenting styles, socialization, development of noncognitive skills, and social networks, parents transmit their social advantages or disadvantages to their children (10–12). While the revolution took away economic resources from bad-class citizens, they still possessed superior cultural and educational resources that could be used to advance their children's education (8, 9). Research has also shown that family SES effects persist even when education expands, as high-SES parents can find ways to use resources in competition for higher levels of education as lower-level education becomes more widely available (13). Further, even if the influence of parents' SES on the immediately following generation is blocked or reversed by a revolution, recent research suggests that the third generation may still be affected by grandparents' SES (14–16).

However, the Chinese Communist Revolution was not an ordinary social event. It was a radical class struggle intended to fundamentally

Significance

Utilizing the latest, high-quality, 3-generation data, this article reports findings from a systematic study of the long-term impact of the Communist Revolution on the social stratification order in today's China. It is found that the revolution disrupted the cross-generational reproduction of the prevailing social stratification at the time of the revolution in promoting the social status of children of the peasant and worker classes and disadvantaging those from privileged classes. Despite a tendency for "reversion" mitigating the revolution's effects in the third generation toward the grandparents' generation in social status, the impact of the revolution on the educational attainment of descendants by class classification immediately following the revolution remains strong even after 6 decades have passed.

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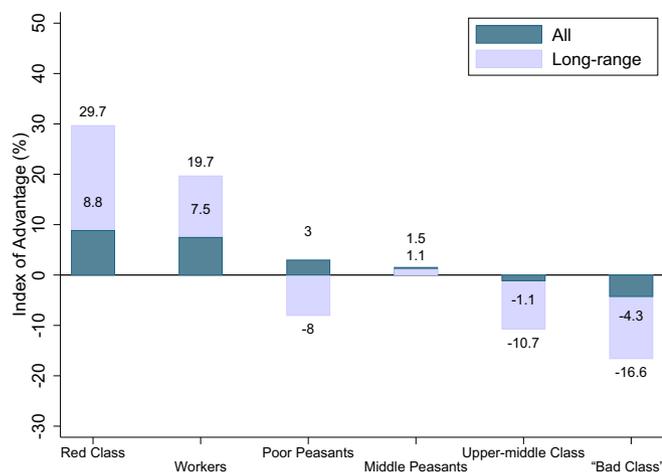


Fig. 2. The index of advantage for G2's educational mobility from G1 by mobility distance and family class origin. Mobility is defined as a 5% or larger educational difference between G2 and G1. Long-range mobility is defined as a 50% or larger difference between G2 and G1. The index of advantage is the net mobility, the difference between upward mobility and downward mobility.

and the percentage of downward mobility and called it an “index of advantage.”

In the second step, we examined G3's education by regressing G3's education scores on G2's education scores and G2's educational deviation from G1, controlling for G3's gender and sibling size (SI Appendix 8). The intergenerational effect of G2's education on G3's education was measured by the regression coefficient of G2's education scores. G2's educational deviation from G1 represents G1's non-Markovian grandparent effect on G3, which we expected to be negative as G3 tends to “revert” to the social position of G1 net of the mediation through G2.

We know that the grandparent effect, if present, would improve the education of descendants of the bad classes and suppress the education of descendants of the good classes. If we find this effect in our study, we will still want to assess its importance for the long-term impact of the revolution. Thus, we conducted a counterfactual exercise in which we removed the non-Markovian grandparent effect from our model and then simulated the education outcomes by class origin.

Finally, since G2 was born in different historical periods when the revolution broke out, we were interested in testing whether those who were born later were less affected by the revolution than those who were born earlier. Of course, we were not able to distinguish confounding effects of other historical events, such as the Great Famine (1959 to 1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976). The best that we could do was to examine cohort variation and interpret the variation with caution.

Educational Attainment by Family Class and Generation

In Fig. 1, we present the trend in educational attainment from G1 to G3 by family class. Because mobility rates are confounded by parental fertility (20, 21), we adopted the standard approach of focusing on one generation at a time, treating parent or child status as individuals' attributes (20). Fig. 1 shows a clear upward pattern of educational mobility among descendants of poor peasants, workers, and red class members. Although G1 of poor peasants started at very low educational attainment, at the 42nd percentile, it increased steadily from G1 to G3 by about 5%. Education of the worker class and the red class enjoyed a greater increase, by 12% from G1 to G3. As a result, education of G3 from the poor-peasant class fell just short of the median (at 46%), education of G3 from the worker class surpassed the

median by 12% (at 62%), and red class G3's education achieved the 78th percentile.

Relative mobility is a zero-sum game. For the good classes to gain status, other classes had to lose out. Indeed, our results show that the bad class and the upper-middle class lost out over generations. The bad class enjoyed an education advantage in G1 (at 52%), but they fell below the median in G2 (at 46%) and regained slightly to almost reach parity with the median in G3 (at 50%). The upper-middle class had a huge initial advantage with their percentile at 67% in G1, but their advantage gradually lost ground, with their education percentile declining significantly to 58% in G2 and then to a level slightly above the median at 54% in G3.

Educational Mobility from G1 to G2

How did the trends by generation depicted in Fig. 1 come about intergenerationally? We now take a close look at how the revolution affected G1-to-G2 social mobility by class. We analyzed detailed mobility tables by class (SI Appendix 9) and summarize the main results in Fig. 2, which displays the index of advantage by family class for overall mobility and long-range mobility.

Overall, a slightly larger portion of G2 from the poor-peasant class experienced relative downward mobility than upward mobility (at a net disadvantage of 8%). However, this overall pattern was driven by the downward mobility of women, not that of men. G2 men from the peasant class actually experienced 4% net upward mobility (SI Appendix 10). Since sons were traditionally favored over daughters in rural China, men from the peasant class were likely to seize new educational opportunities created by the revolution, while rural women's education was impeded all of the way up until the Cultural Revolution (22). The data also reveal that a noticeable proportion (around 3% overall) of G2 from the poor-peasant class experienced long-range upward mobility for both men and women (SI Appendix, Fig. S4), likely attributable to the government's class-based preferential policies. Those in G2 of the worker class and red class were the main beneficiaries of the revolution. The worker class experienced

Table 1. Ordinary least square regression of G3's educational attainment on G2's educational deviation from G1, $n = 9,023$

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
G2 education percentile	0.610*** (0.022)	0.609*** (0.022)
G2 educational deviance from G1	-0.160*** (0.022)	
Positive deviance of G2 from G1		-0.152*** (0.032)
Negative deviance of G2 from G1		-0.167*** (0.030)
G3 sibling size	-4.160*** (0.273)	-4.159*** (0.273)
G3 male	-1.006 (0.581)	-1.004 (0.581)
Constant	38.761*** (1.447)	38.639*** (1.486)
R^2	0.206	0.206
F test: model 1 nested in model 2		0.130

SEs are in parentheses. The dependent variable of models 1 and 2 is G3's education percentile score. The reference category of G3's sex is females. Model 1 (restricted model) is nested in model 2 (unrestricted model). The F test for the nested models shows that model 1 is preferred. *** $P < 0.001$.

the impact of this reversion was small, insufficient to compensate for the very large, class-based effects of the revolution on G3's education.

The Changing Impact of the Revolution

G2 in our study grew up in different periods after the revolution, and thus, some were more affected by it than others. G2 born between 1940 and 1962 were exposed to many postrevolution political events, such as the Land Reform, the Anti-Rightist Movement, and the Great Leap Forward. By comparison, the last cohort, born in 1963 to 1969, did not suffer from these turbulent events or the Great Famine. They were too young to be affected by the send-down movement (1, 4). Is there a variation across the cohorts in the impact of the revolution, operationalized as the class-based difference in G1–G2 social mobility?

In Fig. 4, we present the results of the cohort variation in G1–G2 education difference by family class. The y axis represents net mobility, the average difference in education percentile scores between G1 and G2. For the first cohort, born between 1940 and 1947, we observe large differences in net mobility by class, with the red, worker, and middle-peasant classes at the top, the bad class at the bottom, and the other 2 classes in the middle, close to zero. The class differences in net mobility persisted into the second cohort, born between 1948 and 1962. However, class differences in net mobility are less pronounced for the last cohort than for the previous 2 cohorts, except for the upper-middle class. This supports the interpretation that the impact of the

revolution on G1–G2 social mobility waned over time, although the cohort trend could be confounded by important political events, such as the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976).

Conclusion

In this study, we analyzed recently collected data on 3-generational social mobility in contemporary China to answer the question of whether the Chinese Communist Revolution fundamentally altered the prerevolutionary social stratification order over the long term. Our answer is a qualified yes. We showed that the revolution disrupted the cross-generational reproduction of the prevailing social stratification at the time of the revolution in promoting the social status of children of the red, poor-peasant, and worker classes and disadvantaging those from privileged classes. We also found a tendency for reversion mitigating the revolution's effects in the third generation toward the grandparents' generation in social status, but it was insufficient to compensate for the class-based preferential policies implemented by the government. In other words, grandchildren of the bad class and the upper-middle class were helped by better-educated grandparents than grandchildren of the worker and peasant classes. However, the impact of the revolution on the educational attainment of descendants by class classification immediately following the revolution remains strong even after 6 decades have passed. There is also variation in the impact of the revolution by cohort, as it was most pronounced for the birth cohorts immediately following the revolution, attenuating for more recently born cohorts.

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