

SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL SOCIETIES *

REVIEW ARTICLE

I

The books by Ho and Marsh – a historian and a sociologist – both deal with the problems of mobility in classical Chinese society and both address themselves to the analysis of social processes in historical societies, focusing on what has been a central problem in sociological inquiry, namely, that of social mobility and also – in Marsh’s case – structure of the bureaucracy. Marsh’s book is dedicated to “The Revival of the Sociological Study of History” – a fitting description also of Ho’s study. As such, they may serve as a good starting point for an appraisal of some of the main problems of such study. Accordingly, we intend to use them in the following pages as a spring board for the discussion of such problems. Their usefulness for such an appraisal lies in that first they provide an analysis of an important aspect of the structure of one major historical society, and second, a very concrete focus for the discussion of some central problems of sociological studies of historical societies. In this way it avoids the dangers of vague generalizations and generalities.

Let us start with a brief survey of the contents and problems of the two books. A common aim of theirs is to analyze the system of stratification of Imperial China (especially of Ming and Ching China – although it does not necessarily span over into former periods) through the analysis of the determinants of bureaucratic advancement. Both Ho’s and Marsh’s first steps are an analysis of the general system of stratification of China. This system is defined in the usual sociological terms derived from Max Weber – i.e. as dealing with the differential distribution of wealth, prestige and power and with the criteria of such distribution. While there is certainly nothing novel in this appraisal or in the general description of the Chinese system of stratification – which builds heavily – and justly too – on the works of Eberhard, Wittfogel, Kracke, and others – the very juxtaposition of the usual sociological categories and of the historical material brings some clarification

* R. M. Marsh, *The Mandarins, The Circulation of Elites in China, 1600–1900*, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961, xii, 300 pp., \$5.00.

Ping-ti-Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China, Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368–1911*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1963, XVIII, 385 pp., \$8.50.

of certain simplifications that may be very often found in the literature of China. Thus, first, the fact that the distribution of wealth did not always follow on the distribution of prestige is not presented as an "aberration" of the classical Confucian-bureaucratic pattern or as a reason for bewailing the fate of the merchants, but indicates that the Chinese system of stratification, like that of any large-scale centralized "bureaucratic" society was to some extent flexible, that certain degrees of "free floating" (i.e. not committed to ascriptive units of various kinds) resources – whether power, wealth or prestige – existed in it and that although the official elite attempted to regulate and channelize these according to the criteria of "Confucian" bureaucracy, they never fully succeeded and many secondary systems or "sub-cultures" of stratification continuously existed in China. Moreover, the importance of merchants and of the military-factors often looked upon as exogenous, while in fact constituting a continuous part of social organization and very important channels of mobility into the literati group and the bureaucracy, and the existence of special bureaucratic-military sector¹ – is brought out by Marsh's and even more by Ho's systematic description.

Their analysis also makes useful distinctions between the gentry, the literati and the bureaucracy to describe the place of the gentry and the literati in the local structure with great vividness.

Ho's analysis of the Chinese status system is much more elaborated and detailed than Marsh's – he goes into great detail to analyze both the different social strata in Chinese society and the major grades within the upper echelons of the literati and the bureaucracy, to show the origin of the official social ideology and the systematic reason for Confucian-legalism upholding of the fluidity of the status system despite some obvious ascriptive tendencies. He does also go in much greater detail into historical and sociological analysis of the different avenues of advance into the bureaucracy and sets the bureaucracy – which constitutes Marsh's main focus of analysis – within the wider context of the upper stratum of Chinese society, i.e., of the gentry and literati. Moreover he attempts also to analyze the process of downward mobility and shows how within a relatively static society with a fluid, open system of mobility, such downward mobility was almost a historical or sociological necessity, and he describes also in great detail some of the intra-family mechanisms (such as conspicuous consumption) which could contribute to such downward mobility.

In Marsh's case this general background material serves for the analysis of the determinants of bureaucratic advancement. Here he wants to test several major hypotheses, all dealing with the extent to which internal-

¹ Already the work of Des Routours on the military government under the T'ang – taken up also later on by Pulleyblank – has indicated this important fact. See R. Des Routours, "Les grands fonctionnaires des provinces en Chine sous la dynastie des T'ang", *T'oung Pao*, XXIV (1926), pp. 219–315; E. C. Pulleyblank, *The Background of the Rebellion of An Lu Shan*, London, 1955.

bureaucratic seniority examinations, as against external (mainly familial) criteria, determine the extent of bureaucratic advancement. In order to test these hypotheses he analyzes by carefully statistical methods – using most of the techniques of modern mobility studies – a sample of 572 officials from “Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period.”

His main conclusions are that among Chinese officials, seniority tended to equalize the chances of advancement for men from official and from commoner families – once they were in the bureaucracy. Furthermore, he shows that if the seniority rule enhanced the opportunities of some commoners’ sons, it also did not retard the advancement of other, more exceptional commoners. The latter commoners’ sons did not have to adhere to the seniority principle, but instead had rapid ascent as a result of military successes and the like.

But if within the confines of the bureaucracy proper the various mechanisms of bureaucratic advancement counter-availed the strength of familistic pressures, in the broader social structure it was the particularistic-familistic criteria that prevailed. They impinged on the bureaucratic structure by limiting the basis of its recruitment. Thus the bureaucratic elite were recruited disproportionately from the 2 per cent of the population in the elite stratum, rather than from the 98 per cent of the population in the below-elite, or commoner, stratum.

Ho’s analysis is more concerned with the processes of mobility in the wider context of the overall Chinese societal system and their influence on its working, as well as with the broader social and political determinants of such processes of mobility in different periods of the Ming and Ch’ing dynasties.

His main conclusions are that although the Ming-Ch’ing society, like the Chinese society of earlier periods, was a regulated society, the discrepancy between the social ideals embodied in legal texts and social realities was a very great one. The complex social and economic forces, together with the lack of strong will on the part of the imperial government strictly to enforce the stringent law, made the maintenance of special hereditary statuses impossible. In the Ming-Ch’ing period as a whole, the status system was fluid and flexible, and there were no effective legal and social barriers to prevent the movement of individuals and families from one status to another (pp. 256–257).

He shows how the trend of increasing mobility continued after the founding of the Ming, when the examination and academic degree system became more elaborate and the school system truly nation-wide. All this, together with the most unusual political and social circumstances in which the Ming dynasty was inaugurated, created a chapter of social mobility probably unparalleled in Chinese history. He indicates that, of course, other things being equal, members of successful families naturally had various competitive ad-

vantages and must in the long run prevail over the humble and poor in the competitive examination. He shows that the chances of successful mobility for ordinary commoners would have begun to decline drastically earlier had it not been for the combined effect of the early stage of large-scale reproduction of basic classics and reference tools, the teachings of Wang Yang-ming, and the subsequent mushrooming growth of private academies. The rise of a large number of private academies, with their usual scholarship provisions, occurred just about the time that community schools had begun to decline (p. 261).

He attempts also to correlate this great upsurge of mobility with broader social conditions. He shows that the early Ming period up to 1500 was one of peace, prosperity, government retrenchment, reduced fiscal burden and steady agricultural and commercial expansion which, together with the government's unusually sympathetic attitude toward the upward mobility of the humble and the vast expansion of educational facilities, cannot have failed to have a beneficent effect on both general social and the more specific socio-economic mobility, and he then studies briefly the impact of declining conditions on restriction of mobility (pp. 264–5).

It is, of course, difficult for a non-sinologist to evaluate the studies from the point of view of use of sources, and to compare them with other studies on mobility in China, such as those of Hsu or Kracke.

It seems that the major problem here in Marsh's book would be that of the sources used by him. He himself fully recognizes that first, the "Eminent Chinese" does not contribute a statistical sample from which generalizations could be made to a larger, determinate population (p. 191). This source is, of course, by its very nature, a biased one in favor of the more "officially" (i.e. both organizationally and ideologically) approved people. Other sources, such as various local chronicles or a fuller roster of the materials about all central elite positions, could modify his results and it might have been, perhaps, useful and interesting if Marsh would have traced the different career patterns – in terms of type of jobs and departments – of different "bureaucrats".

As far as a non-sinologist can judge Ho is more aware of the unreliability of many of the sources and is more cautious in using them, while at the same time he shows himself to be a master of them.

But whatever the limitations or modifications of the conclusions of these two studies, they do indicate the possibility or beginning of a coming together of sociological and historical methods for the analysis of social process and institutional structure in historical societies. While Marsh shows a greater predilection for formal hypotheses and the use of some of the modern research techniques developed by the social scientists, his analysis is weaker on the level of the overall institutional structure. This level is picked up much more masterfully by Ho.

II

A continuous combination of these two approaches could certainly greatly advance the contributions of sociological analysis to the understanding of historical societies and of such analyses for the testing of sociological hypotheses. But in order to be able to appreciate fully the potential contribution of these approaches it is necessary to put them in the context of the study of the sociological problem to which they address themselves, i.e. studies of mobility and of bureaucracy.

Studies of mobility have been for a long period in one of the forefronts of sociological inquiry. Many studies in different countries – in the United States, England, Scandinavia, Germany, France, Japan, and many other countries – have analyzed the scope of social mobility, i.e., the extent to which sons follow the occupations of their fathers, or do better or worse than their fathers, and conversely the extent to which different occupational positions are filled from the sons of their occupants.

Some of these studies have tested hypotheses about the differences in the rate of mobility in various modern societies, others have provided very broad statistical-demographical studies and descriptions of the changes in the patterns of organization of different occupations. Still others were concerned primarily with methodology. Most of these studies have been very succinctly summed up and critically evaluated by S. M. Miller's trend report.² This very able survey brings out sharply that the great proliferation of these different studies has not been matched by a concomitant development in the posing of the questions or problems which the study of mobility has to answer. Some of the more specific studies, as for instance those analyzing the conditions of the supply of talents of different occupations, or in the blocking of such opportunities through different systems of educational selection and their relation to class structure have a very definite focus. Such focuses may also be found in other – less numerous – studies which deal with the effect of mobility on "class consciousness" or on the professional and occupational orientations of different groups.

But many of the other studies on mobility have not made explicit or operationalized their implicit assumptions about the nature of mobility as a social mechanism, and about its influence on the operation of the social structures within which they take place. It has been, of course, generally recognized that the process of mobility is an important mechanism for the placement of the available human personnel in different social positions, of the differential redistribution of population to each position and sometimes of creation of new social groups and positions. Similarly it has been generally recognized that there exists some close relationship between the processes of

² See S. M. Miller, "Comparative Social Mobility", *Current Sociology*, IX (No. 1, 1960), pp. 1-89.

such placement and redistribution, and the continuity of a given structure or system or with different changes which take place within it.

But which aspects of this process are most important for the understanding of the functioning of a given social system? Which contribute to its stability and which generate changes and what kind of changes? To what extent are these different aspects of mobility and their effects common to all societies, or do they differ between them? Do we have systematic knowledge about the influence of different patterns of mobility on the availability of talent for different social and cultural positions? Often some general assumptions that certain circulation of elites may be good for the keeping up of fresh blood into the central functions of a society, or that mobility is good – at least for a democratic society – can be found in the literature. But there have been, as Miller's survey clearly shows, relatively few systematic analyses of existing materials to test or operationalize these assumptions.

But while some of these problems could perhaps to some extent be neglected in studies of mobility in modern societies, they became much more pertinent when the study of mobility became transplanted to historical societies.

The very materials presented by Marsh and Ho – as well as the broad contours of the Chinese society which they study – underline the necessity and importance of studying some of these broader problems. To mention just a few of such problems which come out of these studies of Chinese society: How did the mobility from different strata or regions influence the identification of these groups with the broad political and cultural structure? When did either different rates of mobility from different groups, strata and regions, or concentration of mobility in special channels – i.e., of the “usual” examination system – influence this identification? How did these different patterns of mobility influence the availability of sufficient manpower to the main positions in the society, in the bureaucracy, and how did they affect the functioning of the different echelons and departments of the bureaucracy? What institutional changes were generated by such changes in the processes of mobility? To what extent was the famous “dynastic cycle” connected with such changes in the rates and channels of mobility – as some historians have assumed? Which social and political conditions did generate favorable rates of mobility, and under what conditions were the less favorable rates and channels developed?

It is important to emphasize that in posing all these questions we have to deal not only with differential *rates* of mobility, but also with different institutional channels of mobility – i.e., whether it went through the examination system, through wealth, or through the army. This is especially important in the study of the Chinese case where mobility was set within a relatively stable society and where perhaps the clearest type of “sponsored” mobility – i.e., of mobility which is sponsored and regulated by an elite, oriented

towards recruitment of relatively limited and clear elite patterns – could be found.³

Similar questions can be posed also with regard to other historical societies and systems – whether with regard to other centralized societies, like the Roman or Byzantine Empires – or with regard to other types of historical societies, like the feudal society. Marc Bloch's classic analysis of the two feudal ages, and of the changes in the composition and background of the aristocratic groups in each of these stages is a good example of a possible approach to such materials.⁴

A similar range of problems can be pointed out with regard to the study of bureaucracy and of its different structural characteristics. Most historical and sociological studies of bureaucracy have been greatly influenced by Max Weber's "ideal type" analysis of bureaucracy and, to a smaller extent, by the works of political scientists like Friedrich or Finer or sociologists like Merton, Barber and Simon.⁵ They have often focused on the extent to which any concrete administration – as it developed in any given historical setting – deviated from some of the characteristics of the ideal type or was nearer to some of the "patrimonial" bureaucracies described by Weber. One "natural" focus of such analysis has been the extent to which any such bureaucracy really maintained its own autonomy in the selection of officials and in their advancement or, conversely, the extent to which it was influenced by "external" criteria and forces such as family and kinship, forces which exist in every society, but the nature of which necessarily varies from one type of society to another – as does, of course, also, the extent of their influence.

As we have seen, Marsh focuses his analysis on some of the criteria which are most relevant for the Chinese setting – i.e., whether gentry or bureaucratic family connection – and he pays great attention to the special position of the Manchus. But just as studies of mobility raise questions about the more *general* problems which they can help in solving, so do also these different studies of bureaucracy. Here the existing literature provides us with some more systematic hints and possibilities of approach. Basically, two inter-connected approaches seem to be possible. One may deal with the extent to which different patterns of recruitment to the bureaucracy may influence its working, the extent to which they may influence its rationality and efficiency. Here one could trace the influence of different patterns of recruitment on the internal division of labor of a bureaucracy – their success in recruiting adequate personnel to different types of activities and departments – and on the extent to which such personnel was capable of performing the different bureaucratic jobs – became negligent of them, or tended to

³ See R. H. Turner, "Sponsored and Contest Mobility and the School System", *American Sociological Review*, XXV, No. 5 (1960).

⁴ See M. Bloch, *La Société Féodale* (Paris, 1939), I, 40.

⁵ See S. N. Eisenstadt, "Bureaucracy and Bureaucratization", A Trend Report, *Current Sociology*, 1959.

develop new tasks, to undertake reforms, etc. A parallel, but not necessarily identical analysis would be that of the influence of the scope of recruitment to the bureaucracy from different strata – i.e., the extent to which this may influence not only the performance of specific tasks in the bureaucracy but also social or political orientations of the bureaucracy or of its upper echelons.

This last brings us to the second aspect, namely, to the extent to which the bureaucracy, or its different echelons, develop political attitudes of their own, and the extent to which these orientations are compatible with the basic premises of the political system within which they operate. Here, many of the studies touch directly on the studies of mobility – and to a very great extent they are identical or very closely overlapping. They necessarily suffer from the lack of explanation of many of their hidden assumptions. But it is here again that some of the most baffling and interesting problems can be discerned and the juxtaposition of the two complexes of studies – those of mobility and those of bureaucracy, especially through the study of differential mobility into the bureaucracy – can be very promising and important. Marsh's own analysis only touches on these problems and any attempt to undertake them fully would necessitate a much more variegated methodological approach and use of different types of historical sources. There are but a few monographs which make any such attempt. Perhaps the closest single example is Rosenberg's analysis of the development of the Prussian bureaucracy.⁶ True, he tends to use various historical sources in the more traditional manner, but the way in which he uses them is much more sophisticated than most, although here also only some of his basic sociological assumptions are made explicit. A matching of his approach with that of Marsh and Ho could certainly be very welcome and fruitful. It would be fruitful within the analysis of any single society, but to answer these questions and problems fully would necessitate going beyond the analysis of any single historical case and leaning heavily on comparative analysis because only such an analysis can approach the differential weighting of the various social factors hypothesized in historical analyses.⁷

These conclusions may also indicate some of the general problems of sociological study of historical societies. Such a study may go in two different directions. One is the analysis of any single historical society and of its development or changes. Such an approach may be not dissimilar from the approach of social anthropologists that attempted to analyze either the "whole" of a primitive society or, more often lately, some particular institutional aspect thereof – except that the conceptual and methodological

⁶ H. Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy and Autocracy – The Prussian Experience 1660–1815*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958.

⁷ One possible approach of this type has been attempted by the reviewer in S. N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*, New York, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963, see especially ch. XI.

tools used by anthropologists to study “simple” societies are not always fully adequate to deal with the problems of the more “complex” ones.⁸

In all such cases of the study of any single historical society the special contribution of the sociologist can be in two different, yet complementary, directions. One is a methodological direction, i.e., an attempt to apply some of the methods developed in the social sciences to historical data and sources.⁹ The other is through the application of more rigorous conceptual tools and “Problemstellung” about the nature of different social “forces,” institutions and processes. It is mainly in these ways that sociological analysis can explicate and put to test many of the various implicit and often ad hoc assumptions which can frequently be found in many of the best historical treatises about the working of societies or the nature of social institutions.¹⁰

Such explication and testability of these assumptions becomes even more articulated in the second major approach which the sociologist may develop with regard to historical societies – namely in the comparative approach – i.e., when either certain types of social, political, economic structure (e.g., feudal system) or certain aspects of such institutional structures – their conditions of development and change – are compared between different societies. Obviously such an approach cannot come in the place of historical analysis proper, but it can greatly help in its systematization and in the bringing out of some of its implicit assumptions and it constitutes, from the sociologist’s point of view, a basic part of the study of the nature of society, of processes of institutionalization and of social change.

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⁸ See on this: S. N. Eisenstadt, “Anthropological Studies of Complex Societies”, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (June 1961), pp. 201–222.

⁹ See on this P. F. Lazarsfeld, J. R. Strayer and H. David, “History and Public Opinion Research, A Debate”, in M. Komarovsky (ed.), *Common Frontiers of the Social Sciences* (Free Press of Glencoe, 1957), pp. 242–287.

¹⁰ See on this S. N. Eisenstadt, “The Causes of Disintegration and Fall of Empires – Sociological and Historical Analyses”, *Diogenes*, 34 (Summer, 1961), pp. 82–108.

* This paper was written in 1962–63 while the author was Carnegie Visiting Professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.