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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038512466971>

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Citation

ZHANG, Qian Forrest.(2014). The Strength of Sibling Ties: Sibling Influence on Status Attainment in a Chinese Family. *Sociology*, 48(1), 75-91.

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The Strength of Sibling Ties: Sibling Influence on Status Attainment in a Chinese Family

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Abstract

What allowed eight siblings from a politically disadvantaged rural family to overcome institutional barriers and achieve upward mobility during Maoist China? What then restricted their children's chances of upward mobility during the Reform era, when both family background and institutional environment were more favourable? In studying this anomalous case, whose experiences contradicted the well-documented effects of state policies and yet cannot be explained by parental influence, this study examines how adult siblings influenced each other's status attainment processes, an issue largely neglected in the literature. Through comparing the micro-level mobility processes of the two generations in this family, I propose that, in times of rapid social change, sibling influence is more effective in generating status gain than parental influence, because the extensivity of sibling ties allows people to mobilize more relevant and heterogeneous social resources to facilitate social mobility.

Keywords

China, intergenerational mobility, sibling relations, social resources, status attainment, strong ties

Introduction

How do adult siblings influence the status attainment process of each other? Especially, how does sibling influence compare with parental influence in shaping individuals' status attainment? Sociological studies on siblings' effects mostly focus on the competition among siblings for parental resources, especially when they live under one roof. This line of research established a clear inverse relationship between sibship size and children's

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educational attainment in western industrialized societies, and explained it with the 'resource dilution' theory, which posits that more siblings intensify the competition for finite parental resources and reduce parental investment in each ([Blake, 1981](#); [Downey, 1995](#)). More recent studies have challenged the universality of this inverse relationship by noting how extra-familial institutions and conditions mediate the sibship effect, especially in developing countries ([Buchmann and Hannum, 2001](#); [Lu and Treiman, 2008](#)). Other studies have extended this line of inquiry by examining the effect of sibling spacing and sex composition on status attainment ([Conley, 2000](#); [Powell and Steelman, 1990](#)). Another line of stratification research uses sibling correlations in socio-economic characteristics as omnibus measures to capture the effects of all aspects of family background on status attainment. Some propose an inter-sibling effect on educational attainment and argue that, by means of role modeling and social facilitation, siblings can have reciprocal effects on each other, creating sibling resemblance in educational attainment ([Benin and Johnson, 1984](#); [Hauser and Wong, 1989](#)).

These studies all share a narrow conceptualization of siblings' effects on status attainment. In this view, any sibling effect is limited to the pre-adulthood stage when siblings interact more closely within the family; once they reach adulthood and start their separate lives, they disappear from each other's mobility processes. Because siblings in pre-adulthood have little independent resources of their own, naturally, sibling influence is seen as minor compared to parental influence: siblings only matter to the extent that they interfere with parental investment on oneself. Such a conceptualization probably reflects two assumptions about family relations and status attainment in western societies: first, a nuclear family is the norm, so that people's sibling networks are small and relationally distant; second, in a rationally organized economy, meritocracy has replaced nepotism as the dominant mechanism of status attainment, and career mobility is primarily based on achievements rather than particularistic social ties. As a result, kin members' influence on one's status attainment is limited mainly to parent-child relations and to educational attainment. Other family members, including siblings, can interfere with parents' influence on children's education, but once people complete education and live independently, they are on their own.

To what extent these two assumptions are true in western societies and this narrow view on sibling influence justified is probably debatable. In the US, for example, while some studies find generally low levels of social support among siblings ([White and Riedmann, 1992](#)), others argue that strong sibling solidarity still exists, especially in the working class and ethnic groups ([Allan, 1977](#)). Advances in the social network literature show that social resources accessed, and mobilized through, personal ties can be instrumental in facilitating status attainment in western societies; but the irony here is that weak ties are usually more effective in generating status gain than the strong ties that typically exist among siblings ([Granovetter, 1973](#); [Lin, 1999](#)). The real challenge, however, comes when we shift to different social-historical contexts. In a country like China, where kin networks are a key unit of social and economic organization and the use of particularistic personal ties penetrates into all aspects of social life, the neglect of adult siblings' impact on status attainment becomes particularly problematic. This article begins to address this gap with a qualitative case study that examines the two questions posed at the beginning in the context of post-1949 China.

Social Change and Status Attainment in Contemporary China

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Chinese society went through some of the most dramatic social changes in recent human history. Land reform in the countryside and socialist transformation of the urban economy eliminated landlords and urban bourgeoisie as social classes. The ensuing political campaigns and purges within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) turned the lives of many intellectuals and state cadres upside down. The Cultural Revolution that started in 1966 pushed broader segments of the society further into chaos. The radical Red Guards attacked and deposed authorities, and armed conflicts broke out between factions. Millions of urban youth had their schooling disrupted and were sent down to the countryside for 're-education'.

Status attainment in such an unpredictable environment was a tricky business. During the Maoist period (1949–1978), key channels of social mobility were disrupted. The state kept rural-to-urban migration under strict control through a caste-like registration system that categorized citizens as either urban or rural. The urban labour market was eliminated, and allocation of urban jobs tightly controlled by the state. Ascriptive traits such as one's family origin – the hereditary 'class label' – superseded achievement characteristics. During the Cultural Revolution, secondary and tertiary educations were interrupted for years. Even when colleges reopened in the early 1970s, the government implemented a social-engineering policy that enrolled students on the basis of family class label, admitting children of peasants and workers while excluding those of landlords and bourgeoisie. Normalcy was gradually restored when the Cultural Revolution ended and the Reform started in the late 1970s. The Reform, however, was no less a disruption to people's status attainment processes: not only was the reversal of the radical policies an abrupt turnaround, new changes were also brought in that, in the span of one generation, would fundamentally transform the stratification system and mobility regime.

The impacts of these structural and institutional changes on macro-level mobility patterns during these two periods are well documented. A consistent finding is that the shifting state policies had indeed altered stratification dynamics repeatedly ([Cheng and Dai, 1995](#)). More specifically, the socio-economic leveling policies during the Maoist period not only deposed landlords, bourgeoisie, and intellectuals from the privileged positions they had occupied, but also set up obstacles to block their children from advancing in the new society. [Deng and Treiman \(1997\)](#), for example, find that, during the Cultural Revolution, the socio-economic leveling policies weakened father–son correlation in educational attainment and reduced the advantage of children from intelligentsia and cadre families. [Zhou et al. \(1998\)](#) find that the family class label had substantial influence on one's educational attainment and that such effects fluctuated with changes in state policy.

This literature, however, has two weaknesses. First, just like the broader literature on intergenerational mobility, it focuses on parental influence but does not conceptualize or empirically examine whether siblings and other kin members would have any influence on status attainment. Such models of status attainment that only allow for parent–child associations yield an incomplete picture of social mobility in a society like China. Second, these quantitative studies were intended to confirm hypotheses about the expected effects of macro-level social changes, especially the socio-economic leveling

policies implemented after 1949. To the extent that the observed associations between parents' and children's characteristics fit the expected effects of macro-level changes, these studies can then identify the institutional logic of these policies as the causal mechanisms that created the observed mobility patterns. However, in cases where mobility outcomes deviated from, or even contradicted, the expected effects of macro-level structural and institutional changes, these studies are at a loss to explain the micro-level causal processes that could lead to such results.

A recent study on the long-term trend in status reproduction in one Chinese province exposes these two weaknesses and points out a new direction ([Campbell and Lee, 2011](#)). Despite radical changes that took place after 1949, in rural villages in Liaoning, the authors find considerable continuity in both the relative status of kin groups and father–son associations in status attainment throughout the 20th century, and thus, long-term stability in patterns of stratification and little impact from the radical policies of socio-economic leveling. What created these surprising outcomes, the authors suggest, is the power of kin networks: when the direct father–son transmission of status was blocked by social leveling policies, the larger kin networks remained largely intact and helped to preserve and transmit intangibles like attitudes and orientations that are conducive to status attainment. In other words, micro-level processes such as kin relations mediated the impact of macro-level changes and shaped mobility outcomes.

This echoes the insight from the micro-level mobility theory, which argues that status attainment results from everyday social interactions, which are shaped by the social resources people can mobilize through personal ties ([Lin, 1999](#)). In a seminal work that applies this theory to China, [Bian \(1997\)](#) finds that, when job seekers in urban China used personal networks to influence the administrative job assignment process, contrary to the famous 'strength of weak ties' thesis, strong ties, because of the obligations and trust involved in them, were more effective in motivating social contacts to exert their influence and generate favourable results.

Although [Bian's](#) analysis did not single out sibling ties to investigate, his findings make it clear that, even in the more institutionalized setting of urban China, the strong ties among adult siblings can be effective in bending the official institutions and influencing the status attainment process. On the other hand, [Campbell and Lee's \(2011\)](#) work shows that there are theoretically anomalous cases whose mobility experiences contradicted the well-documented effect of state policies and yet cannot be explained by a narrow focus on parental influence. They do not, however, have micro-level data to either investigate siblings' impact or substantiate the causal mechanism they propose. The logical question is then: are sibling ties a missing piece in this puzzle? The research strategy this study takes is, therefore, to find anomalous cases that had mobility experiences similar to the 'surprising continuity' that [Campbell and Lee \(2011\)](#) find, but use a qualitative approach that is better suited for uncovering micro-level processes to examine the role of sibling ties in creating these counter-intuitive mobility outcomes.

The Case: The Lu Family

As one would expect from [Campbell and Lee's \(2011\)](#) findings, such anomalous cases are not too hard to find. In talking to my circle of friends, who are mostly intellectuals

and professionals of urban origin, about their families' mobility histories, a trend started to emerge in their parents' mobility experiences, which contradicted one of the most strongly documented patterns in the literature: a 'bad class' family origin – such as landlord and bourgeoisie – subjected people to discriminatory policies and hindered their educational and occupational attainment in Maoist China ([Cheng and Dai, 1995](#); [Deng and Treiman, 1997](#); [Zhou et al., 1998](#)). Surprisingly, it is not uncommon for children from these families of stigmatized class backgrounds to defy the odds stacked against them and achieve upward mobility in Maoist China.

I collected brief mobility profiles of nine families, knowing basic information about family background, family structure, socio-economic status of members, and key events in their mobility history. From this group I selected one family. The experiences of the two generations in this family most sharply contradicted the known structural effects and can thus best reveal the micro-level family processes that this study intends to find. I combined narrative interview and conventional structured interview to collect the life history data of the subjects. I interviewed all eight siblings in the first generation and 12 out of the 16 children born to these eight siblings. The interviews were all conducted at the subjects' residence and lasted from one to four hours. Members of the family – especially the second generation – live in various parts of China; the data were collected in several rounds of fieldwork that stretched over 30 months.

The family under study descended from a couple who lived in a village in the eastern part of Hunan Province in south-central China. Ancestors of the husband, Mr Lu, migrated here 300 years ago. Until today the village remains a largely single-lineage village; its name – Lujiapi – still bears the lineage's name. Mr Lu was the only son of his parents, who both abandoned the family to join a Buddhist monastery in their middle ages. Mr Lu inherited a moderate piece of farmland and received some elementary education by his parents and at the lineage's ancestral hall. Mrs Lu, who hailed from a neighbouring village and a different lineage group, was illiterate. Mr Lu had some business acumen. When he was in charge of the ancestral hall and its assets, he used that capital to get into rice trading and made some money for both the ancestral hall and his own family. This allowed him to purchase more land and, at peak seasons, hire seasonal labour on the family farm. The couple, however, never had year-long employees or tenants.

Their misfortune started right after the founding of the PRC. During the land reform, even though they did not fit any criteria of the landlord class, they were classified as landlords – one of the only two cases in the village – simply because they had the largest landholding, and, more importantly, the village *needed* to have some landlords to provide both targets for political campaigns and assets for seizure and redistribution. Their land, house and other assets were all seized by the new village authority and redistributed among villagers. They got an equal piece of land as other villagers and continued to live in the family house, although now sharing with other poorer families and only occupying the shabbiest part of it. Besides the material deprivation, this political classification turned the Lus into an enemy of the state and subjected them to repeated public humiliations and personal assaults over the years, culminating in the suicide of Mr Lu in 1960 during the great famine. Mrs Lu, however, survived all the hardship and died in 1995 at the age of 91.

This study examines the mobility experiences of the children and grandchildren of the Old Lu couple – referred to here, respectively, as the first and second generations of the

Lu family. Mrs Lu gave birth to 11 children; eight survived into adulthood. The seven daughters and one son were all born in the village, Lujiapi, from 1929 to 1954, spent their childhood in the countryside, and had farming experiences. All started their careers in the Maoist era and retired in the Reform era. During the Reform era, none of the siblings changed employers. The eight siblings together gave birth to 16 children from 1956 to 1980. The second generation all started their careers in the Reform era. The family structure and family members' residential and occupational statuses at the time of data collection are summarized in Figure 1.

As we can glean from Figure 1, many incidences of upward mobility and no incidence of downward mobility were found in the first generation during the Maoist era, despite their disadvantages of coming from a rural and landlord-class background. In the second generation, however, downward mobility was frequently experienced during the Reform era, even though many came from an advantaged family background. What caused this divergence? Did sibling influence contribute to it? The eight siblings of the first generation provide an ideal case for the purpose of this study: disadvantaged family background, mobility outcomes contrary to the expected policy effects, a large sibling network, and limited parental influence. The second generation, who differ from the first on almost each of the above aspects, provides a comparison that can offer a preliminary test of the findings from the first generation.

Against the Tide: The First Generation's Upward Mobility in the Maoist Era

Six of the eight siblings in the first generation left the countryside and settled in cities; they became skilled workers, state cadres, and professionals. In other words, the majority of the children from this rural and politically disadvantaged family moved up and entered the ranks of the Maoist urban middle class.

The two eldest children, Ailing and Biling, both joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1949. By then, they had both completed elementary education in the lineage's ancestral hall and finished two or three years of middle school at the county seat – a rare accomplishment for rural girls. When the PLA marched into Hunan during the last days of the civil war and army recruiters approached the students about joining the PLA, Ailing did not hesitate, and brought Biling along. Thanks to their educational background, Ailing was assigned to become a political cadre and Biling a medic, and received further training in the army for their posts. After the civil war ended, both were demobilized from the army and transferred to local civilian posts. Ailing started as an office clerk in 1953 in a power plant in a prefectural level city. She later transferred to the provincial agency in charge of electric transmission and substation construction in the provincial capital city of Changsha, and became an administrative cadre. She retired from the agency in 1985. In 1951, Biling's army medical unit was turned into a local civilian hospital in Chaling County, not far from the siblings' ancestral village, and Biling became a doctor there. She was later transferred to the teaching hospital of the School of Public Health in Xiangtan City and retired from there in 1992.

The fourth daughter, Deling, saw her elementary schooling truncated when the ancestral hall of the village was demolished during the land reform. Then, economic stress on

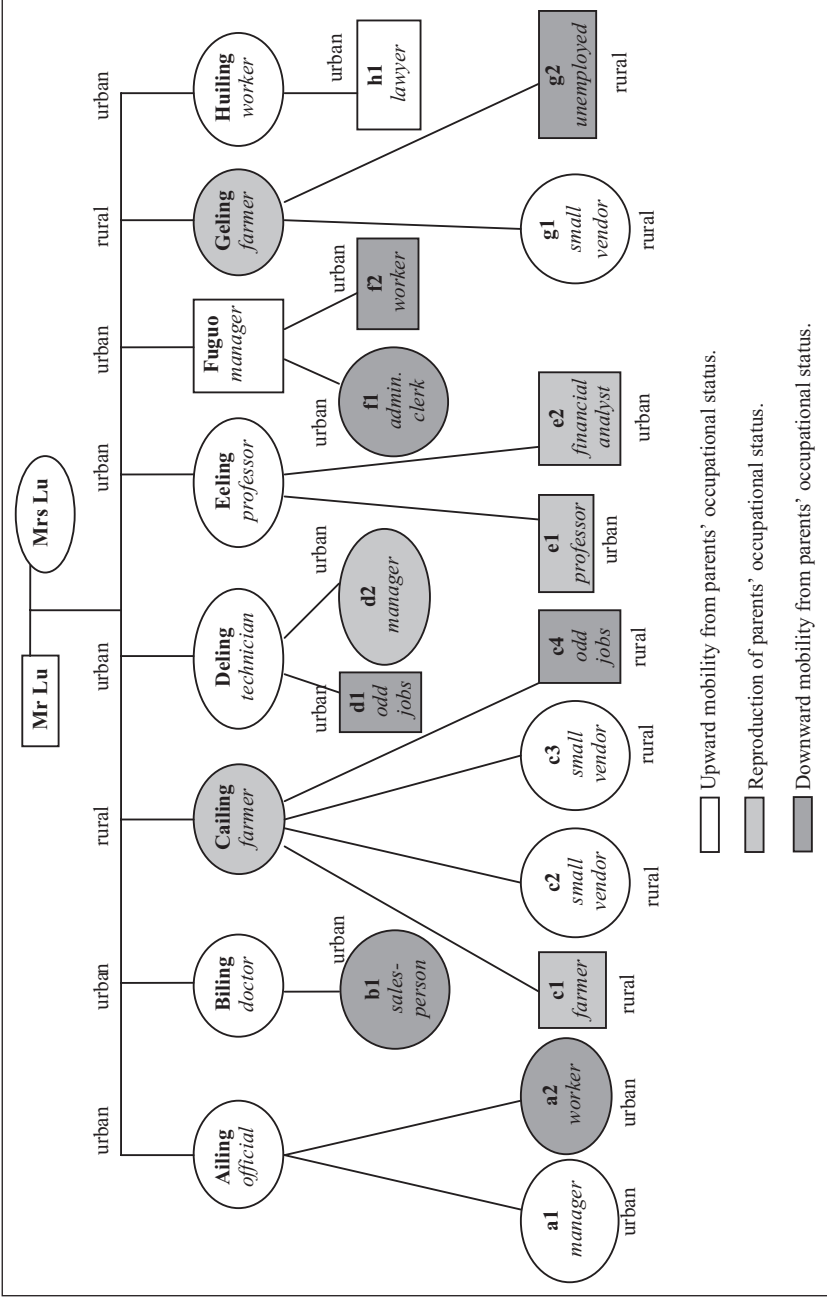


Figure 1. Three generations of the Lu family: family structure, residential status, and occupation
 Notes: Ovals indicate females, squares indicate males.

the family in the early 1950s forced the father, Mr Lu, to keep her at home to help with farming, crushing her dream of further schooling. However, in 1956, thanks to Ailing's strenuous efforts, Deling was sent to her eldest sister's home in Changsha and finished her primary school there. She started as an apprentice in a factory of locomotive repairs in 1959 in the nearby industrial city of Zhuzhou. She moved up the ranks in the factory and in 1992 became the first female certified master technician in her city. Her factory, however, went into decline during the state sector restructuring in the 1990s; she took early retirement from the factory in 1996.

The fifth daughter, Eeling, finished her primary school in a town near the ancestral village in 1955. She excelled at her studies and was admitted to a middle school in the neighbouring county – 70 kilometres away from home – where her sister Biling worked at the local hospital. Since then, Biling became her guardian and source of financial support, all the way till she graduated from university in 1968. After graduation, she started as a technician in a fertilizer factory in a small city in western Hunan. In 1973, she transferred back to her alma mater in Changsha, the provincial capital. She retired in 2003 as a full professor.

Fuguo, the only son, followed Eeling's steps in finishing primary school and then lower-middle school under Biling's support. He, however, failed to advance to upper-middle school and had to settle for a vocational school. After graduation in 1963, again thanks to Ailing's efforts, he got a job as a worker in the provincial electric transmission and substation construction system – Ailing's own work unit. He spent his entire career in this system, rose to the rank of general manager in a subsidiary company and retired in 1998.

The youngest daughter, Huiling, born in 1954, was only two years older than Ailing's daughter. After the father's death in 1960, her widowed mother could no longer feed her in the countryside, and sent her to live in Changsha with Ailing, who by then had become the de facto head of the entire family. Huiling thus grew up with her two nieces and went to school in Changsha. After finishing lower-middle school in 1970, she, like millions of her contemporaries, was sent down to the countryside to be 're-educated'. She spent five years working in the most remote part of the province. In 1975, with Ailing's help, she was given an entry-level, manual job in Hengyang Municipal Bureau of Electricity and returned from the countryside. She stayed with the same employer for 20 years and took earlier retirement in 1995.

Only two of the eight siblings stayed behind in the countryside: Cailing and Geling, the third and seventh daughter. They spent their entire lives as farmers, but also engaged in some sideline jobs from time to time, ranging from making and selling tofu to working as a part-time cook at the local government. They both moved out of the ancestral village and lived with their husbands on the outskirts of the county seat. The township they lived in was later absorbed into the expanding county seat; their household registration status was changed to urban. Their children grew up in an urbanizing environment and could no longer get more land beyond what was left by their parents.

Explaining the Puzzle: Sibling Ties in Facilitating Mobility

The upward mobility experienced by the siblings reflects the macro-level opportunities created by structural changes during the Maoist era, such as state building (recruiting

Ailing and Biling first into the military and then the expanding state bureaucracy), industrialization (generating industrial employment for Deling, Fuguo and Huiling), and educational expansion (providing higher education and employment opportunities for Eeling). However, the institutional rules of allocating these new opportunities in Maoist China clearly put people like the Lu siblings at a disadvantage when competing with other 'red seedlings' from politically trusted backgrounds. Furthermore, in the entire Lujiapi village, these six siblings were the only ones who managed to move out of the village and enjoy the opportunities of upward mobility provided by structural changes in the Maoist era. Their upward mobility was far from determined by structural level changes.

What stands out from their experiences is the extent and effectiveness of cross-sibling help in facilitating social mobility and, in comparison, the absence of parents' help. The four younger siblings who moved into cities all owe their upward mobility in some way to the help from the two eldest sisters. Essentially, Ailing's bold move to join the PLA started a chain reaction that, step by step, pulled five of her younger siblings out of the countryside and onto tracks of upward mobility. Biling simply followed Ailing's lead in joining the PLA and staying in it after the war. Once they were allocated state jobs and were financially in a much stronger position than their parents, they took over the education and career development of the younger siblings. Deling and Huiling went to live with Ailing in Changsha; they – and the brother, Fuguo – later got their state factory jobs thanks to Ailing's use of her social resources within the provincial electricity system, where she herself worked. Eeling and Fuguo were sent to Biling, first in Chaling County, then Xiangtan, and completed their education under Biling's auspices.

The strong sibling ties made the Lu siblings closely attached to each other and willing to help out each other, even when they themselves were in no way well-cushioned. For example, when Biling started supporting the education of Eeling and Fuguo, she was just an entry-level medical staff member at a small hospital. Under socialist China's strict rationing system of consumer goods, state employees had little disposable income. Yet, Biling had to save up from her meagre salary to support her younger siblings – in Eeling's case, for eight years. According to Biling's estimate, her financial support of Eeling was much greater than of her own daughter.

In contrast, the siblings' status attainment processes benefited little from their parents. This is not simply a result of the absence of the Lu father. Old Lu had every intention to help his children. His decisions to not only give education to every daughter upon school age, but also send the two eldest daughters to middle school outside the village – both highly unconventional measures at the time – are good indications. In fact, all the siblings thought of Old Lu's suicide as his last desperate act to help them. When he could do nothing positive to help his children any more, he probably thought that his departure – at the time of a great famine – would finally free his children from being burdened by not only his political sin but also his unproductive old age. Similarly, Mrs Lu spent the rest of her life moving from one child's home to another, taking care of almost every single one of the 16 grandchildren. For an illiterate rural mother with bound feet, unable to speak anything but the incomprehensible home-town dialect, this was as much as she could do to help her children.

The Lu siblings' experiences show that, in a context of rapid social change like the Maoist China, *sibling influence is more significant than parental influence in the status*

attainment process. This is due to two key advantages that siblings have during rapid social change. First, siblings, as contemporaries with each other who go through a similar life course within a short span of time, are more likely to have resources that are relevant to the time and useful to other siblings. In comparison, the fast pace of social change can easily devalue the resources of an older generation – the parents – or even render them obsolete in a new institutional setting. Old Lu, for example, had been quite resourceful prior to the revolution. But his landholdings and other resources, which, without the revolution and land reform, would have provided high status and a good economic foundation for his children in the countryside, were not only eliminated but even turned into a liability by new socialist institutions. Instead, it was the resources accumulated by Ailing and Biling under the new institutional environment that made the difference to the other siblings.

Second, siblings, because of their larger number and the earlier life stages they are in, are also more likely than parents to be resourceful in an uncertain institutional environment. By the time children start their careers, parents are usually quite advanced in careers that often have been built under an outdated institutional setting and are difficult to change. A large number of siblings, on the other hand, can have more heterogeneous careers – and therefore resources – increasing the chance that at least one has the right resources in the new institutional setting. In this sense, the strength of sibling ties is similar to the ‘strength of weak ties’ (Granovetter, 1973): sibling ties have greater extensivity and heterogeneity than parental ties, and, as the extensivity-of-ties proposition suggests, ‘the more extensive the network, the better social resources to be accessed and mobilized’ (Lin, 1999: 483). In some institutional settings, sibling ties can therefore mobilize more useful social resources than parent ties. Siblings, being younger than parents, are also more likely to adjust their career trajectories to adapt to institutional changes and remain resourceful.

For the eight siblings in the first generation, sibling ties helped them overcome political disadvantages and obtain upward mobility in a highly unstable institutional environment. Interestingly, the second generation of the Lu family also started their careers in a context of rapid social change, but mostly had few or even no siblings. They provide a control group to show what effect the absence of extensive sibling ties has on mobility outcomes.

Experiences of the Second Generation in the Reform Era

Most children in the second generation grew up in urban middle-class families and had much more advantageous backgrounds than their parents’ rural, landlord background. But downward mobility became a recurrent experience for many of them during the Reform era.

Ailing and her husband, a senior engineer at the same work unit, have two daughters, Aiya (a1) and Aizi (a2). Aiya was sent down to the countryside after graduating from lower-middle school, just like her aunt Huiling two years her senior. While at the countryside, she prepared hard for the newly reopened college entrance exam and won admission to a university in the northern city of Tianjin in 1978. After graduating in 1982, she

started working in a state factory as a technician, but had numerous job changes. Now in her early fifties, she is a mid-level manager at a multinational corporation in Shanghai. Her younger sister, who was spared the sending down experience, however, did not advance beyond lower-middle school. She started working as a manual worker in a factory affiliated with her parents' work unit. The factory went under during state sector restructuring in the 1990s, forcing her to take early retirement in her early forties. So while Ailing's elder daughter achieved upward mobility, the younger daughter slid down.

The only daughter (b1) of Biling, the doctor, also failed to advance beyond lower-middle school. She worked for many years in the local state-run immunization centre, a job found by her parents. After being downsized from that job in the late 1990s, she continued with sporadic jobs at various sales positions. She attained much lower social status than her parents.

Deling married a mid-level manager at her locomotive factory. They have two children. The elder son (d1) failed to advance beyond upper-middle school and joined the PLA afterwards. After discharge, he followed his wife to her home city, Beijing, but was unable to find stable employment there. While his wife worked in a state-run department store, he took on various odd jobs. Deling's daughter (d2) fared better. She graduated from an adult-education community college with an associate degree. Thanks to her parents' help, she got a job in the lucrative municipal bureau of electricity in their home city. Although she has much higher income than her parents, in terms of relative social status, she has so far not surpassed her father's position as a mid-level manager.

Eeling, the college professor, whose husband is a professor at the same university, has two sons. Both excelled at school. The elder son (e1) graduated from a top-tier university and later obtained a PhD from an American university. He now continues his parents' vocation as a university professor. The younger son (e2) worked as a software engineer after graduating from university. He now works in a brokerage firm as financial analyst. Both sons of Eeling manage to at least maintain their parents' social status.

Fuguo married a fellow worker in his work unit – uneducated but with impeccable working-class pedigree – and has two children. Both failed to go beyond lower-middle school. The elder daughter (f1) found a job, thanks to her parents' help, as a saleswoman in a state-run pharmacy. Over the years, she advanced to an administrative position in the company. She took early retirement in 2000 when her husband was promoted to manager and had a good enough salary to support the family. The younger son (f2) couldn't find a job after finishing school. After much effort by his parents, he was recruited into the PLA despite failing the physical exam. After his discharge in 1993, he was hired by his father's old work unit as a truck driver, a job he still holds till this day – another case of downward mobility from his father's social status.

Huiling, the youngest of the eight siblings, married a fellow worker in her work unit. Because of the one-child policy, they could only have one son (h1). Huiling devoted much of her life to her son's education; her son repaid it with excellent performance in school, graduating from China's top law school in 2004. He now works as corporate lawyer in one of China's largest private law firms in Beijing.

Downward mobility is also found among the children of the two siblings who stayed in the countryside. Cailing and her husband, a farmer, who was once also the accountant

of his village, have four children. The two sons (c1 and c4) never stepped out of the rural county. One is a hog farmer; the other does various odd jobs including making tofu and growing and selling bean sprouts in local markets. Cailing's two daughters (c2 and c3) both pursued vocational training in Changsha, where their aunts and uncle live. Neither of them, however, could find a stable job in the city after finishing the two-year training. They had to return to the rural county of their origin. But they could not do farming either, because their parents' land was passed down to the two sons. Through marriage, they both became self-employed retail shop owners. Cailing's four children have become better off economically than their parents, largely thanks to the urbanization process. However, none of them were able to move from the rural county to cities even after completing schools in Changsha.

Geling also married a farmer. The couple has two children. Neither child's education went beyond lower-middle school. The elder daughter (g1) makes a comfortable living by making tofu and growing and selling bean sprouts in local markets. The younger son (g2), however, has not found a secure way of making a living and now works irregularly as a street vendor selling fruit. Compared to his parents' comfortable living, by the standard of the rural county, he has slid down.

In the career histories of all second-generation members, cross-sibling help was very limited – not surprising given the much smaller sibship size in each family. While sibling ties could still be effective in facilitating social mobility, macro-level changes – in this case, the demographic transition and the family planning policy that greatly reduced sibship size – reduced the number of sibling ties and the possibility of sibling influence in status attainment.

For the second generation, parental influence superseded sibling influence. But parental resources again showed the intrinsic limitations in facilitating job mobility during rapid social change: outdatedness and lack of extensivity. Ailing, for example, tried to get her second daughter a better job within the provincial electricity system, just as she did for her younger siblings. However, by the time her daughter Aizi entered the labour force in the early 1980s, many of Ailing's contacts had retired or moved. The institutional setting had also changed. Credentials became more important in job allocations, while the importance of personal connections declined. Fuguo also tried to get a job for his son after his discharge from the army. But when his son returned to Changsha in 1993, Fuguo was only five years away from his retirement and had just been transferred to a subsidiary company in Hainan Province. Only after repeated efforts was he able to find his son a low-level truck-driving job in his old work unit. In both cases, parents' resources were devalued by the lapse of time and institutional changes and could only land the children jobs in declining state-owned units. The real growth opportunities, however, were in the market sector – a new terrain for the parents. None of the parents changed their jobs to enter the market sector – a move that was too difficult and risky at their stage – and had little chance to accumulate any resources that could help their children's careers in that sector. In the second generation's mobility history, all incidences of parent-facilitated mobility (a2, b1, d2 and f2) led to jobs in the state sector, none of which ended in upward mobility. In contrast, all incidences of upward mobility (a1, c2, c3 and h1) happened through employment in the burgeoning market sector, none of which were the result of parent-facilitated mobility.

Conclusions

Table 1 summarizes the mobility experiences of the two generations in the Lu family in two periods of rapid social change. Six out of the eight siblings in the first generation, despite their disadvantages of coming from ‘bad class’, lowly educated rural parents, obtained upward mobility, thanks mainly to cross-sibling help. In contrast, although the 16 members in the second generation had much better family backgrounds, in the absence of extensive sibling ties and relying more on parental resources, many failed to obtain upward mobility and even slid down the social ladder.

Such differences cannot all be explained by macro-level differences between the two periods. The industrialization process during the Maoist era indeed had the expected effect of weakening the influence of family background on status attainment and increasing intergenerational mobility ([Cheng and Dai, 1995](#); [Deng and Treiman, 1997](#)). But, as mentioned earlier, even though modernization created the new positions that made the upward mobility of the Lu siblings possible, the institutional rules discriminated against them in favour of people from better political origins. Furthermore, this type of mobility-inducing macro-level conditions was only stronger during the Reform era, when accelerated industrialization, market reform, educational expansion, and relaxation of migration control all took place; yet many in the second generation failed to benefit. Therefore, in addition to whatever effects of structural level changes, we have to look at micro-level social interactions to gain a fuller understanding of the diverging mobility experiences of these two generations.

The intention of this study is not to compare the macro-level mobility regimes of the two periods, but to examine how sibling influence and parental influence shaped the

Table 1. Mobility experiences of the two generations in the Lu family.

	First generation	Second generation
Number of cases	8	16
Historical context	Maoist period (1949–78)	Reform period (1978 to present)
Social change	Rapid, more politically centred	Rapid, more economically centred
Family background	Bad class (landlord), low education, and rural	Mostly urban middle class, no political disadvantage
Family structure	Large sibship size, strong sibling ties	None to small sibship size, weak sibling ties
Macro-level mobility regime	Opportunities for upward mobility, administrative allocation based more on political status and personal ties	Opportunities for upward mobility, more market allocation based on credentials
Dominant micro-level mobility mechanism	Sibling influence	Parental influence and personal achievements
Mobility outcomes	Consistent upward mobility	Varied, more incidences of downward mobility

micro-level mobility outcomes of the two generations. Apart from idiosyncratic factors, which will be discussed later, the presence or absence of strong and extensive sibling ties is a key difference that contributes to the two generations' diverging outcomes. I propose two causal mechanisms to explain the greater effectiveness of sibling ties than parental ties in facilitating status attainment: the greater relevance and heterogeneity of sibling resources.

The validity of this causal argument, however, is predicated upon three scope conditions. First, this conclusion only applies to the macro-level context of rapid social change, which devalues parental resources and weakens parental influence in mobility processes. For the two generations in the Lu family, parents (as they always do) tried to use their resources to assist their children's status attainment. Rapid social change, however, exposed the limitations of parental resources – outdatedness and lack of heterogeneity – and made such attempts largely futile. Counterfactually, had those social changes in both Maoist and Reform-era China been absent (the socialist revolution and land reform that dispossessed Mr Lu of his assets and made him a political pariah, and the market reforms that caused the decline of the state sector and made Ailing and her siblings helpless in the growing market sector), both generations would have benefited more from their parents than siblings.

Second, the effectiveness of sibling ties depends on a large sibship size and strong sibling relations, which, compared to parent–child relations, are more variable across social contexts and sensitive to social changes. In the Lu family's case, for the first generation, the large number of siblings in the family meant that parents' investment and participation in each child's development is limited. Older siblings took over much of the responsibility of taking care of younger siblings. Stronger bonds formed among siblings, which could later be mobilized to seek cross-sibling help. But for the second generation, macro-level social changes such as urbanization, industrialization and then, later, the reproductive policies of the state drastically drove down women's fertility rate and created small, nuclear families, especially in cities. Within the families, as more family functions such as childcare and education shifted to non-familial social organizations – especially in urban China's work units, where all urban members of the second generation grew up – relations between the small numbers of siblings were less close and the exchange less extensive. Without the relational infrastructure, sibling-facilitated mobility ceased to be effective during the Reform period.

Furthermore, sibling relations, of course, are not always cooperative. They are shaped by other family dynamics, especially parental influence. In this sense, strong and supportive sibling and kin relations could be one of the 'intangibles' that are conducive to status attainment and transmitted in families and kin groups of higher social status, as Campbell and Lee (2011) hypothesize. In rural China, the kind of cross-sibling support we find in the Lu family, therefore, may be specific to – or at least the strongest in – the rich-peasant and landlord-cultivator classes.

Lastly, the effectiveness of sibling ties also depends on the importance of personal ties in social life, more so than that of parental ties. While parental help for children's mobility can occur through transmission of values and assets, cross-sibling help usually happens through the direct use of social ties in interacting with – facilitating, circumventing, or even bending – institutional rules. However, as social life becomes more rationalized and the significance of social ties declines, the effectiveness of sibling ties also declines. Part

of the reason why sibling influence was muted for the second generation and a person's educational attainment played a more important role than family relations is the institutional transition in the Reform era from administrative allocation of jobs, which was more susceptible to the influence of personal ties, to the more market-based allocation of jobs based on credentials and other achievement criteria. None of the well-to-do members of the second generation – the lawyer, professor, and manager – can help much in landing their siblings or cousins a job with their own employers, as Ailing did for her siblings in the past.

Discussion

In the discussion so far, I have not examined the idiosyncratic factors that also played a role in shaping each person's experience and can potentially weaken the causal argument. The most crucial event for the first generation is Ailing and Biling's joining of the PLA on the eve of the Communist victory, a result of personal efforts rather than sibling influence. It may seem that this event is more important than cross-sibling help in explaining the first generation's upward mobility. This seemingly idiosyncratic event, however, is actually why I argue that sibling resources are more likely to be useful than parental resources in a time of uncertainty and rapid change. It is precisely because of the varied personal efforts and idiosyncratic experiences of a large number of siblings, who are at more youthful stages of life, that an 'idiosyncratic' yet fateful event like this, which was not unequivocally rewarding at the time in a highly uncertain social context, is more likely to happen to some siblings rather than an aged parent. Again, extensivity of ties increases the usefulness of social resources within the network.

These findings about the two types of social ties echo those in the social resources theory. The new contribution here is shifting the focus from tie strength to a more nuanced analysis of other properties of social ties – specifically, the effectiveness and limitations of these two types of strong ties in mobility processes, as determined by the institutional context. While sibling ties can have greater extensivity and heterogeneity and help people to access more contemporary resources, compared to parent-child ties, they are more vulnerable to social changes that either alter the family structure or restrict the use of social ties.

Cases like the Lu family are surely a minority in contemporary China, and findings here are not meant to challenge the well-documented macro-level mobility patterns. Instead, the goal here is to find the effect of sibling influence and the causal mechanisms through which it works, which can then inform quantitative analysis. One testable hypothesis from this study is that, when other things are controlled, a large sibship size will have an independent, positive effect on occupational attainment during the Maoist period in China, because it increases one's possibility of using social resources to gain job mobility.

More broadly, findings from this study highlight the intimate relations between family dynamics and stratification processes. Even in the context of powerful state policies and transformative social changes, there is no single dominant mobility process. Instead, the impacts of structural level changes are mediated by family dynamics, and result in diverging mobility processes across population groups that differ in family characteristics. Furthermore, in a society like China, the validity of treating status attainment purely as an

individual enterprise, independent from that of family members – the assumption widely taken in quantitative analyses – needs more scrutiny. The role of kin members may go far beyond simply being a source of support for status attainment, but may in fact shape one's motivations in life and career strategies to the extent that, as Campbell and Lee (2011) suggest, we need to change our analytic unit from individuals to kin networks.

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this article were presented in a panel (RC06 on family research) at the International Sociological Association's XVII World Congress in Gothenburg, Sweden, and at a seminar at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. I am grateful to the conveners of these two events, Professors Emiko Ochiai and W Jean Yeung, respectively, and the participants for their comments and suggestions.

Funding

Fieldwork for this research was funded by a research grant from Singapore Management University's Office of Research.

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