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Citation for published version (APA):
Li, Y. (2022). Intergenerational Social Mobility in China. In Y. Li, & Y. Bian (Eds.), *Social Inequality in China* (pp. 19-48). World Scientific Publishing Europe Ltd.

Published in:
Social Inequality in China

Chapter 2

Intergenerational Social Mobility in China

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Abstract

This study examines intergenerational social mobility in China. Drawing on national representative surveys in the last few decades, the analysis focuses on absolute and relative mobility rates for men and women. With regard to absolute mobility, we found a high level of total mobility and high rates of upward mobility, including long-range upward mobility. These patterns hold for men and women alike and reflect the occupational restructuring brought about by reform policies. With regard to relative mobility, we found a trendless fluctuation coupled with signs of growing social rigidity for the younger cohorts, especially for men. Rural women in China faced the greatest social disadvantages in social mobility.

Keywords: intergenerational social mobility; absolute and relative mobility rates; social fluidity and rigidity; *hukou*; China

1. Introduction

Research in intergenerational social mobility is concerned with issues of social justice, equality of opportunity, and the creation of a fair society. Unprecedented socio-economic changes have taken place in China since 1949, especially in the last 40 years after the reform policies were launched in 1978. Much research has been conducted on different domains of people's lives. Yet, little systematic research is available on patterns and trends of intergenerational social mobility in China.

This study aims to fill in this gap. Using national representative surveys from 1996 to 2015, the analysis focuses on absolute and relative mobility experienced by men and women in China. At the most general level, we find an updated occupational structure, with "more room at the top." Both men and women have benefited from this, experiencing more upward than downward mobility and, for men, even long-range upward mobility rates were at similar or somewhat higher levels than downward mobility rates. Yet, the opportunities were not equally shared. Those with advantaged family origins were standing at the front of the queue and had clearly more opportunities for educational and career development. Relative mobility showed little change over time, and young people faced much stronger competitions than older cohorts. There were clear signs of growing social rigidity.

This chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, I give a brief account of existing research on intergenerational social mobility in China by Chinese and overseas scholars. Although there are a few studies using single datasets, no comprehensive analysis on the patterns and trends of social mobility is currently available. Following this, I will present data, methods, and key findings. The chapter will end with a discussion.

2. Social Change and Social Mobility

Social mobility across generations refers to the transmission of social (class) position from parents to children, thus the reproduction of social advantages and disadvantages. The class of family origin serves as the social condition shaping people's destination class as outcome. People in advantaged families will seek to make the best use of the socio-economic-cultural resources at their disposal to help advance their children's social position and at the same time do everything they can to avoid their children's downward mobility. People in poor families would also wish to

secure a good future for their children but lack the socio-economic-cultural resources. As Goldthorpe and Mills (2004: 223) point out, individuals in different social positions will tend to pursue mobility strategies which are rationally adapted to the constraints typical of their class situations and which tend in their aggregate to maintain the relative positions unchanged unless there are strong external forces that change the "class-lined" inequality of condition. How do Chinese people in different classes pursue rational mobility strategies within the constraints of their class situations? Is the mobility competition becoming stronger over time as more people are able to join the competition or is it becoming weaker as the reform has generated more opportunities? Have the reforms changed the class-lined social inequality? Both the "rigidity" and "fluidity" theses can find support from state policies. For instance, the "open-up and reform" policies and the associated relaxation of the household registration (*hukou*) control have allowed hundreds of millions of peasants to find jobs in cities but at the same time numerous new jobs have been created.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese government have adopted many policies to try to reduce socio-economic inequalities, although not all of them were specifically aimed at promoting social mobility and some of them may have had the unintended consequences of exacerbating social inequality.

The most important state policies include the elimination of the private ownership of the means of production, establishment of state- or collective-run enterprises under central planning, establishment of the household registration (*hukou*) and workplace unit (*danwei*) systems, "send-down" movement during the Great Cultural Revolution, launch of the open-up and reform policies, and "urbanization" drive with the gradual relaxation of the *hukou* control. Tremendous changes have been effected by these policies, especially the policy of the *hukou* system adopted in 1958, which has affected the lives of the Chinese people even to this day, and the reform policies initiated in 1978 which have lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and transformed the country from a largely agricultural society to the second-largest economic power-house in the world. During the last 40 years, over 280 million peasants have moved from the countryside to cities in search of jobs and a better life. Many of them, the second generation in particular, were born and bred in cities with little experience or expertise of agricultural work but are still called "migrant peasant workers," showing the hallmark of institutional discrimination. Currently, the migrant peasant workers constitute

the mainstay of the workforce in the country's industrial and commercial activities. Voluminous studies have been conducted on the causes, manifestations, and consequences of these policies. The following is a brief account of the major policies that have had a close bearing on social mobility.

First, the elimination of the private ownership of the means of production in the 1950s rid the country of the "exploiting classes" composed of landowners ("landlords" in Chinese terminology) and capitalists, and put the vast majority of workers and peasants into the "proletariat." The working class was held as the leading class in the country with the alliance of peasants. Yet, even though not openly acknowledged, there were vast differences within the "proletariat," such as between revolutionary leaders (cadres), professional and technical workers, clerical workers, urban manual workers, and rural peasants. Treiman and Walder (2019) show that those who owned land and factories before liberation were downtrodden in the new China, treated as class enemies and given the label of "Bad class." Their land, factories, and other forms of property were confiscated by the state. Poor peasants in the countryside and manual workers in cities, who were the mainstay of the revolutionary force, have now become the master class of the country. For decades afterward, the Bad class and their offspring were relegated to a lower social status, deprived of educational and occupational opportunities, unable to join the army or become a cadre. The Red class, composed of revolutionary cadres and soldiers, had the highest social status and enjoyed the greatest advantage. Yet, in terms of educational attainment, childrens of the Bad class were not markedly behind their peers from the Good class (peasants and workers) at each level of matriculation with the sole exception of that for junior middle school (Treiman and Walder, 2019: 1148).

The household registration (*hukou*) system established in 1958 created a chasm among the Chinese people, separating the population into an "agricultural" rural and a "non-agricultural" urban sector. For decades afterward, the rural *hukou* holders were not allowed to move to cities for education or employment, and they could not enjoy the benefits bestowed upon urbanites in terms of jobs, education, housing, healthcare, pensions, and many other services provided by the state. In the urban sector, the government further differentiated workplace (*danwei*) statuses giving top priority to Party and government organizations, followed by state-owned enterprises, and cascading down to collective-owned enterprises (Cheng and Selden, 1994; 1997). Most importantly, newborn babies had to

register their *hukou* following their mother's *hukou* status, a policy only relaxed in 2003. As most Chinese people were living in the countryside at that time, and as women were even more likely to work as peasants than men, this means that the overwhelming majority of children born in the latter half of the 20th century in China had rural *hukou* status and were destined to be peasants themselves, even for those whose fathers had urban *hukou* or were working in rural areas as cadres or professionals, such as commune leaders, doctors, or teachers. Only "the best and brightest" of the rural children, as Wu and Treiman (2007: 419) called them, could squeeze through the very narrow door and gain access to urban life by attending college or going to the army and becoming an officer.

Hukou was therefore a most important ascriptive factor for social mobility in China. This factor, together with parental class, largely determined the life chances of the Chinese people in the last 70 years. For decades since the inception, this system served as an effective control mechanism of the people in the country and a powerful barrier for rural people. Parental socio-economic positions further strengthened the social divide. For instance, even during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), cadres' sons had 50% more chances for senior-secondary education than peasants' sons (Deng and Treiman, 1997: 421). In the urban sector, parental class played a highly significant role on children's life chances. For example, even though family background had little influence on who was sent down to the countryside as "educated youth" during the Cultural Revolution, it had a marked effect on who could return to urban life earlier: those from high-ranking cadre families were over twice as likely to secure an early return to the city as their peers from ordinary working-class families (Zhou and Hou, 1999: 24).

While the detrimental effect of the *hukou* and class on social mobility has been much studied in research (Li, 2021; Li and Zhao, 2017; Li *et al.*, 2015; Wu and Treiman, 2004; 2007), the work-unit (*danwei*) effect is less straightforward. In an interesting study, Lin and Bian (1991: Table 2) show that father's work unit had a significant and notable effect on son's first-job work-unit status whereas father's class effect was negligible. Wu and Treiman (2007) suggest that this might be a methodological artifact as they were using the structural equation modeling method for categorical variables (such as *danwei* and class) which could not adequately capture the path dependence of the mobility trajectories.

While the state policies prior to the reforms may be viewed as largely unfavorable to social mobility, those adopted during the reform period

might be expected to be more conducive to mobility. Indeed, Nee (1989) was among the first to predict that social mobility would increase and meritocracy prevail as the market unleashed its forces. As he saw it, the reforms will benefit direct producers at the expense of the redistributive powers. Talent, hard work, and educational qualifications will assume an increasingly more important role, whereas ascriptive factors such as family background and political status will gradually lose importance.

The idea of a market-driven meritocracy has received some empirical support. For instance, Li and Walder (2001), Lu and Treiman (2008), Walder *et al*. (2000), all show a weakening importance of family background and Party membership, and a growing importance of human capital in post-reform China. Yet, as Bian and Logan (1996) point out, the optimism over market-based meritocracy may be premature, oblivious of the powerful resistance to change by the privileged. The transition to a market economy may not necessarily lead to a weakening of the redistributive powers, as market and political forces are more likely to join forces than to go their separate ways. This may lead to the formation of a new elite with a concentration of socio-economic and political powers, making them even more powerful than before, a feature that has been corroborated in the more recent socio-economic development. For instance, Li *et al*. (2018) showed that the father–child association in the intergenerational social mobility is stronger now than in the past.

These and other policies would undoubtedly affect peoples' life chances although it is not possible to find a one-to-one correspondence for social mobility. Until fairly recently, social-mobility research in China tended to rely on small-scale and unrepresentative data, collected in one or a few localities or picked impressionistically, with the results from such studies being ungeneralizable to the whole population. Even when national representative data have become available, systematic research is still hard and there is little scholarship on the patterns and trends of social mobility for both men and women that covers a long period of time in China. For instance, Li and Zhao (2017) and Wu and Treiman (2007) restricted their analysis to men; Li and Zhu (2015) limited their analysis to respondents aged 14–35; Chen (2013), Li *et al*. (2015, 2018) only used a few years' data with a semi-cohort approach which, while showing insights on age-group changes, do not show changes from earlier to later periods. Given this, a careful examination of the patterns and trends of absolute and relative mobility rates and for both sexes at the national level is still needed, which is the task of the following analysis.

3. Data and Methods

To reveal the patterns and trends of intergenerational social mobility for men and women in China in the past few decades, the present study uses data from the Life History and Social Change (LHSC, 1996) and the China General Social Survey series (CGSS, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013). These are the best national representative surveys, covering the longest time span, available at the time of analysis for this chapter. While there are some differences in geographical coverage between individual surveys, almost all provinces and municipalities in mainland China are covered.[1]

With regard to father's and respondent's class, we adopt the Goldthorpe schema with some modifications in light of China's context as discussed above. This schema is much used in intergenerational social mobility research and has been used for mobility research in China (Chen, 2013; Li and Zhao, 2017; Li *et al.*, 2015; Wu and Treiman, 2007). It is based on the employment relationship theory (Goldthorpe, 1987, 2007) which first differentiates a person's employment status in the labor market: whether he or she is an employer, self-employed, or employee and, at a second level, amongst employees, the occupational positions they hold on the basis of his or her current or last main job according to the employment contract with the employing organization. The chief distinction is made between those situated in higher-level professional-managerial positions (higher salariat) with those in lowest manual positions (routine manual workers in the west or peasants in China). The higher salariat hold the "service" contract relationship with their employers where they provide professional expertise or managerial skills in return for secure employment, stable incomes, and future benefits. People in routine manual jobs with the labor-contract relationship are paid by the

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[1]The SCLH and CGSS data are available at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset. xhtml?persistentId=hdl:1902.1/M889V1 and http://www.cnsda.org/, respectively. The CGSS is jointly conducted by the Survey Research Centre of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and the Sociology Department of the People's University of China. The first CGSS survey was launched in 2003, followed annually or biannually. The 2003 survey is not used in the present study because it considers only the urban sector. The CGSS series covers most provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities in mainland China with the exception of Qinghai, Tibet, and Ningxia. Qinghai and Ningxia were not covered prior to 2010, and Xizang (Tibet) was only covered in 2010. Nevertheless, this is the best and most comprehensive social survey available on mainland China. The response rate is 60–75%, as shown in the CGSS Technical Reports.

piece or on hourly rates with no guarantee of secure employment and steadily advancing careers (Goldthorpe, 2007). In between are positions with intermediate employment relationships. The schema is typically used for mobility research in industrial societies. In China, there is a very large agricultural sector, namely, peasants with rural *hukou* status who are located at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

For fathers and respondents alike, we constructed the following five classes: (1) professional and managerial salariat class (I, II); (2) intermediate class of clerical, own-account, manual supervisorial, and lower technical workers (III–V); (3) skilled manual workers in commerce and industry (VI); (4) unskilled manual workers in commerce and industry (VII(a)); (5) agricultural workers (also called "peasants" in Chinese terminology, *nongmin*, VII(b)). The father's class refers to his job when the respondent was aged 14–18 and respondent's class refers to his or her current or last main job. As the CGSS is designed for the adult population in China aged 18–69, we confine the analysis to this age range. Excluding the cases with missing data on key variables used in this analysis, we have an effective sample size of 65,834.

We conduct analyses of both absolute and relative mobility rates. The former refers to mobility between parents and children as we directly observe and are expressed in percentage terms, while the latter refers to the results of class competition, namely, the competition for gaining access to advantaged and for avoiding disadvantaged positions, and are typically expressed in terms of odds ratios.

4. Analysis

4.1. *Absolute mobility*

4.1.1. *Overall distributions*

We begin with descriptive analysis. Figure 1 shows the trends of class distribution for men and women during the period covered, namely, from 1996 to 2015. With regard to men (panel 1), we find a notable upgrading of the occupational structure, as shown by a sharp reduction of the proportions engaged in agricultural work from 51.9% in 1996 to 34.4% in 2015, a decrease of 17.5 percentage points. The size of the unskilled manual working class grew by 11.3 percentage points (from 9.2% in 1996 to 20.6% in 2015), and a large portion of this increase could be due to peasants becoming "migrant peasant workers" ("migrant peasant workers" are

Panel 1: Men
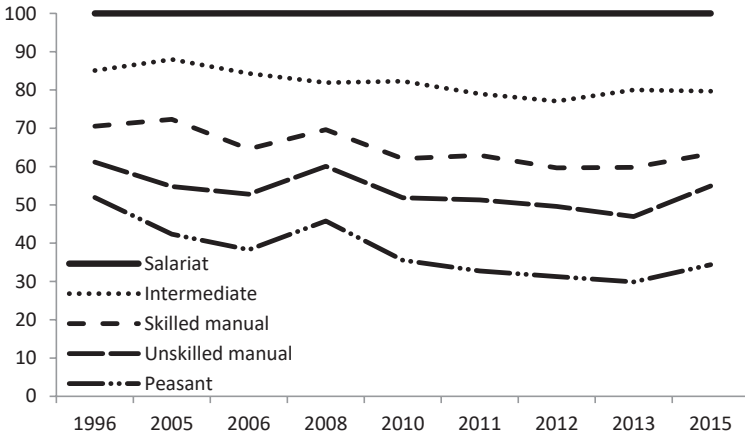
Panel 2: Women
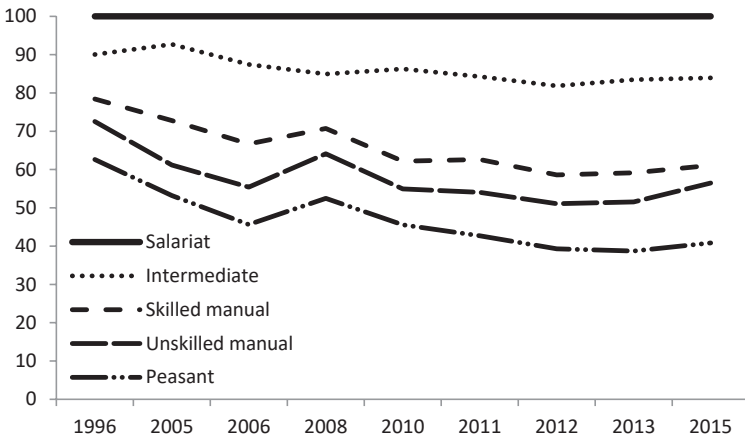
Fig. 1.   Class distributions for men and women, cumulative percentage.

defined as those who have moved to cities and have worked there for six months or more, or who work in the local factories within their county or within 60 kilometers of their *hukou* registration place). During the period in question, the number of migrant peasant workers increased from around 44 million in 1996 (Liang, 2016: 454) to around 278 million in 2015.[2] It is noted here that the size of the intermediate classes changed

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[2]http://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%86%9C%E6%B0%91%E5%B7%A5/581, accessed on 15/4/2017.

rather little, whereas there was a big increase in the size of the professional-managerial salariat, rising from 14.9% in 1996 to 20.3% in 2015. Overall, we find an expansion of the professional-managerial salariat and the manual working class, and a marked contraction of the peasant class.

Turning to the class distribution of women as shown in panel 2 of Figure 1, we find both similarities to and differences from the patterns for men. As in the case of men, women's class positions improved during the period, with an even bigger contraction of the size engaged in agricultural work by 21.8 percentage points as compared with the 17.6 points for men, namely, from 62.6% to 40.8% between 1996 and 2015. The increases in the working class at 5.7 points was smaller than that for men, but the increase in the intermediate positions from 11.6% in 1996 to 22.9% in 2015 was highly noticeable. Interestingly, the increase in professional-managerial salariat, at 6.1 points, was also larger than that for men. Comparing women and men, we find two notable features. First, women were consistently disadvantaged. At each of the time points covered in the data, they were less likely than men to find themselves in the professional-managerial salariat and more likely to be in peasant positions. Second, we also find signs, albeit small, of gender progress, as women's lead in peasant occupancy was reduced from 10.7 percentage points in 1996 to 6.5 points in 2015, and a smaller improvement manifested itself in terms of salariat occupancy, with men's lead decreased from 4.9 to 4.3 points between the two ends of the time spectrum covered.

Having looked at the overall class distributions of men and women, we proceed to gross and net amounts of intergenerational social mobility. The former is measured by the dissimilarity index (DI) and the latter by Lieberson's (1975) net difference index (NDI). The DI indicates the percentages of cases that would have to be reallocated to make two distributions identical, such as between father's and son's classes. Thus, as a measure of the overall difference between two distributions, it is widely used in mobility studies (Goldthorpe, 2007; Li and Devine, 2011; Li and Heath, 2016). Yet, it has some undesirable effects. For instance, it is insensitive to the location of the differences between father's and son's classes and is unable to depict the direction of change between groups. The NDI can overcome these shortcomings. It shows the net class decline or advancement of the respondent's relative to their father's class.[3]

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[3]DI is defined as $0.5\Sigma_{i=1} \mid X_i - Y_i \mid$ and NDI as $\text{ND}_{xy} = \text{pr}(X > Y) - \text{pr}(Y > X)$ and further as $\Sigma_{i=2}^{n} \chi_i \left(\Sigma_{i=2}^{n=i} \gamma_i \right) - \Sigma_{i=2}^{n} \gamma_i \left(\Sigma_{j=2}^{n=i} \chi_j \right)$, where in our case, X indicates father's class and Y that of the respondent. It is noted here that we reversed the class order in calculating the NDI

Panel 1: DI
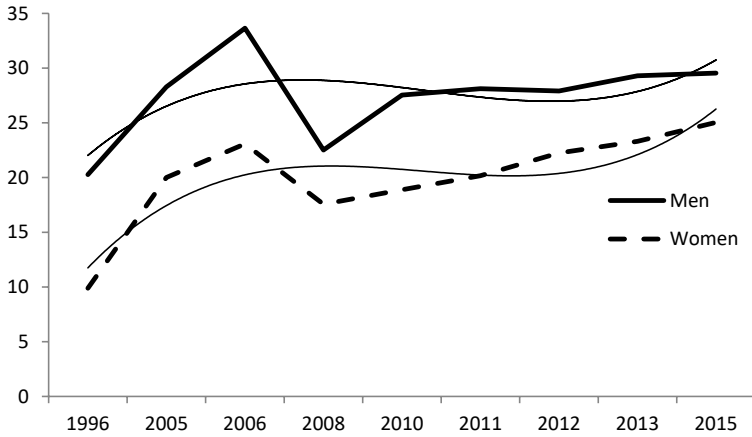
Panel 2: NDI
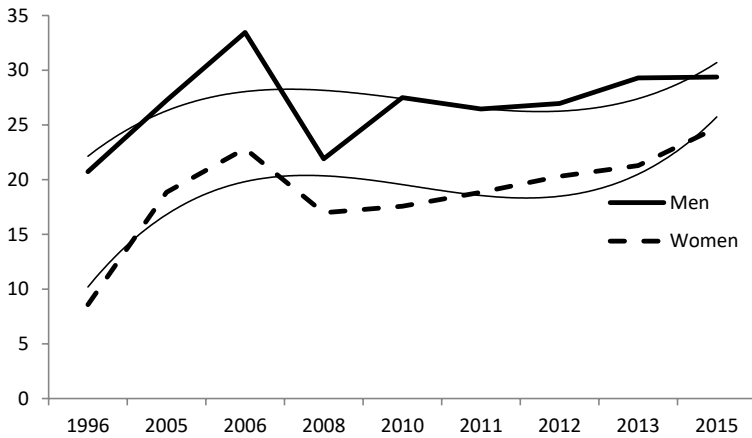
Fig. 2.   Dissimilarity index (DI) and net dissimilarity index (NDI) for men and women.

The data on the DI and NDI for men and women, as shown in Figure 2, reveal three main features. First, there was greater mobility from 1996 to 2015 in terms of both gross and net mobility and that for men and women alike. Take the DI for men as an example: 20.3% of the men were

with 1 referring to agricultural workers and 5 to the salariat. It is further noted here that the NDI, as Lieberson defined, ranged from –1 to 1, but we have multiplied it by 100 so that the data can be more directly compared with the DI.

in different class positions to their fathers in 1996, which became 29.5% in 2015, indicating greater overall mobility. Second, there was greater mobility for men than for women, indicating more disadvantages faced by women. Third, there were signs of gender convergence. At the beginning of the data coverage, men had a lead of around 10 points in terms of both DI and NDI, but the differences halved by the end of the period. Women were persistently disadvantaged but they were also catching up.

4.1.2. *Absolute rates*

The patterns in the class distributions over time would suggest changes in terms of absolute mobility. There are different ways of measuring such mobility, including total mobility, upward mobility, downward mobility, and horizontal mobility (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007; Goldthorpe and Mills, 2008; Li and Define 2011; Li and Heath, 2016). In this analysis, I keep most of the existing practices except for horizontal mobility which refers to movement among Classes III–V in the Goldthorpe class schema. While the overall advantages and disadvantages in terms of employment security, income stability, and career prospects for people in these positions are similar in Britain, they are quite different in China, making it less meaningful to adopt this approach. On the other hand, I add long-range upward and downward mobilities. The theoretical inspiration was drawn from the employment relationship theory positing movement into and out of the professional-managerial salariat as the most decisive form of mobility (Goldthorpe, 1987; Li, 2002). By way of illustration, I show immobility and different kinds of mobility in Table 1. It should be noted that, as they stand, the cell values in the table refer to the outflow rates, that is, class distributions of men and women by class of father. If one had used cell percentages, the total values of the table would add up to 100%, enabling the rates of immobility and various kinds of mobility to be calculated. The data on the main diagonal indicate the propensity to follow in one's father's footsteps, hence immobility; the cells below the diagonal indicate more advantaged positions for respondents than for fathers, hence upward mobility, and similarly for the cells above the diagonal refer to downward mobility. The sum of upward and downward mobility rates constitutes the total mobility. Within the upward and downward mobilities, I also show long-range upward and downward mobilities, defined as movement into and out of the professional-managerial salariat.

Table 1.   Class distribution of respondents by class of father (percentage by row).

Father's class	Respondent's class					
	1	2	3	4	5	N
Men						
1 Salariat	39.9	21.8	10.3	15.0	13.0	3,962
2 Intermediate	31.3	29.7	13.1	17.5	8.4	2,828
3 Skilled manual	23.9	23.9	24.4	20.2	7.6	3,039
4 Unskilled manual	23.1	22.4	16.4	31.0	7.0	2,750
5 Agricultural	11.4	13.8	9.2	13.5	52.1	20,003
(All)	18.1	17.4	11.4	15.9	37.2	
Women						
1 Salariat	35.8	27.4	7.7	11.4	17.7	4,139
2 Intermediate	28.8	37.3	8.9	11.9	13.2	2,936
3 Skilled manual	22.6	32.1	17.7	17.1	10.5	3,118
4 Unskilled manual	22.8	31.8	13.4	20.3	11.5	2,609
5 Agricultural	6.1	15.4	6.4	9.2	63.0	20,450
(All)	13.8	21.0	8.1	11.0	46.1	

■ Immobility	▨ Long-range upward mobility	☐ Short-range upward mobility	☐ Short-range downward mobility	▨ Long-range downward mobility

Note: Weighted analyses and unweighted data (the same for all analysis in this study).

The different kinds of mobility rates for men and women at the different time points are shown in Figure 2. But before we discuss the data in Figure 2, let us have a brief look at the overall pattern of class inequality from the perspective of the outflow table.

Table 1 shows the pattern of social mobility at the overall level, with data pooled over the years. We can see that the salariat has considerable advantages over other classes, the peasant class in particular. From salariat families, 40% of the sons and 36% of the daughters find themselves in salariat positions, as compared with only 11% and 6% of their counterparts from peasant families, a difference of 30 percentage points in each respect. The class differences in avoiding the most disadvantaged destinations are even more pronounced. Peasants' sons have a lead of 39 percentage points in doing agricultural jobs over salariat's sons, and the lead is even bigger at 45 points for women. If we just focus on the top and bottom, we can find that the chances of someone from salariat families finding themselves in salariat positions and avoiding peasant positions is 14 and 21 times for men and women, respectively, as compared with those from peasant families in the same kind of competition. The social advantages and disadvantages entailed in such competitions are even greater than those found in Britain (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2019: 81) echoing previous findings by Li *et al*. (2015).

We noted an earlier study by Wu and Treiman (2007) who found a markedly high level of long-range downward mobility for men from salariat origins to peasant destinations. The authors attributed this to the unique *hukou* system in China. The effect is echoed here, with 13% of men and 18% of women experiencing long-range downward mobility at the overall level. If we focus on those with rural *hukou* origins, we find even higher rates of downward mobility, at 27% for salariat sons and 35% for salariat daughters. The disadvantages of women can be explained by the long tradition of male preference in China, and this was even true of rural salariat families. However, for those who grew up with urban *hukou*, there was little gender difference. Further analysis shows that 48% of the sons and 47% of the daughters from urban salariat families were situated in salariat positions. Men from urban salariat families were actually more likely than their sisters to find themselves in unskilled manual positions, at 16% and 11%, respectively. Finally in this regard, we notice that peasants' children are most likely to inherit their father's positions, with 52% of their sons and 63% of their daughters being intergenerationally stable.

Figure 3 shows the data on the different kinds of absolute mobility as discussed above for men and women over the time period covered in the study. The 95% confidence intervals are also constructed, but to avoid making the graph "too crowded," they are only shown on the lines for total mobility rates. The panels show total mobility rates, their upward and downward components, and within each component the long-range kind.

Looking first at the data for men, we find that total mobility was on the increase, rising from 44% in 1996 to 57% in 2015, an increase of 13 percentage points, which are only a few points lower than those for British men reported by Goldthorpe and Mills (2008: 88). Rates of total mobility are subject to the number of categories used in the origin and destination classes, and would be higher if one had used more class categories. Goldthorpe and Mills used seven categories in their analysis, whereas only five categories are used in the present analysis, which may explain the differences between my findings and theirs. What is, however, of chief importance for present purposes is the general similarity between the findings, indicating the overall congruence of Chinese mobility patterns with those of the developed countries such as Britain. Looking more closely, we find that the rising total mobility rate is almost exclusively driven by the increase in upward mobility, from 33% to 45%, as there is no change in the rates of downward mobility which stayed constant at

Panel 1: Men
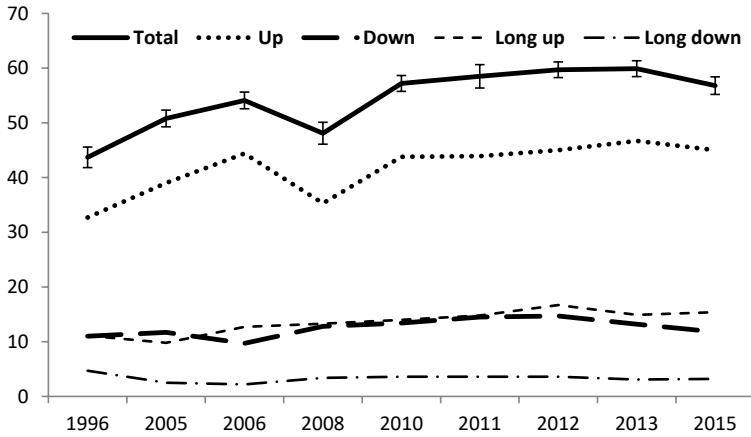
Panel 2: Women
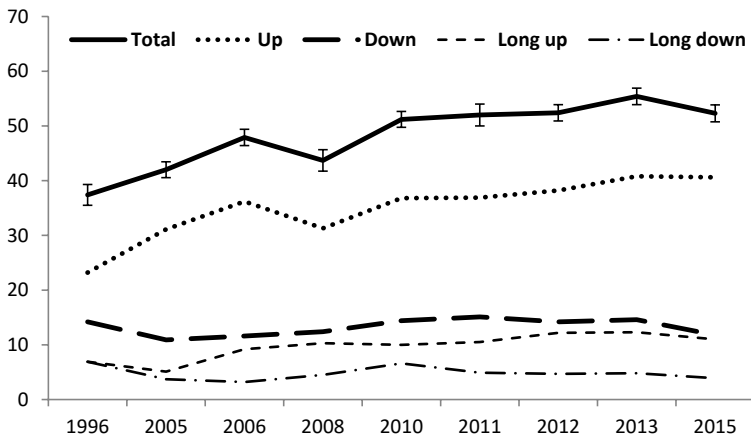
Fig. 3.　Absolute intergenerational class mobility rates.

around 11%. Equally importantly, we find that a substantial part of the increase in upward mobility is driven by long-range upward mobility with fathers situated in the lower rungs of the social hierarchy but sons moving all the way to occupy advantaged professional-managerial positions. The patterns reveal not only a substantial growth of intermediate and manual working-class jobs for peasants' sons but also an impressive growth of salariat positions that benefited the lower-class families.

The patterns for women's absolute mobility, as shown in panel 2 of Figure 3, are very similar to those of men except that the rates in various respects are a few percentage points lower. Thus, the total mobility rates increased from 37% to 52% from 1996 to 2015, with upward mobility rising by 18 percentage points (from 23% to 41%) and long-range upward mobility increasing by 4 points (from 7% to 11%). A notable difference from men's pattern is the slightly higher rate of downward mobility, including that of a long-range kind. The female disadvantages shown in Table 1 where women from all class origins were more likely than men to find themselves in peasant positions are given concrete manifestations here.

4.2. *Relative mobility*

Turning to relative mobility, our research questions focus on whether the association between class origins and destinations is becoming more fluid. In other words, is there greater equality of opportunity over time or across cohorts? Is social rigidity becoming stronger? Are women catching up with men or is gender disparity becoming more serious with the return of traditional gender ideology (Xu, 2016; Yang and Du, 2017)?

Relative mobility refers to the competition between people from different family (or *hukou*) origins in obtaining advantaged and avoiding disadvantaged destinations, and is expressed in odds ratios. The closer the odds ratio is to one, the weaker the origins–destinations association and the greater the social equality. The further away an odds ratio rises above one (or for the log odds to rise above zero), the stronger the association between origins and destinations and hence the more unequal the mobility chances. Conversely, the further away an odds ratio falls below one (or the log odds below zero), the more equal the mobility chances.

To address the research questions as outlined above, we use loglinear and uniform difference (UNIDIFF) models and fit three models: The first is the conditional independence model, which proposes that all odds ratios defining the origins and destinations are at a value of one. The second is the constant social fluidity model (CnSF), which allows for an association between origin and destination but not three-way interactions; in other words, this model postulates that the association between origins and destinations remains constant over time or across the cohorts. The third is the UNIDIFF model, which can provide an assessment of the direction and

Table 2.   Results of fitting the conditional independence (Cond. ind.), constant social fluidity (CnSF), and uniform difference (UNIDIFF) models to mobility tables for men and women (N = 33,904 and 32,479, respectively), 1996–2015.

Model	G^2	*df*	*p*	RG^2	BIC	Δ
Men						
1 Cond. ind.	7800.0	144	0.00	0.0	6297.9	19.3
2 CnSF	269.0	128	0.00	96.6	−1066.2	2.7
3 UNIDIFF	259.4	120	0.00	96.7	−992.3	2.6
2 − 3	9.6	8	0.29			
Women						
4 Cond. ind.	8966.7	144	0.00	0.0	7470.7	22.0
5 CnSF	273.8	128	0.00	96.9	−1055.9	2.8
6 UNIDIFF	253.0	120	0.00	97.2	−993.6	2.7
5 − 6	20.8	8	0.01			

Note: rG^2 = Percentage reduction in G^2; Δ = Percentage of cases misclassified.

magnitude of changes in the association between origins and destinations over time or across cohorts.[4] This third model provides us with a general test of differences in fluidity, testing whether there is a uniform pattern for the odds ratios to be closer to (or further away from) unity in a particular layer of the origin-by-destination table. We run the models separately for men and women.

Table 2 shows the results of fitting the loglinear and UNIDIFF models to the mobility tables for men and women over the period 1996–2015. For both men and women, we find that none of the three models provide an adequate fit to the data. Even though the UNIDIFF model gives a

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[4]The models are:

1. baseline model (conditional independence):

$$\log^{F}_{ijk} = \mu + \lambda_i^O + \lambda_j^D + \lambda_k^Y + \lambda_{ik}^{OY} + \lambda_{jk}^{DY};$$

2. constant social fluidity (CnSF) model:

$$\log^{F}_{ijk} = \mu + \lambda_i^O + \lambda_j^D + \lambda_k^Y + \lambda_{ik}^{OY} + \lambda_{jk}^{DY} + \lambda_{ij}^{OD};$$

3. log-multiplicative or UNIDIFF model:

$$\log^{F}_{ijk} = \mu + \lambda_i^O + \lambda_j^D + \lambda_k^Y + \lambda_{ik}^{OY} + \lambda_{jk}^{DY} + \lambda_k X_{ij},$$

where O stands for class origin, D for class destination, and Y for year (or cohort); X_{ij} represents the general pattern of the origin–destination association and λ_k the relative strength of this association.

statistically significant improvement in fit over the CnSF model for women (but not for men), the Bayesian information criterion (BIC) statistics still favor the CnSF over the UNIDIFF models for both gender groups, suggesting little directional change in the net association between origins and destinations or in the relative mobility.

In Figure 4, we graph the parameter estimates from the UNIDIFF models for men and women, with 1996 as the reference point. The data confirm the notion of trendless fluctuation, with little sign of systematically rising or falling relative mobility rates in any uniform or directional manner. This suggests that even though the occupational structure was upgraded in the past few decades with a contraction of the peasant class
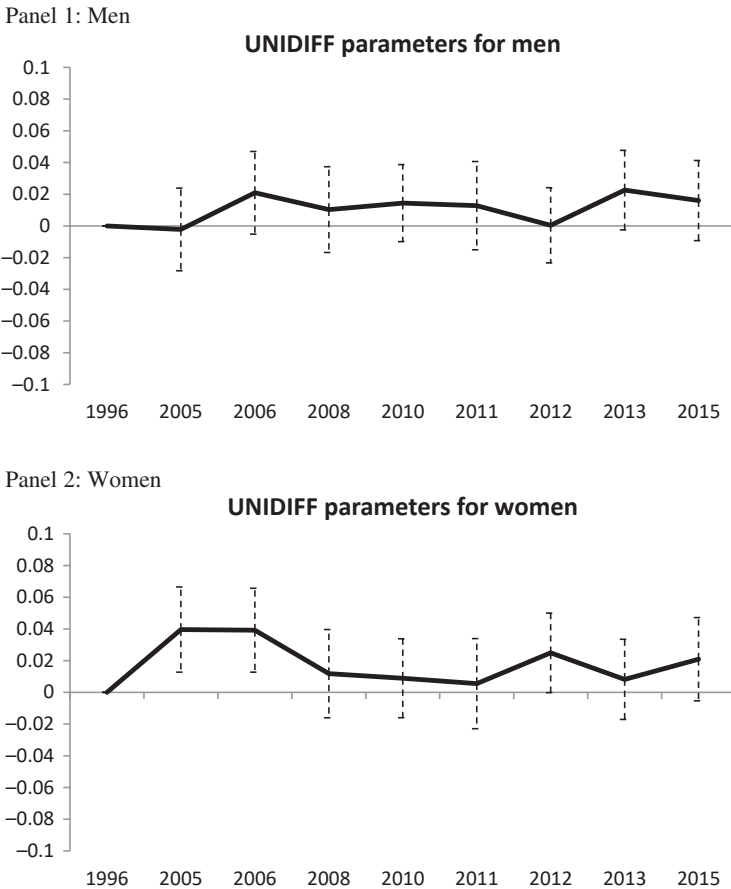
Panel 1: Men

Panel 2: Women

Fig. 4.   UNIDIFF parameter estimates and 95% confidence intervals, 1996–2015.

and an expansion of higher classes, the strength of association between origin and destination classes, or in other words the competition for access to advantaged positions and for avoidance of disadvantaged positions, remained as strong as ever. Hence, even though men and women were having more favorable opportunities over the time period covered, the net competition between classes did not change. If anything, the UNIDIFF lines were moving up a bit, suggesting signs of an increasing rigidity. In other words, rising opportunities brought about by the reform policies did not result in social progress.

Another way to look at social change is to conduct a semi-cohort analysis by pooling the data together and coding age groups (Chen, 2013; Li and Zhao, 2017; Li *et al*., 2018). For present purposes, four birth cohorts are differentiated: born before 1950, during 1951–1961, 1962–1975, and 1976–1997. According to this classification, the cohorts would correspond to job starts before the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), during the initial period of the Reform that started in 1978, and during the deepening of the Reform after 1992, respectively. People who entered the labor market during the different historical periods are expected to have different experiences ranging from a predominantly redistributive economy to an increasingly market economy. According to the neoliberal theory (Nee, 1989, 1996), the market-oriented reforms would lead to a steadily increasing and largely educational-based meritocracy with ascriptive forces gradually losing force. The period covered in the analysis also witnessed an expansion of the higher-educational sector in China in 1999, which would lead one to expect growing educational effects and weakening origin effects on the occupational attainment for the younger cohorts.

In Table 3, we show the fit statistics for the three models by birth cohorts. For both men and women, the UNIDIFF model clearly gives a better fit than the CnSF model as judged by the comparison between the models. In the case of men, the BIC statistic also favors the UNIDIFF model although it favors the CnSF model in the case of women. This suggests a fairly clear linear trend for men and some non-systematic change for women.

Figure 5 graphs the UNIDIFF parameters together with the 95% confidence intervals, which shows clear evidence of increasing social rigidity for men. Relative to the oldest cohort, the odds ratios defining relative rates of class mobility rose by factors of 0.031, 0.025, and 0.069 for the three younger cohorts, respectively, all being highly significant. In other

Table 3. Results of fitting the conditional independence (Cond. ind.), constant social fluidity (CnSF), and uniform difference (UNIDIFF) models to mobility tables for men and women ($N = 33,904$ and $32,479$, respectively), by birth cohorts.

| Model	G^2	*df*	*p*	RG^2	BIC	D
Men						
1 Cond. ind.	7372.7	64	0.00	0.0	6705.1	18.4
2 CnSF	242.6	48	0.00	96.7	−258.1	2.6
3 UNIDIFF	192.0	45	0.00	97.4	−277.4	2.2
2 − 3	50.6	3	0.00			
Women						
4 Cond. ind.	8943.2	64	0.00	0.0	8278.3	21.9
5 CnSF	230.1	48	0.00	97.4	−268.5	2.6
6 UNIDIFF	207.9	45	0.00	97.7	−259.6	2.3
5 − 6	22.2	3	0.00			

Note: rG^2 = Percentage reduction in G^2; Δ = Percentage of cases misclassified.

words, social fluidity decreased across the cohorts for men. The pattern for women indicates a declining fluidity or rising rigidity as well, although the shape is not as clear-cut as in the case of men.

As has been noted by earlier research, loglinear and UNIDIFF models are good at capturing the patterns of social fluidity at the global level but not so good at identifying specific features of social inequality at the "local" level (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007; Li and Devine, 2011; Li and Heath, 2016). To pursue the latter case, we show, in Table 4, sets of symmetrical odds ratios involving the same pairs of origin and destination classes in the same kind of competition for gaining access to certain (advantaged) and avoiding other (disadvantaged) class positions. We do this for men and women separately, and over the cohorts as we have constructed while at the same time taking into account the period (year of survey) effects in constructing the odds ratios following Breen *et al.* (2009).[5] Take the cell value for the first row (for the oldest cohort) under

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[5]A technical complication in using the cohort approach for conducting symmetrical odds ratios pertains to the variable dating of the destination position of the respondents in the same cohort, rendering it difficult to estimate the population-level fluidity at a particular date (Goldthorpe and Mills, 2004). Yet, if one's interest is not in the fluidity at any particular date, the cohort approach would, as Breen *et al.* (2009) observed, have advantages as
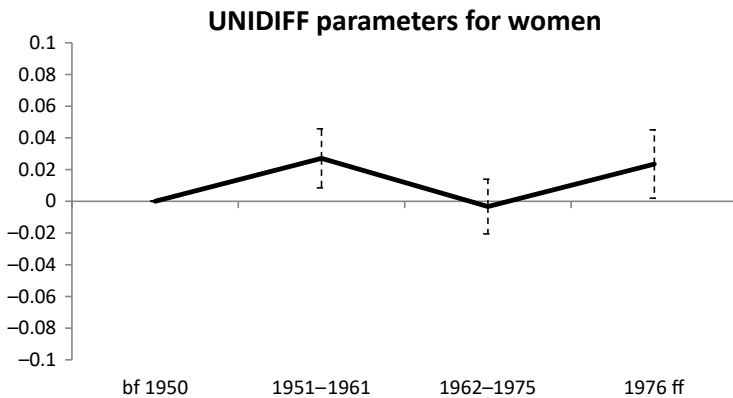
Panel 1: Men
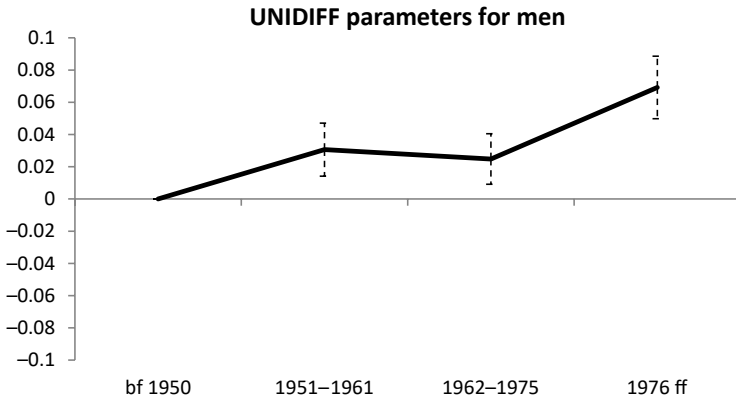
Panel 2: Women

Fig. 5.   UNIDIFF parameter estimates and 95% confidence intervals over birth cohorts.

the fifth column for example. The cell value is 7.18, which refers to the odds ratio in the competition between Classes 1 and 5 in the oldest cohort. That is, as compared with peasants' sons, sons from cadre and

people in the same cohort will have been sampled at different time points, and assuming the use of systematic surveying methods and assuming no major population-level disruptions caused by immigration or emigration during the time period under consideration (these conditions are fully met by the data used in this study), then pooling the surveys together and designing appropriate cohorts would produce more reliable results than using a single dataset. We therefore take the survey effects into account in the following analysis (separate analysis without taking into account of the survey effects yielded similar results though).

Table 4.   Symmetrical odds ratios: The rows in each set refers to the four cohorts (C1–C4), respectively.

	2	3	4	5
	Intermediate	Skilled manual	Unskilled manual	Agricultural
Men				
Salariat				
(C1)	*1.11*	2.08	2.06	7.18
(C2)	2.43*	3.92	4.51	14.01**
(C3)	1.68	4.55*	3.37	14.89**
(C4)	1.97*	4.32*	3.86	28.14***
Intermediate				
(C1)		2.01	1.04	10.71
(C2)		1.95	2.84	17.61
(C3)		2.34	2.06	7.57
(C4)		2.62	2.16	19.98
Skilled manual				
(C1)			*1.38*	10.25
(C2)			2.86*	40.29***
(C3)			1.99	15.53
(C4)			1.52	8.40
Unskilled manual				
(C1)				14.89
(C2)				40.09**
(C3)				10.22
(C4)				8.78
Women				
Salariat				
(C1)	*1.42*	3.13	2.58	19.67
(C2)	1.73	3.47	3.33	27.63
(C3)	1.65	4.04	2.92	21.32
(C4)	1.82	2.34	4.14	21.14
Intermediate				
(C1)		1.81	*0.91*	14.51
(C2)		2.75	2.21*	16.27
(C3)		1.77	2.21**	7.31*
(C4)		2.03	1.93*	10.30
Skilled manual				
(C1)			*1.17*	18.29
(C2)			*1.28*	30.53

Table 4. (*Continued*)

	2	3	4	5
	Intermediate	Skilled manual	Unskilled manual	Agricultural
(C3)			1.89	17.07
(C4)			*1.06*	6.05**
Unskilled manual				
(C1)				14.71
(C2)				25.62
(C3)				8.91
(C4)				4.61***

Notes:

1. Cohort 1: born before 1950; cohort 2: 1951–1961; cohort 3: born 1962–1975; cohort 4: born 1976 or later. All odds ratios are calculated controlling for year of survey.

2. All odds ratios are significant at the 0.05 level or above except for those in italics. Significance tests are conducted for cohort differences, with cohort 1 as reference: $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$.

professional (salariat) families are around seven times as likely to have a salariat rather than a peasant position. This is indeed a huge advantage. But as we move down from the oldest to the youngest cohort (from C1 to C4), we find that the odds ratios were rising sharply, doubling for the two middle cohorts and quadrupling for the youngest cohort (7, 14, 15, and 28, respectively). To check whether such increases were due to chance factors, we conducted significance tests using the odds ratios for the oldest cohort as the reference point against which the odds ratios for each of the three young cohorts were compared.[6] We found that the increases in the odds ratios for the three younger cohorts all represent highly significant changes, indicating that class competition for the younger cohorts was becoming even fiercer than for the oldest. In other words, as opportunities

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[6]As Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007: 538) point out, trying to identify cross-cohort changes in social fluidity is risky due to "fortuitous wrinkles in the data." We pay due attention to the warning by conducting statistical tests between the odds ratios under consideration, with differences indicating a significant rise or fall in social rigidity (relative to the oldest cohort) indicated by asterisks.

for the younger people were generally rising, so was the importance of family backgrounds.

While the competition between Classes 1 and 5 was getting tougher from the oldest to the youngest cohorts, that between the working class (both skilled and unskilled, Classes 3 and 4) and the peasants (Class 5) was taking a rather different direction. Before the reforms, only those with urban *hukou* were entitled to job assignments by the government. The status of having an urban *hukou* and working in factories, shops, or government institutions was a dream denied to the rural population. The state maintained a tight control over *hukou* in order to safeguard the well-being of urbanites. This is clearly shown in the competition between the working class and the peasant class: the odds ratios rose around four times between the oldest and the next cohort, from 10 to 40 in approximate terms. For the third cohort, the odds ratios started to drop and, for the youngest cohort, they declined even further, being 8–9. This is due to the large numbers of migrant peasant workers moving to the urban sectors and taking up "dirty, difficult, and dangerous' (3-D) jobs in industry and commerce, jobs which were shunned by urbanites. Note that while the privileges enjoyed by those with the urban status were reduced during the reform period, they were not equalized with the migrant peasant workers. Fairly similar patterns are seen in women's competitions of Classes 3 and 4 with Class 5, where the odds ratios sharply increased from the oldest cohort to the next one, and then precipitated for the youngest cohort. Overall, the advantages for urban working-class origins over rural peasant origins were being sharply reduced for access to manual working-class positions for the youngest cohort but the salariat effects were being greatly enhanced. Further analysis shows that, whereas around 80% of the skilled working-class men in the oldest cohort had urban origin *hukou*, the proportion dropped to 37% in the youngest cohort, and the change was even more marked for women (from 93% to 27%). One of the most important features of the reforms was the relaxation of *hukou* requirement for manual working-class jobs.

Finally, in this section, we come to changes in gender relations. We showed in Table 1 both gender and class differences. With regard to gender differences, 18% of the men are in salariat positions as compared with 14% of the women. With regard to the competition between Classes 1 and 5, the odds ratios amount to around 14 for men and 20 for women. The gender differences in the odds ratios are highly significant, as shown

Table 5.   Symmetrical odds ratios: upper figure in each pair for men and lower figure for women.

	2	3	4	5
	Intermediate	Skilled manual	Unskilled manual	Agricultural
1 Salariat	1.67	3.69	3.54	13.54
	1.63	3.59	2.76	20.34***
2 Intermediate		2.22	2.28	12.99
		2.17	1.71	11.26
3 Skilled manual			2.09	17.58
			1.36	16.33
4 Unskilled manual				16.57
				11.73*

Note: All odds ratios are significant at the 0.05 level or above. Significant gender differences are listed on women's odds ratios: $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$. All odds ratios are calculated controlling for year of survey.

in Table 5. This does not mean that salariat families treat their daughters more favorably than they treat their sons, but it does mean that peasant families tend to sacrifice their daughters' careers for their sons' careers. In order to see a clearer picture, we show the changing fortunes over time and across cohorts in access to the salariat, controlling for factors that are usually found to play an important role in salariat access, such as parental class, gender, age, age squared, parental and own memberships in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), educational qualification, and year of survey. Detailed modeling coefficients are not shown to save space. The key findings, in terms of predicted values from the models, are shown in Figure 6.

The data in panel 1 of Figure 6 show the predicted values in salariat access by survey year. We can see that men are more likely than women to be in professional-managerial positions by around 3 to 4 percentage points in each year. In panel 2 of the figure, we show the cohort effects controlling for survey year. Here, we find that the gender disparity is declining at a fast rate. Among the oldest cohort, men had, other things being equal, a lead of 8 percentage points over women in their likelihood of gaining salariat positions but the lead fell to 5, 3, and 1 points in the next three cohorts, respectively.
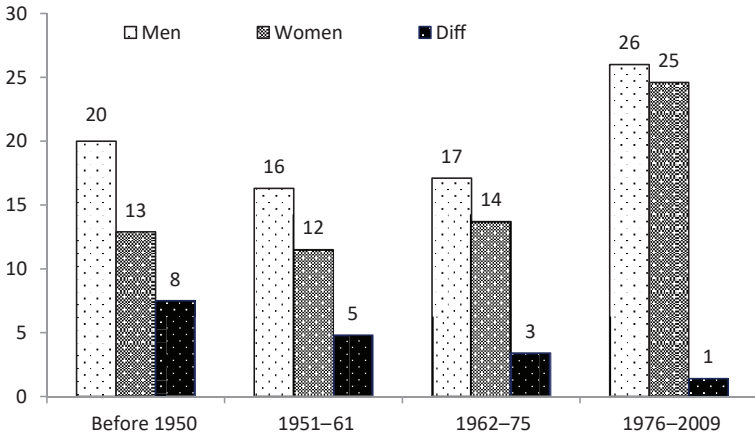
Panel 1: Over time
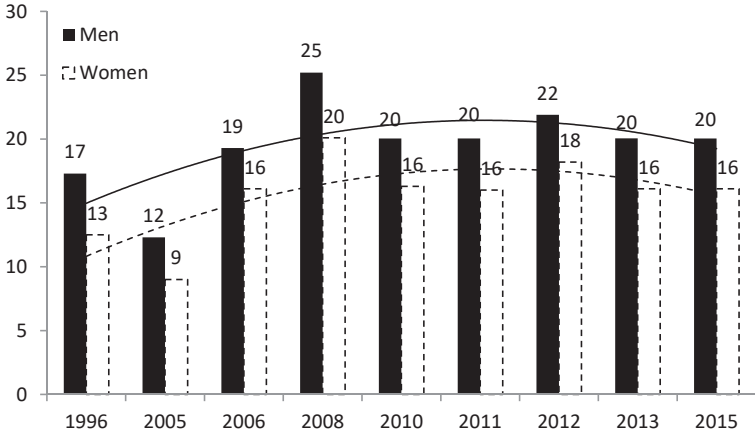
Panel 2: Across cohorts

Fig. 6.   Net gender differences in access to the salariat.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

We have, in this study, sought to provide a comprehensive analysis of the patterns and trends of intergenerational social mobility in China. Using the most authoritative national representative social surveys currently available spanning around 20 years, we conducted a detailed analysis of

absolute and relative mobility for men and women. The main findings can be summarized as follows:

- The rapid socio-economic development in China, especially since the adoption of the reform policies in 1978, has led to much more room at the top, with a notable expansion of professional-managerial positions and a contraction of the agricultural population, resulting in a steady occupational upgrading and better life chances for men and women relative to their parental generation.
- Thanks to the economic development, there is a rising level of total mobility for both men and women, a level generally comparable to that reported for developed countries such as Britain (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Goldthorpe and Mills, 2004, 2008; Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2019). Within the total mobility of China, upward mobility was far more important than downward mobility, and even the rate of long-range upward mobility was at a similar level to that of downward mobility, which may explain the overall level of optimism, confidence, and life satisfaction of the people in China as compared with those in former communist countries, as reported by Treiman (2012).
- While there were growing opportunities in the country, little change was found in the relative mobility for men and women over time, and if we move our gaze to cohort comparisons, we actually find an increasing rigidity from the older to the younger cohorts, more for men than for women. The odds ratios involved in the competition between the salariat and the peasant families trying to secure access to the salariat and avoiding peasant positions for their children quadrupled from the oldest to the youngest cohort for men. On the other hand, the privileges associated with the urban working class over the rural peasants declined, with odds ratios falling to one-fourth for men and one-fifth for women.

Overall, our analysis suggests both signs for optimism and cause for worry. The reforms have promoted socio-economic development, upgraded the occupational structure, and given more opportunities to men and women, especially those from rural origins. Yet, at a deeper level, in terms of relative mobility indicating social justice and fairness, we should point out that class inequalities persisted and even deepened, although there were signs of growing gender progress across the cohorts.

The increasing upward mobility and constant (or, more precisely, somewhat declining) relative mobility are therefore the defining features of social mobility in China, a theme which would sound familiar to readers steeped in international comparative social mobility research (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Goldthorpe, 2007; Li *et al*., 2015). We have also found features unnoticed in previous research, such as the inverted U-shape in the class competitions between the working class and the peasants. Further research should focus on the associations between family origin and education, between education and class destination, and between origin and destination controlling for education, the classical origin–education–destination relationship while taking into account China's unique situations such as *hukou* and CCP membership.

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