Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century

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Social Change

Having set the stage and described in general terms the contours of Qing society and culture, we shall now look even more specifically at the diversity in this society and at the changes most characteristic of the eighteenth century. In this Part we explore first the eighteenth-century expansion and diversification of the Qing economy that was the foundation for so many social changes, then the demographic increases of the period and the related processes of social differentiation and social mobility.

Next we consider in detail the various constellations of social problems and institutions found in each of China's macroregions. The book closes with a reappraisal of eighteenth-century trends and their implications for the nineteenth century.

ECONOMIC DIVERSITY AND GROWTH

The expansion of the Qing economy within and beyond China is so inextricably tied to changes in Qing society in the period that it must be considered in some detail. As the economy expanded and grew more diverse and more commercialized, the population increased and migrated into new regions, and society became more mobile and impersonal, more heterogeneous in some ways and more homogeneous in others. The Qing involvement in the world economy, on the other hand, was not marked by a comparable increase in awareness of the world beyond East Asia.

Throughout the Qing dynasty, agriculture contributed the dominant share of the national product; then as now, the vast majority of the people lived in rural villages and were primarily employed in working the land.
China had long since rejected the mixed-farming systems found in Europe that combined animal husbandry with cereal production and reserved a large amount of the cultivable land in pasture. The Chinese concentrated on cereal production and substituted intensive human labor for animal power. But regional diversity, matching the wide extremes of climate and soil that existed within an empire about twice the size of Europe, produced a multitude of local cropping systems: an early twentieth-century survey counted 524 different rotation systems, and the earlier period was probably no different.

Broadly speaking, China proper could be divided into two zones. In the dryland cropping zone that dominated the northern plains, the major cereal crops were wheat and varieties of millet; south of the Huai River and the Qinling range the norm was wet-rice cultivation. Tillage practices, agricultural implements, grain storage, and the system of landownership varied enormously between these two zones. Northern dryland agriculture fought a short growing season and the twin enemies of drought and flood. Large fluctuations in the size of the harvest were common and periodic crop failures were a fact of life. Because of smaller yields, population densities were lower, and farm size had to be larger than in the south. The Qing imperial estates and lands appropriated for banzemen were concentrated in this northern zone, as had been the lands of the Ming imperial family. With the exception of these estates, tillage initially with serflike labor but later with contractual tenants, tenancy was relatively uncommon. Landlords tended to be extensively involved in production, providing seeds, plough, and oxen for their tenants in exchange for a share of the harvest. Share cropping, the rent system by which landlord and tenant divided the risks of harvest failure, was more common in the northern zone than the southern.

The wet-rice cultivation system of south China was typical of East Asian rice systems in its ability to support very high population densities—average yields were much higher than for wheat or millet—and to reward intensive labor. China grew several subspecies of Asian rice in a large number of varieties adapted to specific soils, climate, and water conditions. Because wet-rice culture depended primarily on nutrients in the water and the timely supply of water, the creation and maintenance of irrigation systems, as we have noted, was essential. The high cost of this investment and organization paid off, however, in a much more regular sequence of harvests and in continuous cropping of paddies.

The abundant rainfall in south China and the widespread network of rivers and tributary streams that supported wet rice were also the basis for an efficient system of waterborne transport that enabled many localities to have ready access to markets outside their immediate vicinity. Many goods traveled along the rivers across macroregional boundaries. From the “rice bowl” of Hunan’s Xiang River basin, rice was shipped downstream to the marketing center of Hankou and sold to other merchants who transported it down the Yangtze to large cities in the delta. Large rice yields and dense populations were found together with small farms, high rates of tenancy, and diversified agricultural systems that incorporated handicraft and by-industries into the farm economy.

Northern cropping patterns characterized North China and Northwest China; southern patterns dominated the Lower Yangtze, Southeast Coast, Middle Yangtze, Upper Yangtze, Lingnan, and Southwest. Of the areas newly developed in the Qing, Manchuria was part of the northern zone and Taiwan part of the southern; the fragile Xinjiang oasis agriculture, dispersed in deserts and grasslands, was quite different from either. Within each macroregion the intensive agriculture of the cores contrasted with the extensive cultivation of the frontiers.

Chinese Marxist studies of the “sprouts of capitalism in agriculture” have described the linkages between the agrarian economy and the commercial expansion of the eighteenth century. More commerce and mercantile investment in agriculture stimulated specialization in crops sent to market, both raw materials for the expanding handicraft industry and consumption goods such as tea, sugar, and tobacco. Profit enticed merchants, landlords, and peasants to buy or rent lands to produce cash crops, and many prospered. A new kind of managerial landlord, a commoner who used hired labor to farm several hundred mu of land, growing crops for the market, emerged in the early Qing. The influence of the market could be further seen in changes in forms of rent, improvement of the position of the tenant vis-à-vis the landlord, the rise of a wage labor force in agriculture, and the increasing use of land as a marketable commodity. In this view, the capitalist sprouts in agriculture increased the tendency toward commercialization and specialization and improved the lot of most tenants, while polarizing rural society into rich and poor.

Western-trained economic historians have tended to view the capitalist sprouts thesis with skepticism, but many of their studies agree in surprising measure on the main trends of Ming-Qing agrarian development, including the increasing complexity of the farm economy and the resultant heterogeneity of rural society. Most Western scholars also believe that landownership had become more dispersed in the early Qing.
and that large landlords were fairly unusual. (Even the large imperial estates amounted to less than 1 percent of all the land under cultivation.) Many of the elements of this process of commercialization had appeared in earlier periods, particularly during the commercial revolution of the Song. Historians have been hindered by the lack of reliable quantitative measures from precisely comparing and thus distinguishing earlier phases of economic growth from the Ming-Qing spurt. They must turn instead to qualitative changes in the Chinese economy. China experienced a new and higher form of economic activity in the eighteenth century, as can be seen in the monetization of silver in the sixteenth century and the circulation of Mexican silver dollars in Qing markets, the appearance of new forms of multiple landownership rights and permanent tenancy, and the emergence of a labor market for agricultural workers.

Japanese, Chinese, and Western scholars all agree that, regardless of their precise origins (a subject still under debate), systems guaranteeing tenants permanent rights of cultivation first emerged in south Fujian in the late sixteenth century, spread in the eighteenth century through the wet-rice cultivation zone, and could also be found in many dryland cultivation systems. Multiple layers of ownership made landlord-tenant relations more distant, physically and socially, generally benefited the tenant, and, by providing security of tenure, improved his incentives to maintain soil fertility and increase productivity. There is also widespread agreement that even when permanent tenancy did not exist, most tenants were better off because they were now legally treated as commeners rather than as servile dependents.

The general shift from servile to contractual labor in agriculture is one of the many social consequences of these economic changes that marks a contrast with earlier eras; this shift paralleled and encouraged a slow trend from Ming times toward elimination of fixed statuses and increased mobility of labor and land.

We must also stress the limitations of the new eighteenth-century developments in agriculture. Land sales and mortgages, for example, show the frequent persistence of customary checks on the theoretical mobility of land. In many localities, a landowner had first to offer the land to his kinsmen before he could sell it to an outsider. An unusual study that examines contracts for the same plot of land over several decades in eighteenth-century Fujian shows that complete alienation of the land from an owner frequently stretched over decades. A longitudinal study of an estate on Taiwan comes to similar conclusions: the size of the estate was always changing in response to changes in the size of the domestic labor force, but the transactions were primarily between agnates; in other words, "land changed hands frequently but within a limited social sphere."2

The post-sixteenth-century boom also created new layers of rural markets that linked villages more firmly than ever before to the commercial economy. The majority of transactions in the early Qing continued to take place within regional systems, but there was also a significant expansion of interregional and national trade in bulk consumables such as grain, tea, cotton, and silk. The Yangtze River brought rice from interior areas downstream, while the delta also began to serve as a processing center for consumer goods, importing raw cotton from North China via the Grand Canal and exporting finished cotton cloth as well as local silk. Handicraft textiles, produced in rural areas, passed through merchant hands before being sold back to peasants, who bought cloth with money earned from selling grain. Shanghai—long before its discovery by Westerners—became a thriving entrepôt for coastal trade. Thousands of boats bought wheat and soybean products (beans, oil, and meal for fertilizers) from Manchuria and North China, while others sailed north with sugar, eardrums, and tea. The commercial profits from serving as a national entrepôt and manufacturing center thus gave the Yangtze delta the economic foundations that underlay its political and cultural preeminence.

The most dramatic innovations in eighteenth-century economic institutions such as native banks and new fiscal instruments came at the end of the century and were responses to the needs of the expanding long-distance trade for credit and the safe, easy transfer of funds. Native banks (as they were called by foreigners in the nineteenth century) accepted deposits, made loans, issued private notes, transferred funds from accounts in different regions, and performed many other functions essential to local and long-distance trade. Private notes payable in silver or in copper cash were issued by these banks, by money shops specializing in money exchange, and by pawnshops. Promissory notes, issued by native banks on behalf of merchants and payable in five to ten days, facilitated the purchase of large quantities of goods, and money drafts and transfer accounts helped merchants move resources from place to place. By the early nineteenth century, paper notes may have constituted as much as a third or more of the total volume of money in circulation. Thus, the demands of large-scale long-distance trade had, without government participation, inspired merchants to transform the monetary system from a metallic regime to one in which paper notes supplemented copper cash and silver.
Similarly, customary law evolved outside the formal legal system to expedite economic (and social) transactions. Legal developments also reflected an increasing need to do business with strangers. Reliance on written contracts for the purchase and mortgaging of land, purchase of commodities and people, and hiring of wage laborers became commonplace in the Qing period. Most eloquently, private (so-called white) contracts supplemented (and soon outnumbered) the red (that is, stamped) official versions registered for a fee with the local yamen. Business partnerships in mining, shipping, commerce, and agriculture could be formalized and protected through this increasingly vigorous and effective system of contract law.

The process of agricultural commercialization and diversification described above took place in different localities at different times. It was above all a gradual, long-term process that was initially stimulated by a shift in the focus of foreign trade from the Central Asian caravans to the ports of the southeast coast. European ships, arriving in Chinese waters in the sixteenth century, could carry more cargo in a shorter time more cheaply than the camel caravans of the medieval period, and the magnitude of trade between Europe and China rose substantially with the advent of waterborne commerce.

The foreign trade in which the early Qing domestic economy was increasingly involved had two major components: the exchange conducted by Chinese merchants who traveled on junks to ports in Southeast Asia, Japan, and the Philippines (part of Spain after 1583), and the expanding trade conducted across the Indian and Pacific oceans by European trading companies. The Chinese junk trade, handled primarily by merchants from Lingnan and the Southeast Coast, sent porcelain, cotton, and silk textiles to Manila in exchange for Mexican silver and carried ceramics, textiles, medicines, and copper cash to Southeast Asia in exchange for incense, ivory, peppers, and rice.

Foreign trade with Europeans in the ports of the Southeast Coast was temporarily halted by the Ming loyalist resistance during the Ming-Qing transition. After 1684, when the imperial ban on maritime trade was lifted, Western traders gravitated to Canton and were finally confined to this port by imperial edict in 1759. The "Canton system" of trade that lasted until 1842 (the conclusion of the Opium War) specified that Europeans had to trade through the Co-hong, a group of firms who were given monopoly rights by the state to the trade in tea and silk but in return were held responsible for collecting duties, leasing factory space, and controlling the foreigners.

### Table 2: Index of Foreign Trade at Canton, 1719–1833

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Foreign tonnage (thousands of tons)</th>
<th>Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1719–1726</td>
<td>2.808</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1727–1734</td>
<td>3.178</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1735–1740</td>
<td>4.968</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1741–1746</td>
<td>9.008</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1749–1756</td>
<td>13.620</td>
<td>414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1757–1762</td>
<td>10.199</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1763–1768</td>
<td>15.344</td>
<td>547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1769–1775</td>
<td>16.537</td>
<td>596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1776–1782</td>
<td>16.158</td>
<td>576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1783–1791</td>
<td>25.013</td>
<td>892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1792–1799</td>
<td>22.731</td>
<td>811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800–1807</td>
<td>24.689</td>
<td>951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1808–1813</td>
<td>20.300</td>
<td>724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1814–1820</td>
<td>25.591</td>
<td>913</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821–1827</td>
<td>30.492</td>
<td>1,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1828–1833</td>
<td>37.507</td>
<td>1,338</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Constructed using 1719–1726 = 100.

Between 1719 and 1833, the tonnage of foreign ships trading at Canton increased more than tenfold (see table 2). The lure was Chinese tea, which, as one eighteenth-century Frenchman observed, "draws European vessels to China; the other articles that comprise their cargoes are only taken for the sake of variety."5 Until the Commutation Act of 1784 lowered the price of legal imports, continental European tea smugglers vied successfully with the British East India Company to supply Englishmen with what was becoming their favorite beverage. The export of tea increased steadily through the eighteenth century and by 1833 was at more than twenty-eight times its initial level. Exports of silk, the second-most important commodity and long a staple of Chinese export trade, also expanded through the first half of the century, when woven silk textiles were replaced by raw silk for the nascent European silk-weaving industry. The sale of porcelain, also a traditional export, declined during the seventeenth century, rose again after the rebuilding of the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen, but eventually also faced serious competition from European products.

The impact of foreign demand on the society and economy of the
areas producing export goods was direct and important. Exports were, of course, only a fraction of either total output or the amount marketed within China; in the early nineteenth century, for example, tea exports may have represented only 13 or 14 percent of all tea produced and marketed. But the significance of the trade cannot be measured solely in these terms. The imperial treasury, for example, profited directly from it: the post of Hoppo, or Superintendent of Imperial Customs, for Guangdong, created in 1685, was usually filled by householders from the Imperial Household who ensured the flow of surplus revenue into the Privy Purse. Additional and greater sums were presented to the emperor by the Hoppo and the Com- hong.

Western traders had in fact come to exert direct influence on the shape of the export-linked industries. In the course of the early eighteenth century, the British developed a system for the advance purchase of tea by which the British East India Company prepaid 50 percent of the agreed-on price for the next season’s crop to the Chinese Hong merchants, who in turn advanced 70 to 80 percent of the purchase price to their suppliers in the tea-growing districts. This advance-purchase system provided security for tea producers and helped ease the perennial problems of liquidity in the expanding trade; the British were assured of supplies at a stable price. Fujianese who were Hong merchants in Canton responded by investing in tea-growing land in the Wuyi Mountains (Biehua Hills) of northwestern Fujian, thus profiting from both sides of the business.

The repercussions of expanding foreign trade were not limited to the merchants and producers involved in specific export commodities: prosperity was bound to stimulate local economies. In the silk industry, as we have seen, the effects of export demand were also reflected in higher prices. In the Lower Yangtze silk-producing center of Wujiang the price of raw silk rose by 86 percent in the first half of the eighteenth century, while the price of damask, for which foreign demand was declining, rose by only 30 percent.4 The relationship between foreign trade and the money supply was even more complicated. Because the net balance of trade during the eighteenth century was in China’s favor, it was the steady annual inflows of New World silver in enormous amounts that financed this commercial development and economic growth.

The Chinese economy had long been based on a monometallic currency system, whereby copper cash was used for daily purchases and silver for larger business transactions. In the sixteenth century, silver had become the medium in which most taxes were calculated and paid, and this practice continued in the Qing. Copper cash was minted, silver was not. The exchange ratio between these two money metals was highly vulnerable to fluctuations in supply that had immediate effect on all citizens. Although paper money was originally invented in China, some unsuccessful early Ming experiments had made it unpopular, and the Manchu government soon abandoned its attempts to issue paper currency. The notes issued by private firms, discussed above, were relatively uncommon until the late eighteenth century.

The economic expansion of the eighteenth century was thus matched by rising demand for increased amounts of the money metals, not only to accommodate the growing population but also to serve the needs of increased market activity. Because silver was primarily obtained from abroad, fluctuations in this trade had a direct impact on the domestic money supply. The so-called Kangxi depression of the 1660s and 1670s, when the price of rice and other commodities fell, was attributable to the imperial ban on foreign trade, aggravated by withdrawals of silver from circulation to build up reserves in the government treasury. Resumption of foreign trade in 1665 had brought in silver imports direct from Europe and Central America: the monetary silver stock may have tripled in the period 1654–1830, and perhaps ten million Spanish silver dollars a year were flowing into the coastal ports of Fujian in the early Qing. In the eighteenth century Spanish silver dollars became a common unit of account, first in Canton and thence in parts of the Southeast Coast and Lower Yangtze. By the 1780s, prices of commodities in Suzhou were frequently expressed in silver dollars instead of in the domestic unit of account, taels (ounces) of silver.

The Kangxi depression ended with resumption of foreign trade, but it was succeeded by inflation in the value of copper cash as the supply of this metal failed to keep pace with demand or with silver imports. In the early decades of the eighteenth century and in the 1730s and 1770s, prices of copper relative to silver were high, and the actual rates of exchange were far below the official standard (one thousand cash to a tael of silver). The low copper-to-silver exchange was beneficial for many landholders, since small sales of grain were generally conducted in copper cash while the tax was calculated in silver. But the shortage of this money metal also had a dampening impact on economic growth. The copper inflation spurred the government to be conciliatory toward potential Japanese copper suppliers; it also stimulated state promotion of mines in the Southwest, which after the 1730s were able to provide sufficient copper to meet China’s needs for the rest of the century. This success in maintaining a supply of both silver and copper to feed the voracious domestic demand lasted until the
dramatic reversal in the balance of foreign trade in the 1820s. Such success may also have had the effect of persuading the Qing court that they were well equipped to deal with the consequences of this new degree of involvement in a market that extended far beyond China’s borders.

The eighteenth century witnessed a real improvement of China’s economic base, which went well beyond rehabilitation to new levels of gross agricultural output and volumes of domestic and foreign trade. These substantial economic achievements of the high Qing had a wide variety of social consequences, perhaps the most far-reaching of which was an unprecedented increase in population.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

The tripling of Chinese population is probably the most frequently noted feature of Chinese society in the eighteenth century. Qing peace and prosperity made possible not simply a recovery to Ming levels but continuing growth thereafter. We have noted some of the circumstances that facilitated this increase: the improved status of the peasantry, the growth of commerce, effective public measures for coping with natural disasters, better agricultural yields, expanded acreage, and diffusion of improved agricultural technology. Although population growth in turn encouraged colonization of new lands and stimulated demand, scholars have viewed the overall impact of this population increase on China in generally negative terms. In time, competition for land and jobs became sharper, landholdings shrank, prices rose, and the state’s control over this huge citizenry diminished. Most historians would agree with Ping-ti Ho’s assertion that “by the last quarter of the eighteenth century there was every indication that the Chinese economy, at its prevailing technological level, could no longer gainfully sustain an ever-increasing population without overtaxing itself.”

We shall consider in greater detail in the sections that follow the effect of population increase on stratification, mobility, and social organization generally, but here let us look more closely at the population growth itself, examining it in terms of birth and death rates, age and sex distribution, and the structure of households.

Reliable population figures from China’s past are rare. For the first century of Manchu rule, government tax figures (the most accessible sources) registered not population but corvée units known as ding. After 1741, and more effectively after 1775, officials were supposed to record the age, sex, and household of every person, but the population continued to be underreported. Members of non-Han minorities (who were majorities in some parts of the empire) were entirely omitted from most records. China does not appear to have the detailed village-level population data that existed in contemporary Western Europe and Japan. Our knowledge of Qing demography thus comes from these problematic government totals, as well as male-oriented lineage genealogies that are disproportionately from the wealthier strata in the Lower Yangtze, a few hundreds of scattered local data, and several detailed eighteenth-century surveys. It is tempting but dangerous to borrow life tables created from Western European data (and thus associated with a disease structure different from China). In the discussion that follows, we survey Qing demography at this writing and point out seeming trends and interesting areas of further research.

Surely no single premiminary government anywhere in the world ever attempted to rule a populace larger than the three hundred million (or more) under Qing rule in 1800. By contrast, Russia had about forty million people in 1800, Japan about thirty million, and England eleven million. The scale on which the Qing state had to operate would have imposed constraints even had the population been stationary. The sheer size of this eighteenth-century population has tended to overshadow appraisals of actual rates of increase. In fact, Chinese rates of growth peaked at about 8 percent per year ca. 1800 before declining to 6 and then 4 percent in the first half of the next century. Contrary to the impression given by most Chinese historians, these were, by comparison with other contemporary societies, by no means unusually high rates, and were comparable to those experienced by quite a number of industrialized European countries.

The nature of this demographic growth has not yet been clearly explained. Preliminary indications suggest that much of it was due to decreases in the death rate, resulting from the absence of warfare and major natural disasters during the eighteenth century. (It may be indicative of increased life expectancy that the formal age for retirement from the government bureaucracy was changed in 1757 from fifty-five to sixty-five.) Some eighteenth-century data suggest mortality rates of about twenty-five to thirty-five per thousand population, with an average male life expectancy at birth of at least thirty. Statistics on almost two hundred imperial offspring show that princes (exclusive of the eventual emperor) lived to an average age of thirty-one and princesses to age twenty-five.

We know little about the actual causes of death in this society. Infant mortality was high even among those with considerable resources; of the Kangxi emperor’s fifty-five children, twenty-two died before the age of four.
The three emperors who reigned in the eighteenth century each lost between 50 and 60 percent of their sons before age fifteen. Tuberculosis was common; smallpox was particularly feared as a childhood killer, but vaccination, usually by implanting in the nose scabs extracted from persons with the disease, became a common practice among well-to-do families during this period.

Mid-Qing reductions in mortality coincided with increases in fertility. Birth rates were affected by a variety of factors: age and incidence of marriage and widowhood; frequency of sexual intercourse; length of breast-feeding; use of contraception and abortion; and so forth. The religious concern with maintenance of the patriline over the generations combined in China with relatively high rates of infant mortality to put a premium on all children, especially sons—up to 20 percent of couples were childless—and create marriage patterns that encouraged high birth rates.

Marriage was early (at age seventeen or eighteen for women, twenty-one for men), arranged entirely by parents, and virtually universal for females. Polygyny was encouraged and occurred in some 10 percent or more of marriages. By contrast with Japan, we see little evidence of deliberate attempts to plan and limit family size.

Nevertheless, the actual fertility rates for traditional China (largely projected back from the nineteenth century) seem to have been rather low—by age fifty most women had borne about 5.5 children—and demographers have been at a loss to explain why. Was it the prevalence of infant mortality and infanticide, both of which went unrecorded? In most societies before the late nineteenth century, medical knowledge was simply too primitive to be effective against disease, the major killer. We know from the studies of other cultures that the death of children before age two was extremely high, and there is no reason why China should have been exempt from this fact of premodern life. Contemporary Chinese writers also discussed the prevalence of infanticide among poor families. Indeed, some philanthropists tried to discourage infanticide by endowing orphanages in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In both cases, by removing children from family records, infant mortality and infanticide would artificially lower statistics of marital fertility.

Different forms of marriage also had direct consequences on fertility. We do know from studies of Chinese populations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that major marriages were the most fertile, and women who married as concubines or as "little daughters-in-law" the least so; but we do not know for the eighteenth century precisely how many marriages fell into each type. (In major marriages, the only form recognized by Chinese marriage ritual and the normative ideal in the society, the bride moved into her husband's household as an adult, transferring her allegiance from her natal family to the family and ancestors of her husband. In minor or "little-daughters-in-law" marriage, a girl was taken into the household at a very young age and reared by her future mother-in-law. In the third type, unregistered marriage, a man moved into the home of his wife's parents and agreed to let one or more sons bear the wife's surname.) As in other preindustrial societies, the demand for agricultural labor affected seasonal fertility rates, and male servantage may have reduced fertility.

Further research will be necessary before we can understand the impact on fertility of Chinese ideas about conception. Medical treatments intended for well-to-do families and doctors present recommendations that would lower fertility: women should not have sexual relations before the age of twenty, the optimal male age for conception is thirty, the sexual act for procreation should take place only at certain propitious times. While some treaties recommended nursing a child for two years (which would have decreased the fertility of the mother), others advise that a wet nurse will be hired (which would raise a mother's fertility by removing the infant from her). Erotic novels, prints, and scrolls, produced in great volume in the late Ming, were outlawed with only limited success by the more parochial Qing rulers. This literature refers to an extensive array of potions, foods, perfumes, and spells designed to heighten desire and improve performance, and it reflects an openly sensual urban culture in which a variety of nonprocreative sexual acts were common. Elite Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian ideas all stressed the dangers of excessive sexual indulgence. Men were consistently counseled to control ejaculation in order to preserve the semen and prevent the sapping of male essence by the female. In popular culture, the blood of women was seen as polluting, and menstruation, childbirth, and sex were in some sense dangerous to men and an affront to the gods. People were expected to abstain from sex on religious holidays and during mourning. Nevertheless, we cannot tell if such normative behavior was so commonly observed as to reduce marital fertility significantly.

In England and Japan birth rates fluctuated as a result of shifts in the number and age of women who married. In China there was relatively little variation in the age of marriage, and spinsters were virtually unknown (only a few percent as compared with 10 percent or more in Europe). Occupations for unmarried women were few and of low status; male
homosexuality, although not uncommon, served only as a supplement and not an alternative to marriage. On the other hand, an apparently higher mortality rate among men created a sex ratio that left many men unable to marry, especially since well-to-do males took more than one spouse. Official sex ratios for the eighteenth century (which do underestimate women) are in the range of 120 males for each 100 females. Even with the considerable male bias of the data and systematic undercounting of women, there is little doubt that there were more men than women in China at almost all age levels.

The support of a daughter-in-law who would remain in the household and bear sons to continue the patriline was more desirable than that of a daughter who was destined to marry out. Families therefore preferred to raise sons, not daughters, and female infanticide was apparently a common (perhaps the most common) way of adjusting family size. Infanticide meant finer tuning in family planning than the more indiscriminate and hazardous techniques of abortion. It is possible that the sex ratio became somewhat less imbalanced with prosperity, and that, in consequence, more men were able to marry in the course of the eighteenth century. But it is not unlikely that 10 percent of males never married, most of them among the poor.

Ordinarily, women worked only within the home; the popularity of foot-binding as a sign of social status meant that many women would have been disabled for field work or work that required physical mobility. (The practice of tightly wrapping the feet of young girls, folding under most of the toes until they rotted away, dates from the Song period; men found these two-to-four-inch feet highly erotic.) Marriage was the lot of virtually all women. If a woman was lucky, her family provided a portion of the family estate as dowry, giving her house in her husband's household and the likelihood of better treatment from his mother. If she was unlucky, she might enter a wealthy household as a maidservant or concubine or be sold into prostitution. Women were entirely dependent on male relatives in their old age.

How much, if at all, did increases in births contribute to the eighteenth-century population increase? To the extent that prosperity may have encouraged the survival of more females, somewhat earlier marriage, and perhaps more major marriages, birth rates may have increased. This increase in population was apparently expressed both in more new households and in the expansion of existing ones. Although twentieth-century data suggest that the average Chinese household was actually rather small—between five and six persons—the cultural ideal remained larger.

five generations under one roof." Unlike premodern Europe, which had a similar average household size, China had what John Hajnal has called a joint household system in which (ideally) marriage came early and married couples lived with the groom's parents and did not form new households until the death of the older generation.

Even male journeymen who left home to seek employment elsewhere returned home to marry and left their wives in the parental home. As a result, China had more joint (as opposed to stem or nuclear) households than Japan or Europe; Arthur Wolf has asserted not only that in the course of a lifetime "almost everyone experienced life in a complex family" but also that "the potential for large family size was present everywhere and needed only the slightest encouragement to realize itself." If life expectancy increased during the mid-Qing, households all over China, especially those experiencing prosperity, were likely to pass through a joint phase in the family cycle. Prosperity would permit parents to pay the brideprice or dowry needed for a wedding a few years earlier and thus encourage even earlier marriages and longer childbearing years. In regions where new lands were being opened to settlement, on the other hand, we might expect that more young men left home early to set up new households elsewhere, thereby leading to an increase in the total number of households. Single male pioneers in minority areas, too poor to marry at home, may have found non-Han women for wives.

The estimated mortality rates for traditional China, borne out by some scattered data, suggest that about 35 percent of the population was under the age of fifteen and 7 percent over sixty. If infant mortality declined in the eighteenth century, a small baby boom may have occurred late in the century (when rates of increase peaked), one that would have necessitated a shift of resources toward the young. Because Chinese society did not rely on age-graded institutions as a common form of social organization, it was probably better able to handle this sort of fluctuation in the age distribution. However, that generation born in the 1730s and 1790s—a time of shrinking access to resources—would have been mature heads of households when the Daoguang recession of the 1820s and 1830s struck, and they may have been particularly hurt by it.

The larger, more complex households that resulted from Qing population increase were disproportionately among the wealthy. Steven Harrell has pointed that wealthy men "married earlier, married younger women, married or brought in as concubines more women and more fertile women." But we do not in fact have very good information on the average number of concubines possessed by a wealthy man. The genealogies used
by demographers only list concubines who gave birth to sons, and the figure of about two women (wives included) per elite adult male is probably too low. This segment of society grew faster than the less well-to-do and swelled the size of the non-degree-holding elite defined (as we think appropriate in this period) by control of wealth. Clustered in the regional cores of the older macrorregions, these complex families also symbolize the transcendence of worldly power, as the custom of equal inheritance among sons ensured fragmentation of wealth in each generation and contributed to downward mobility.

Except for Manchus, we know even less about demographic trends among non-Han minorities than we do about the Chinese majority. Gains in subsistence levels through adoption of some New World crops such as corn and potatoes were offset by the steady encroachment of settlers into tribal lands, accompanied by fighting and perhaps death from unfamiliar diseases. More contact meant more intermarriage, usually between Han men and minority women, which probably prevented some minority men from marrying at all. The actual marriage customs of such minorities diverged not only from Han Chinese but also from one another and produced distinctive demographic patterns whose study has barely begun. In Tibetan society, to mention simply one example, fraternal polyandry (where a woman married a set of brothers) was common, and younger sons were systematically sent into the celibate priesthood.

Although historians have concerned themselves rather little with the differential impact (by time, place, and class) of Qing population increase, they have been more interested, for good reason, in the impact of more people on the overall well-being of Chinese state and society. We shall consider below in more detail the ways in which this society adjusted to and tried to cope with the tripling of population in four generations, examining not just the role of the Qing bureaucracy but other institutions as well. As background to that discussion, let us first consider the mechanisms by which the state might have been able to affect the rise or fall of population.

It is important to realize that in China the influence of formal political and religious institutions on demographic trends (and hence their control of such trends) was slight, especially as compared with Europe. There, Christian ideas banning polygamy and promoting chastity, celibacy, and individual consent in marriage significantly influenced marriage and birth patterns. By contrast, the monastic communities in which Chinese Buddhist monks and nuns resided had long since been stripped of significant wealth or secular authority; the Taoist establishment was even more

atomized and impotent. Neither had much influence on Confucian family values.

The generally powerful Chinese state did not challenge the widely accepted belief in the importance of the family and desirability of many offspring. Adopting the Confucian notion that the family was the paradigm for the state, the Qing glorified, supported, and strengthened the family institution and the family relations that were a central part of Confucianism: the reciprocal but hierarchical father-to-son, husband-to-wife, and elder-to-younger-brother relationships. The state praised filial piety, rewarded chaste widows with certificates of merit (permitting their names to be inscribed on monumental arches), and erected temples honoring the chaste and the filial. Susan Manow's work shows that the Qing raised widow chastity to new heights of social prestige. The virtually total authority of the male head of the family over the household and the general submission of women to men were upheld by the legal codes.

Chinese society encouraged or at least tolerated sexual license for men. Female infanticide, while criticized, continued to be practiced. Divorce and concubinage were private matters implicitly sanctioned by the cultural insistence on male heirs. Even the failure to bear children was a matter of concern only to relatives and to the gods (who were frequently petitioned for assistance).

As women, children, and the infirm were considered dependents of the family head, so responsibility for care of the disabled and needy was left largely in family hands. Figures from late eighteenth-century Manchuria (probably exaggerated but nonetheless significant) indicate that 6–9 percent of adult males were reported blind, deaf, dumb, or mentally ill, a considerable burden on their relatives. Although Buddhist monks undertook some welfare activities, and Qing emperors directed that orphanages and homes for the indigent be built at government expense in each county, public institutions did relatively little to relieve relatives of primary responsibility for family members.

Although the Chinese government had few ways of directly influencing fertility, it could and did reduce mortality by promoting peace and prosperity. Qing rulers were aware of some of the implications of a growing population. In 1793 the Qianlong emperor reflected on what he mistakenly thought was a tenfold increase in population within the last century. Grateful that (as he saw it) domestic peace and internal colonization had sustained this growth, he met concern about diminishing resources simply with a call for greater efficiency and frugality. Government policy was
directed toward coping with the consequences of improved mortality and fertility, not toward reversing these trends. Chinese values and institutions, in short, were well adapted to increasing birth rates to take advantage of improved economic opportunities, but they were relatively unsuited to containing such growth. Given these family values and the insistence on universal marriage, only infanticide and the crude mechanisms of disease and death intervened in a Malthusian manner to check population increase.

Perhaps an even more significant difference between China and Europe was the fact that in Europe population growth was soon followed by the economic transformation associated with industrialization. The Chinese economy was not transformed during the nineteenth century, and, although population growth did slacken and mortality rose during the prolonged period of rebellion in mid-century, total population remained between three hundred million and four hundred million. The race between population and resources would again begin in the twentieth century, and by the 1930s an industrialized economy and revolutionized institutions and values would struggle to cope with a population of more than a billion.

**HEREDITARY STATUSES**

In the eighteenth century the forces of change so far described put pressure on the hierarchy of Chinese society and on those institutions intended to promote social order. To examine this interaction, we shall look first at the tensions between fixed statuses and social mobility and then at the consequences of geographic mobility for life in the internal and external frontiers of the empire.

To understand stratification and mobility, we need to understand the nature of the Qing elite. Although the peasantry was the largest component of Qing society, even modern social historians have tended to concentrate on the top of the pyramid, paying particular attention to the problem of how to define and demarcate the elite.

While most scholars agree that the Chinese elite enjoyed a concentration of political power (office holding), economic power (wealth), social power (prestige), and what might be called cultural power (education), there is less consensus about which was primary. Historians such as Chung-li Chong and Ping-ti Ho focused on political power and examination degrees (the prerequisite for office) as the sine qua non of elite status. For this group, they use the term gentry, borrowed from European history.

Their view excluded certain members of the ruling minority, such as uneducated bondsmen or eunuchs, who exercised real political power. Very fine status gradations were made within this group based on levels of degrees and access to office, although the primary social distinction lay between the upper degree-winner, who was eligible for office, and the dengyuan, who was not.

The gentry as defined by Ho and Chong was a small group, consisting, with their families, of less than 5 percent of the population. Marxist historians, by contrast, have emphasized control of the means of production and defined elite status more broadly to include not just educated degree and office holders but wealthy landholders and businessmen. Such a definition has the advantage of calling attention to movement into the literati by the nouveau riches, intermarriage between merchant and literati families, cooperation between officials and powerful local families, Manchu-Chinese collaboration in government, and the general interpenetration of the various status hierarchies so typical of this period.

Of course, identification of individuals as members of the Chinese elite depends very much as well on which political and social stage we place them: attempts to distinguish national, provincial, and local elites suggest that at the national level the office holder and degree-winner were preeminent, joined by only the very wealthiest and most distinguished merchants. As we move from Peking down to provincial capitals, prefectural cities, and county seats, degree-holders become increasingly rarer, and we are forced to use broader and broader definitions of elite status to study local leaders. In the village, leadership might be provided by a semiliterate owner-cultivator or by a landlord with little schooling.

We have here eschewed the term gentry in order to avoid the misleading implications of the English model. We have adopted instead the broader concept of elite, believing that in the Qing period any concentration of education, political influence, social status, or wealth tended to be used to attain similar power in the other spheres. In the eighteenth century, the lines between types and levels of status within this elite became increasingly blurred. While an orthodox education, office holding, and the higher examination degrees remained markers of elite status, respect was also accorded to men of leisure whose wealth (however acquired) enabled them to adopt an elite life-style.

Many studies of the Chinese elite have been concerned with the question of social mobility and have been anxious to show that China did (or did not) make possible the kind of transformation of status by dint of personal effort not only prized by Westerners but upheld as a virtue in
Chinese culture as well. Because most analyses of social mobility in Qing society have concentrated on the degree-holding portion of the elite and have narrowly defined mobility as movement in or out of this group, they may have neglected the important place of hereditary status in this society and given a misleading impression of the possibilities for dramatic change of status. Studies by Japanese and Chinese historians that have seen a trend in this period toward increased stratification and greater inequality, on the other hand, may have exaggerated the impermeability of status barriers.

In our view, the economic growth of the eighteenth century was accompanied by a general expansion of opportunity, increased occupational differentiation, and a dissolution of formal and informal barriers to social mobility. Wealth was the essential prerequisite of elite status, yet entrance into the upper levels of the elite did grow more and more difficult even as it became easier to get rich. These trends developed most rapidly in the cities and regional cores but reached even into China's peripheries. In the newly settled frontiers, the absence of old established elites had by the end of the century permitted the emergence of a particularly fluid, unstable, and highly competitive society, poorly structured by the traditional mechanisms of hierarchy and social control.

Hereditary status groups were an accepted part of the social fabric in eighteenth-century China. At the pinnacle of the society, all descendants of the imperial line were clearly identified, their genealogies recorded and their activities supervised by the Office of the Imperial Lineage. This lineage, which grew to very large proportions, distinguished main lines (yellow sashes) from the collateral lines (red sashes) of more remote imperial ancestors. Early Qing rulers exercised firm control over the award of ranks within the twelve-tier nobility; under the Kangxi and Yongzheng emperors especially, demotions and deprivation of rank were not uncommon. Except in a few cases, moreover, rank was automatically lowered with each generation. Vestigial reminders of the Manchu past remained in the so-called Eight Great Banniess, princes of the first and second rank by right of perpetual inheritance who were descendents of the brothers of Nurjaci and his son Hongtaji.

The banner system, a distinctly Qing institution that reflected the highly stratified pre-Qing society of the Manchus, segregated the new rulers and their followers from the populace and divided them into hereditary groups of Manchus, Mongols, and Chinese, each organized into eight banners. Banner membership was intended to be permanent and inaccessible except by birth or imperial fiat. Elsewhere in China's frontiers, in Tibet, among related tribes like the Lolo, even among the Mongols, rigidly two- or three-tier societies were the norm. In these frontier groups, headmen in the tshi (tribal headmen) and banner systems as well as Lamaist Buddhist and Islamic religious leaders occupied powerful hereditary positions.

Within China proper, membership in ethnic and religious minorities was also hereditary. In most cases, but especially for groups who were viewed as low in status (Hakkas or Muslims, for example), entry was usually by birth, and movement out was difficult. In theory, one of the firmest divisions in China's hierarchical society was the one at the bottom, which distinguished respectable commoners, called liang min (literally, "good people") from jiun min, the "mean people." The latter category included remnants of aboriginal groups who had survived Chinese expansion and settlement and practitioners of occupations that included prostitutes, musicians, actors, and some yamen employees (gatekeepers, coroners, runners, police, jailers). The laws forbad intermarriage between mean and good people; all mean people were harried from sitting for the examinations. Although new laws and the fluidity of eighteenth-century society ate away at legal proscriptions, strong prejudices survived.

The evolution of this particular cluster of mean occupations is not fully researched. Some groups, like the "abed people" (discussed in more detail below), seem to have been singled out because they were seasonal migrants and escaped normal household registration. But why, for example, was music consistently linked with degraded status? The supposed low position of the mean people also contrasts with the actual importance of some of these occupations. Indeed, it is difficult to reconcile the eager patronage of actors by literati or the popularity of the post of jiajia among the well-connected subbenianers from Shaoxing prefecture with such supposedly lowly status. In fact, these must all have been relatively promising occupations in this period, attracting the poor and ambitious as well as those with hereditary claims.

In the 1720s, the Yongzheng emperor tried to remove the stigma from a number of despised local groups, who were to be permitted to change their hereditary occupations and register as ordinary commoners. Groups so identified and emancipated, perhaps in response to special interests, were the musician households of Shaxi and Shaxi, the "fallen people" of Zhejiang, the hereditary servants of Huizhou and Ninggiao prefectures in Anhui, the Tanku boatmen of coastal Guangdong, and the beggar households of Suzhou. Descendants of these people (and of entertainers
Servitude in a variety of forms was commonplace at all levels of Qing society. Among the Manchus (like other non-Han groups), human beings were seen as a basic and easily transferable form of wealth, more important than land. Control of another person's labor power was one of the signs and privileges of success. The Manchus had enslaved prisoners of war and used them not only for domestic service but also to till fields. After the Qing conquest, those personal servants of the ruling family (the bondsmen) had become part of the powerful Imperial Household Department. North China peasants whose lands were seized by the Manchus technically became servants of the Imperial Household and were used to cultivate the imperial and banner estates. Together with bondsmen, they constituted the largest part of the servile population in early Qing society. In the eighteenth century, as we have noted, servile field workers were supplanted by contractual tenants, and domestic service performed by persons who had sold or mortgaged themselves became the most common form of servile servitude.

Servitude actually involved an exchange of control for security. For poor people it represented an opportunity of last resort. In the mid-seventeenth century, as in other hard times, adults had sometimes voluntarily commissioned themselves to the protection of others, while in periods of high demand for such labor, people were frequently kidnapped and sold in distant markets through middlemen. Some sales were for short-term servitude: this was the case for prostitutes and in some regions for manumissants. Other transactions permanently altered the status of the individual and his descendants. The Qing code outlined the rare conditions under which a slave could be released from servitude, and provisions for emancipation increased through the eighteenth century. But, like many others, such ex-slaves suffered lingering discrimination.

Most slaves either inherited that status or were sold as children by their parents. One clear mark of servile status for males was the lack of an independent household registration; slaves and servants were listed under their master's name. Females, not being in the patriline, were sold more readily and cheaply than males (standardized written contracts recorded such differences), but they did have some hopes for mobility. A female servant might begin with lowly household chores, be promoted to personal maid, and then be installed as a secondary wife—a process that occurred as easily in the imperial family as elsewhere. Female slaves were sometimes used by their owners to bind free males to their status; a man who married a female slave became a slave himself. Men in servile statuses were unable to change their status as women could, except for infant boys purchased to be adopted as heirs.

In Qing law persons in servile statuses were classified with the jianmin, their relationship with the master and his kinfolk reflected the inequality of their position. Servile tenants were not free to move or leave the land and of course domestic servants were considered chattels. The criminal code reinforced this inequality (as it did other unequal relationships) by varying the punishment with the status of the offense; not the crime itself. An act committed by a slave against the master was thus much more harshly punished than the same act committed by a master against his slave.

But the mere fact of servitude said little about an individual's economic status and power; in fact, it was entirely possible for persons of servile status to wield authority and accumulate wealth in Qing society. Some bondservants accompanied bannermen into battle and won degrees and offices as a result of prowess on the field; the powerful Imperial Household Department was largely staffed by bondservants; in Huizhou, trusted hereditary servants were raised as companions to the master's son and relied upon to transact family business. Even within servile statuses we can see clear hierarchies of privilege, wealth, and power. Among the servile tenants of Huizhou, for example, the households specializing in providing bodyguarding services were the elite, while coffin bearers occupied the lowest echelons. Bondservants in the Imperial Household Department can actually be classified into four ranks: the small elite at the top was both rich and powerful, while those on the very bottom were the slaves of the elite bondservants. It was thus possible, and not uncommon, to have several layers of servitude coexisting within a household or organization. The household staff of a wealthy official or merchant, for example, was a world apart from the hired gatemen or domestic servant of a struggling rural laicist or the indentured laborer of an ambitious peasant.

The role of domestic servants in the life of elite households is too infrequently analyzed by social historians of China. Servants performed a variety of intimate functions (nursing, bathing, feeding, dressing, procuring, and so forth) for their masters and mistresses. In addition, the line between servant and family member, as the ambiguous term jiajun (which
could mean either) suggests, was blurred and very permeable. Personal
slaves who accompanied their mistresses into the husband's household
might well serve as the nurse of the heir and thus occupy a position of
respect in the next generation. The tension between mother-in-law and
daughter-in-law was mirrored in the relationships between the personal
servants of these women, relationships that were complicated by the other
cross-cutting alliances tying these servants to the male members of the
master's household. Those who have read the great eighteenth-century
novel of elite life, Dream of Red Mansions, will know just how complex the
currents and undercurrents of master-servant relations could be in a well-
to-do establishment.

Household servitude in its various forms was not only an important
avenue of social advancement but also a crucial mechanism in the creation
and maintenance of a common Chinese culture. Because servants were
usually from poorer families and poorer (even non-Han) areas, preferably
from beyond one's own community, the personal interaction in households
with servants regularly promoted the blending of cultures and traditions,
expressed in foods, dialects, and folklore—from different regions and
classes.

The diminution of servile field labor and its replacement with con-
tractual forms of tenancy ranks with the emergence and widespread use of
hired labor as one of the major social and economic phenomena of the
early Qing. We do not in fact know precisely how widespread servile field
labor was in the Ming and earlier periods: historical work suggests that the
great estates in the Ming period did use such labor but that the farm
economy also included many small owner-cultivators. In the early Qing,
however, the use of servile statuses to do farm work diminished noticeably.
Tenancy was no longer a sign of unequal status: liang mu hou who entered into
contracts with landlords were in theory their social and legal equals.
Even more tangible evidence of the changes in the servile structure
comes in the heightened importance of long-term and short-term hired
labor. The emergence of labor markets in the early Qing in urban and rural
areas testifies to a significant increase in physical and social mobility.
From the late Ming through the Qing, we find large farms managed by
landlords who relied primarily on combinations of hired laborers. Long-
term workers, employed typically by the year, would be supplemented at
periods of harvesting or planting with men hired by the month or by the
day. The cost of maintaining the labor force during slack seasons was thus
shifted from the landlord to the worker. In exchange, through enactments
in 1761 and 1786, workers were legally freed from servile status and
became part of the respectable commoner population, in theory at least,
protected by law from gross abuse by the employer. Be it all, they were
free to take advantage of the expanded labor market and change employers
if they wished.

Although fewer servants who lived outside the households of their
owners were bound to them by a web of personal obligations, older, more
"feudal" forms did survive in some localities. In three notorious prefectures
in southern Anhui (Huizhou, Ningguo, and Chishan), servile tenants
existed until 1949. There, whole villages of such tenants, clustered
around the lineage village of the master, were fixed in rigid relations of
permanent tenancy accompanied by a variety of demeaning but obligatory
services. The servile tenants were differentiated from other tenants in that
they "lived in the master's houses, tilled the master's lands, and were
buried in the master's mountains."12 In addition to paying rent, they
guarded the master's graves, took care of his ancestral hall, acted as his
bodyguards, and performed music and drama at his weddings and
funerals.

Servants and retainers were a symbol of status among the wealthy. As
the number of wealthy people increased in the course of the eighteenth
century, the demand for servants and slaves must have also risen. Families
experiencing downward mobility and persons from areas of considerable
poverty continually replenished the supply of servants to the rich. In such
times, the transfer of people from one region to another, often from country
to city, was probably accompanied by some improvement in their standard
of living as well as by pain and loss. Among those at the bottom of the
social scale, the line between servants and other groups of low status was
quite blurred. Criminals were frequently awarded as slaves to high
officials or frontier soldiers, and children were sold to be actors and
prostitutes as well as servants.

Not all hereditary statuses were as permanent as those of the slaves,
mean people, or ethnic minorities. The award of hereditary ranks and
titles to eminent generals, officials, and imperial relatives by the Qing
throne created special lines of descent that were somewhat less extensive
and enduring than under earlier dynasties. Nevertheless, in a few special
cases the ennoblement and its privileges were retained undiminished for
many generations—as by the Taoist Heavenly Masters of Jiangxi or the
descendants of Confucius and his disciples (the Kouns, Mengs, Zengs,
and Yans) from Shandong.

A great variety of hereditary professions characterized by their
monopoly over certain occupations existed in Han Chinese society. Such
hereditary trades included the extremely wealthy salt merchants and the official merchants appointed by the emperor for the lucrative copper trade with Japan, as well as the more ordinary licensed brokers in other commodities, soldiers in the Green Standard Army, and those special occupations in which secret recipes and rituals were crucial (brewers, dyers, doctors, navigators, Taoist priests, etc.). Such occupations were usually inherited by only one son in each generation and did not restrict the mobility of family members into other trades. These specialized professions nevertheless mirrored the more general expectation that sons would succeed to the jobs of their fathers. Despite the long-term trend away from fixed statuses that had begun in the ninth century, the idea that status was inherited was apparently still pervasive even as the dream of upward mobility grew in power.

The tension between inherited status and the increasing importance of wealth in determining status is also revealed in the theoretically sharp but increasingly blurred demarcation between professionals and amateurs, particularly in the arts. Music was both the indispensable accomplishment of a gentleman (Confucius had identified it as such) and the profession of degraded persons. Although distinctions were made on the basis of a social hierarchy of instruments that ranged from the silk-stringed zither, played by the literati (and depicted in plate 3) down to the horn and drums, which accompanied weddings and funerals, there was an important area of ambiguity in ensemble music that could be performed by gentlemen or by low-status professionals. In painting, the distinction between the literati painter and the lower-status professional was more subtle, and in many instances it seemed determined not by the genre or style of the work but by the social origins of the artist. Certainly this was the case in the allied field of drama: consider the early Qing literatus Li Yu, who earned his living from touring the provinces with a drama troupe at one point in his life, yet was always treated as an equal by the officials who paid him for his services. As we have noted previously, in the eighteenth century the line between amateur and professional grew even fuzzier, as more men of elite background earned a living by their writing and their painting.

In sum, the fact of inherited status (whether privilege or burden) was commonplace in this society, and apparently widely accepted as a normal state of affairs. Even within closed status groups, however, there was often opportunity for advancement. Formal examination quotas aided Hakka as well as merchants and bannermen, military campaigns afforded chances for promotion, and the resources and support of powerful owners gave servants scope for the exercise of entrepreneurial talents. The Manchus, who were committed to a hereditarily stratified society, may have encouraged the acceptance of such statuses, and a general reliance on hereditary claims may actually have buffered the trend toward dissolution of social barriers that accelerated in the eighteenth century.

SOCIAL MOBILITY

The drive for upward mobility was encouraged by the pervasive belief that it was possible for a humble peasant boy to become the first scholar in the land and advisor to the emperor. This belief, reiterated in proverbs, plays, and stories, together with an ethic that emphasized education, hard work, good deeds, and the improvement of one’s material condition, combined to produce a powerful dedication to advancement. Economic growth and the increase and dispersal of population in the Qing both reduced the intensity of government and elite control over the society and provided the wealth that spurred education and upward mobility. Ideas about reincarnation, geomancy, and fate rationalized the failure and downward mobility that striving could not prevent.

The goal of the upwardly mobile, and still the most prestigious career in Qing society, was that of the scholar-official. Once the prerogative of an aristocracy, by the seventeenth century academic degrees and government positions were essentially open to merit; families had to renew their claims with each generation.

A variety of factors did, of course, tend to favor the relatives of successful literati, and even studies that do not (as they should) include in-laws as well as uncles and cousins in their definition of relatives, conclude that the majority of degree-holders had degree-holding relatives. The once mighty yin privilege (the right of high officials’ sons to purchase low-level posts) and the special examination quotas for the sons and nephews of incumbent officials did survive in the Qing as remnants of hereditary advantage. Scholar-official families had not only the motivation but also the wealth necessary to support their sons during the long decades of study and preparation required for the examinations, to hire good tutors, purchase books, subsidize travel to the examination sites, and, above all, to forego the income that their boys might have earned in commerce or in some other endeavor. Equally important were other benefits that scholar-officials provided their offspring: the manners and culture of a refined person; marriages with families of similar or higher status; the resources of lineage and native-place organizations during the
critical early stages of a career; and patronage networks for more rapid career advancement. Studies indicate that it was quite possible for lin-

gages to produce holders of degrees and office for many generations and

Indeed over several dynasties.

It was, however, characteristic of Qing society that anyone with

sufficient wealth could buy into this elite, using money to subsidize

education, before the right people, and purchase available degrees and

office. The demographic benefits of wealth (more surviving sons) made the

odds on examination successes over many generations more favorable, but

they also threatened perpetuation of elite status by fragmenting the

patrimony. As increased competition lengthened the time required to

obtain a higher degree, family strategies for achieving and preserving high

status had to give increased emphasis to commercial investment and

estate management. This diversification of corporate resources led dif-

ferent members of the same household and lineage to follow commercial

and scholarly careers, and precipitated a near bifurcation of scholar-officials

from aristocratic households.

Because the eighteenth century brought more opportunities to

acquire wealth, the size of the elite, broadly construed to include literati,

merchants, and rich landlords, no doubt grew in absolute terms and as a

percentage of the total population. But neither the examination system nor

the fiefdoms allowed by the throne to grow as fast as the pool of aspirants. The number who could pass the metropolitan and

provincial examinations to obtain the jinshi and juren degrees required to

hold office was limited by quotas that did not keep pace with population.

Competition to enter the upper elite was thus increasingly fierce in the

latter part of the century. Under such circumstances, those who achieved

degrees and office took special pride in their appurtenances—the ban-

ners and plaques of the degree-holder, special court robes, personal gifts

from the emperor, and so forth. Social distinctions at the top became more

finely graded: one’s place on the palace examination, the highest rank

attained in office, postings to desirable locations, and access to the

emperor all counted in evaluation of status among the national elites.

At the same time, other developments (some a result of this increased

competition) led to an expanded definition of what a respectable career

was. High degrees and government office, becoming so difficult to obtain,

were no longer seen as the only acceptable form of achievement. The

demand of incumbent officials for personal aids had multiplied as the

tasks of governance expanded, and the posts of private secretary became

relatively prestigious and highly specialized careers in themselves, as

well as back doors to office. Directorships of the growing number of

schools and academies—and, more important, scholarly research on the

many projects sponsored by rich patrons—provided employment for those

who could be satisfied with a life outside government. The evidential

scholarship that dominated intellectual life in the Yangze delta and

Peking in the eighteenth century encouraged men to withdraw from

politics into textual research. For the wealthy, a gentlemanly life-style and

skills in the arts of painting, poetry, and calligraphy became important

badges of membership in the elite.

Upwardly mobile newcomers spent money from land and especially

business to acquire the symbols of an elite life-style. The elite could be

recognized by their printed genealogies and imposing ancestral halls; they

were buried with considerable pomp in well-sized and elaborate graves.

They traveled in special carriages, accompanied by a retinue of servants,

and dressed fashionably in elegant clothes of expensive silks and furs.

They lived in choice urban neighborhoods (but usually had country estates

as well) in large compounds enclosing private gardens where they gave

select parties featuring rare delicacies and special entertainers. Elite men

lived in large extended households with many servants and multiple

sexual partners. Their daughters were frequently educated and were

trained to manage the finances of large domestic establishments; they

were also used to create affinal alliances with other elite lines. The men

were trained in the classics, and they collected books, antiquities, and other

rare objects; they painted, played the zither, wrote passable poetry,

enjoyed the theater, food, wine, women, and sometimes young men.

They had long fingernails, never performed manual labor, treated officials

as social equals, and were exempt from physical punishment. Honor, wealth,

learning, numerous progeny, and long life (sometimes with the help of

ginseng and other expensive drugs); the hallmarks of the good life were all

simultaneously displayed in the life-style of China’s elites.

These attributes of elite status (rather than degrees or office) were

now available to anyone at the right price. Once the casual possession

of old elite families, this style of life was enthusiastically adopted by the

novouche riches and upwardly mobile who came to dominate urban

culture in the eighteenth century. Their quest for social respectability and

the appurtenances of the good life was reflected not only in satirical novels

of the period such as The Scholars but in many popular plays as well. Very

limited sumptuary laws and the willing patronage by the throne of some of

the most ostentatious of the newly monetized families (such as the Yangzhou

salt merchants) only encouraged conspicuous consumption.
Anxiety over status at all levels no doubt underlay the availability of opportunities for mobility. The fear of families at the very top that status seeking was undermining the social hierarchy was probably exceeded only by the desire of the ambitious and the wealthy for acceptance. And, given the demographic reality, the inability of those at the very bottom of society to reproduce themselves, and the all too successful ability of the elite household to increase in size, downward mobility was not only a fear but a patent social fact.

Fortunately for social stability, it was not just at the upper levels of the elite that socially acceptable careers were becoming more numerous. A variety of lower status elite careers also developed as attractive routes for the upwardly or downwardly mobile. The lower degrees (military as well as civil) became more desirable in their own right, especially in communities where higher degrees were rare. Small-scale business and entrepreneurial landlordism produced enough wealth for people who had no expectations of rising higher to pass the entry-level examinations or even to acquire the jinshi degree by purchase. Writing plays and novels, as we have suggested, had already become a purposefully Confucian pursuit in the seventeenth century. Editing examination essays, serving as clerks in government offices, carving seals and inkstones, practicing medicine, and specializing in geometry all provided occupations for the literate, the moderately well-off, the ambitious, the emerging trend—against which the reformist policies of the Yongzheng emperor had been only temporarily successful—toward the involvement of local gentry in government, their assumption of responsibility for tasks such as dispute mediation, tax collection, public welfare, and supervision of schools and irrigation, can also be seen as an enlargement of career opportunities for lower- and middle-level elites. We should not be too quick to assume that these men were frustrated by their lack of higher status rather than satisfied with the niches they had carved out for themselves.

The possibilities for upward mobility for those at the very bottom of society were far more limited. Those individuals and families who were dependent on and part of the households of the rich were far more likely to have opportunities to enrich themselves and change their status. The people whose lives were most hopeless were those without a community to assist them and with no established claim to regular work. Both the city and the frontier beckoned as places of opportunity, despite the hazards, and during and hardy young men were sometimes able to make new lives for themselves there.

Those at the bottom of society were quite likely to die without offspring. Many low-status occupations were ones where marriage and children were necessarily rare. Prostitutes, eunuchs, monks, soldiers, and convicts were far less likely to have natural families, and even despised groups were circumscribed in their choice of marriage partners. Poor diet, insecurity, dangerous and demanding labor, reduced access to marriage partners, vulnerability to the elements, illness, and injury combined to make it difficult for poor girls to live to bear children and for poor boys to marry and have surviving sons. The greater mortality of both individuals and family units meant considerable turnover and weaker social institutions among the urban and rural poor. The size of this social stratum must have varied with time and place, but one would expect to find the largest concentrations of the poor in cities (to which they were attracted for employment) but where mortality was high), overpopulated areas, and depressed regions.

ASSIMILATION OF MINORITIES

Even before the Qing period, China had already assimilated (and, more than anyone would admit, been altered by) a variety of non-Han cultures. Over the centuries, Chinese thinkers had come to define a sequence of progression from chaos (the state of barbarian societies) to civilization that involved the acquisition of agriculture, clothing, writing, ritual, a complex social hierarchy, and the other concomitants of the Chinese way of life. Possession of these traits separated Chinese from their non-Han neighbors. As the seventeenth-century thinker Wang Fuzhi wrote, "Alas! What clothing represents to Man is indeed great! What brings it respect is that it is the repository of righteousness; and what brings it love is that it is the storehouse of humanness. It is the axis of good and evil; the principle of life and death; the control between order and anarchy; the distinction between civilized and wild beings." 103

The Chinese had long believed that barbarians, if properly encouraged, would willingly abandon their native ways for the superior culture of the Chinese. Ethnic minorities were distinguished more by clothing, food, language, customs, religion, and social structure than by race. As they interacted with Chinese settlers, they began to be evaluated by their degree of cultural assimilation, using the binary opposites sheng ("race," "uncooked," "i.e., wild), and shu ("ripe" or "cooked," meaning civilized or sinoncized). We see this shift in classifications of Taiwan aborigines, who in the 1660s were divided into "local barbarians" and "savages." By the early eighteenth century, after several decades of contact with Chinese, an