

# Ideological transformation and Research of Social Stratification in China

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Over the course of 30 years in which sociology research in China is recovering, the particular research on social stratification is one of the fastest-growing fields of research that yield the most productive results. Meanwhile, it has also been one of the core research focuses and playing a vital role in China's sociology research. Many of the active and eminent sociologists in current sociology field in China have or are researching on this area. Their results have definitely consolidated their academic status in sociology and relevant theoretical fields. In recent decade, the research on social stratification is gaining grounds. It has not only become the key focus of sociology research, but it has also drawn widespread attention from the theoretical field, policymakers and the general public. The reason why the discussion on the issue of social stratification and relevant research results could engage the focus of the academic, theoretical and media fields is because it involves an important social outcome associated with economic reform – drastic social differentiation and expanding wealth gap, which will affect people's overall assessment of economic reform and support for the Party and the government. This is why it draws the attention from the decision-makers. In light of this, the research on social stratification in China concerns not only academic problems, but also realistic issues. What's more, it is closely associated with progress of socioeconomic transition and the process of its development has always been accompanied by the debate on disparate theories. This article divides the research on social stratification over the last 30 years into four phases; each with additional explanations and elaborations. In different phases, research on social stratification reflects different awareness of issue, theory and focus of debate. These changes mirror the evolutionary process of macro socioeconomics over the 30 years in China from a perspective.

## **I. Phase 1 (1979-1989) Start of the Research on Social Stratification: Reflection on the Theory of Traditional Classes and Proposal of New Principles of Stratification**

The period spanning 1979 (recovery of sociology) to 1989 is the period of recovery of sociology in China and the starting phase of the research on social stratification. During the first few years of sociology recovery in China, little attention had been paid to the issue of social stratification by the sociology researchers. However, approaching the end of

1980s, Chinese sociologies started to become interested in social stratification, which attained its prime in the last three years of 1980s (1987, 1988 and 1989).

#### 1. Social Background that Inspires Interest in Research on Social Stratification

The reason why sociologists began to take interest in social stratification at this particular period of time is that the changes in social stratification were becoming increasingly evident with the advent of economic reform, particularly in areas of social composition. One important aspect of economic reform in 1980s was that it allowed the existence of multiple economic elements, i.e. the employment, business operation and working outside state-owned or collectively owned companies. The implementation of these economic policies had triggered a series of structural changes in our society. Firstly, some new social groups were emerging in addition to the original three classes (workers, farmers and intellectuals) – individual laborers, the self-employed and proprietors as well as employees hired by the self-employed and proprietors. The emergence of these particular social groups had made our social structure increasingly complicated and this insidious change of social structure appeared to be heading further in the opposite direction from what was traditionally defined as the components of a socialistic society.

Besides, in association with the abovementioned policies regarding economic reform, one of the most important, guiding slogans that fuel the economic reform in 1980s was “Let some people turn rich first”. A bunch of self-employed people, private business owners, contractors and celebrities made themselves into the wealthy class. The wealth gap started to widen among different social groups. This trend of development was evidently conflicting with the traditional ideology that emphasizes even distribution of income. The differences among workers hired by companies of different ownerships (state-owned, public-owned, individual, private-owned and enterprises in the three forms of joint venture, cooperative business and exclusively foreign-owned business) were becoming more pronounced than ever. The discrepancies between some cadres and intellectuals who originally fell in the category of working class and workers were growing as well. The previously homogenous rural class (members of people’s commune) was rapidly going towards two extremes. With the promotion of family business and development of enterprises in non-rural areas and town regions, the discrepancies between peasant households and individual farmers were pretty apparent, in terms of income, forms of business operation and types of occupations. Unsurprisingly, there was an increasing trend of social stratification in both cities and rural areas.

The abovementioned changes in social structure had mounted serious challenges to the theories on Marxist class struggle and relevant ideological theories that were popular in times of Cultural Revolution. How to explain the increasingly evident phenomenon of social stratification? Does socialistic society allow the increasing income gap? Do the newly emerging private business owners imply the advent of a new capitalistic class? This series of problems had raised intense controversies in the theoretical world. In light of these problems, socialists draw on the theories and research methods employed by western socialists concerning social stratification, raising some theoretical explanations and proposing some doubts towards the theory of class struggle and some relevant

extremely leftist mindset and offering description and analysis of social stratification in China based on anecdotal researches. What was particularly worth noting during this period was that in 1988, Sociology Institute of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences launched an important research project – “Research on Social Stratification in China”, which acted as the driving force for the nascent research on social stratification in China. The researchers involved in this project published a series of research results, attracting large numbers of sociology researchers from all over China to shift their focus of research onto relevant questions, triggering the upsurge of research on social stratification in the field of sociology. Scholars holding different theoretical opinions then published many articles and the debate went on for years, making the research on social stratification one of the most heatedly discussed fields in sociology.

## 2. Major Theoretical Breakthroughs and Research Results

During this particular period, the major productive result of research on social stratification lay on theoretical level rather than experience level. It is a well-established fact that the research on social stratification is closely associated with Marxist class theory – an important component of socialist ideology. From an academic perspective of research on social stratification, the Marxist class theory is one of the many theories regarding social stratification. It arose from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was a Marxist theoretical explanation of inequality, relations between social groups and macro-social structure in early capitalist society. It is not entirely applicable and thus requires modification and improvement to use it to explain the class relation, inequality and social structure of contemporary society.

However, the leaders of China Communist Party simplified and dogmatized Marxist class theories in 1960s and 1970s and thereon developed a set of theories on class struggle which became a core part of official ideology. In 1980s, the research on China’s social stratification was inevitably restrained by the limits of this dogmatized theory on class at its inception. But soon enough, sociologists discovered that adopting this set of theory on class struggle failed to explain the phenomenon of social stratification back then. There was a need to break through these theoretical constraints before the research on social stratification could be promoted. Hence, the focus of research on social stratification in late 1980s revolved mainly around reflection and criticism towards the dogmatized Marxist class theory and ideologized conception of social structure and hopefully by building on this, they could seek or establish a new theory on social stratification that lent more explanatory support to the then phenomenon of social stratification. However, during this process, scholars raised dissenting voices regarding correct interpretation of Marxist class theory and how to draw on the theory of social stratification in the west.

### (1) Correct Interpretation and Development of Marxist Class Theory

During this period, copious articles were published that focused on the debate over whether the previous logic on class struggle was indeed applicable to the analysis of contemporaneous social stratification in China. It was believed by the majority of researchers on social stratification that analytical approaches that laid excessive

emphasis on class struggle and opposition were not applicable to contemporaneous research on social stratification in China. However, it did fit the previous slave society, feudalistic society and capitalistic societies (Lei Tao, Dai Jianzhong, 1986; Wang Yu, Lei Tao 1988). Researchers further pointed out that following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, persistent clinging to the theory on class struggle had produced dire negative effects on socialist construction. However, a handful of scholars still stuck closely to the analytical approach of class struggle. (He Jianzhang 1988)

#### (2) Replacement of Singular Stratification with Multiple Stratifications

While reflecting on the traditional theory on class struggle, researchers on social stratification pointed out that research on China's social stratification may need to draw on some theories on social stratification in the western sociology field – mainly multiple stratification theory raised by Marx Weber. The Weber theory is based on multiple perspectives and he raised three major dimensions of classification: class (economic dimension), political party (power dimension) and status (social reputation dimension). The then Chinese researchers on social stratification failed to gain a comprehensive and profound understanding of Weber theory on social stratification, but the three-stratification theory proposed by Weber appeared to have been quite appealing. They believed that multiple stratification perspective was more suitable in explaining the issue of social stratification in China (Yang Xiao, Li Lulu, 1989; Pang Shuqi, Qiu Liping, 1988). However, some scholars were convinced that the three-stratification theory was nothing more a capitalist theory that aimed to conceal the class conflicts in capitalistic societies.

#### (3) Hierarchical Society or Stratified Society

Another new notion put forth by researchers on social stratification during this particular period was the concept of the hierarchical society, which differed from traditional ideology. For a considerable period of time, the core concept that underpinned socialist ideology was “equality for all” and “eradicating wealth gap”. The goal that Chinese Communist Party leading the mass has been pursuing was to create an egalitarian communist society. The slogan raised by Mr. Deng Xiaoping that “Let some people turn rich first” since the launch of economic reform implied the tolerance for income gap. Essentially, what lies behind this slogan still retained the socialist ideal– the goal of letting some people turn rich first before the rest of the people become rich. Researchers on social stratification were, however, far ahead of this slogan. They criticized egalitarianism harshly, stating that a truly egalitarian society was unrealistic and prevalent social stratification was reasonable (Pang Shuqi, Qiu Liping, 1988). However, other theorists held opposite opinions towards the expansion of the income gap.

#### (4) Economic Stratification Replacing Political Stratification

Researchers on social stratification further propounded, upon the notion of multiple stratifications, that there were different standards for social stratification in different eras and different societies. They believed that prior to economic reform, Chinese societies were mainly stratified or classified by political standard – “differentiation of ‘enemies from friends’ and ‘leftists from rightists’ was necessary, ordinary social members, even regular civilians, were incorporated in the scope of political groups”. Since the economic reform and as the social stratification developed, Chinese societies have shown evident trend towards economic stratification. (Pang Shuqi, Qiu Liping, 1988)

#### (5) Notion of Function Replacing Notion of Conflicts

During this particular period, researchers on social stratification were disposed to replacement of the original notion of conflicts with notion of functions when discussing the issue of China's social stratification. The notion of traditional class struggle was a typical theory of conflicts and its core opinion was that all the class societies (including slave society, feudalistic society and capitalistic society) were composed of two opposing classes. The struggle between the two opposing classes had become the main conflict and driving force of social development. Researchers on social stratification and the then theorists were convinced that it was exactly this particular set of notions on class struggle that should be responsible for social and political unrest and economic stagnation in times of Cultural Revolution. Hence, in analyzing contemporaneous social structure and group relations in China, we should abandon the analysis from the perspective of conflicts; instead, function notions shall be adopted to define the attributes of classes and their inter-relationship.

Some scholars proposed the replacement of "class" concept with "stratification" concept. (Lei Tao, Dai Jianzhong, 1986) The concept of "class" implies internal conflicts of interest whereas the concept of "stratification" implied differences or classification, but it did not necessarily involve conflict; instead, a cooperative or compromising relationship might be pinpointed. (Pang Shuqi, Qiu Liping, 1988; Wang Yu, Lei Tao, 1988; Yang Xiao, Li Lulu, 1989) Besides, when the class attributes of individual business owners (petty bourgeoisie) and private business owners (bourgeoisie) were in question, scholars were more inclined to prefer the analysis by functional notion. If the traditional theory on class conflicts were utilized to analyze the class attributes of the two classes, the conclusion was bound to be the fundamental conflict of interests between these two classes and the proletariats. Based on the analysis through the functional perspective, both of the two classes were the "driving forces behind the productivity development", which should be allowed to exist and develop.

In late 1980s, the reflection on the theory of class struggle and reference to stratification theory in some of the western societies in the research on social stratification laid a solid foundation for the subsequent research on social stratification in China. The debate that particularly focused on whether the class struggle notion and relevant concepts were applicable to the analysis of the issues of social stratification in contemporaneous China has made sociologists ahead of the mind liberation movement – which essentially eliminated obsolete, leftist and ideologized dogma. When some mainstream theorists and scholars of other disciplines were still sticking to traditional dogma, sociologists have already adopted pretty objective and realistic attitude to analyze realistic problems by extracting the essence of Marxism.

## **II. Second Phase (1990-1995) Recovery after Twists and Turns: A Systematic Description and Analysis of the Phenomenon of Social Differentiation**

After 1989, the research on social stratification became a politically sensitive topic for

research. Even though the discussion on relevant theories became off-limits, it would by no means dampen the intense enthusiasm widely shared among sociologists in the issue of social stratification. The research on social stratification still remained one of the most important subject matter for research in the field of China's sociology. During this period, the researchers in the main sociology research institutes in China introduced some large-scale and long-standing research topics, carrying out exclusive research on the issue of social stratification. The outstanding characteristics of research on social stratification during this particular period was: collected and investigated materials on problems the society, public and government decision-makers were most concerned of; offer description and analysis of these problems based on relevant research materials. Analysis based on research materials became a primary means of research for researchers on social stratification. In general, the research on social stratification during the period spanning 1990 and 1995 eschewed theoretical debate; instead, the focus was on empirical analysis and description of phenomenon. During this particular period, researchers on social stratification carried out relatively profound investigation and research on the phenomenon of social stratification on macroscopic, microscopic levels and in some exclusive fields. An encouragingly large amount of research results have been obtained, providing a lot of useful information for related governmental department and the general public.

#### 1. Social Background that Inspires Transition from Theoretical Discussion to Empirical Research

During the post-1989 Era, the mind liberation movement in China's theoretical field was met with some setbacks. The revival of some extremely leftist notions has led some theoretical notions previously raised by researchers on social stratification be accused of "liberalized thinking". Some theorists claimed that class struggle still existed under socialist conditions and private-owned economy was "re-cultivating and feeding a bourgeoisie with the efforts of the working class" (Duan Ruofei, 1996), and this bourgeoisie would threaten our socialist system and liberalized thinking was a perfect ideological reflection of this class (He Jianzhang, 1990). The majority of researchers on social stratification eschewed theoretical debate and shifted their focus onto the description and analysis of realistic problems during this particular period of time.

On the other hand, social and economic differentiation was picking up the pace during this particular period of time. Following the year 1992 when Deng Xiaoping paid a visit to the southern tip of China where he delivered a landmark speech, the pace of economic reform gained increasing momentum. Meanwhile, China was also embarking on a period of rapid economic growth. Unfortunately, what accompanied it was the pronounced widening of income gaps and polarization in occupations and classes. In the fields of non-public economy, the number of individual business owners burgeoned incredibly, forming a cluster of private business owners of measurable scale. Among them, some individual business owners have become the employers, expediting the formation of a cluster of private business owners. Even though it is difficult to conclude that these two groups have already formed two distinct classes, it is beyond the shadow of a doubt that

they are definitely developing toward it. Meanwhile, a tremendous number of Multi-national corporations and foreign-owned companies made their way into China, enticed by the Chinese policies, and the middle- or high-level management staffs and professional technicians in these enterprises have formed a group of white-collars that make high income.

The income made by private business owners, self-employed people and middle- and high-ranking management in foreign-owned companies was far more than ordinary employers and employees and those under the public-owned economy. The income gap was widening in sectors of public-owned economy as well. The income for those in some privileged governmental organizations, monopolizing companies and enterprises who manage to seize niche markets was rising rapidly. In contrast, the income of those working in government organizations who were entitled to limited or no authorities and traditional or sunset industries was on a gradual incline, resulting in the rapid widening of income gap among these companies. Besides, the income of personnel in the same company was widening as well, typically reflected in the ever-broadening income difference between white-collars and blue-collars and between leaders, managers and ordinary workers. In general, income gap was increasing in both urban and rural areas, and fields of public-owned economy and non-public-owned economy, accentuating income inequality in the process. What's more, social differentiation during this particular period was not only reflected in income gap, but also the differentiation of occupational functions and social reputation.

In face of intense socioeconomic shift and rapid socioeconomic differentiation, researchers on social stratification were given little time to perform theoretical reflection or conclusion. They may raise some theoretical concepts or elaboration sometimes, but the rapid change of social reality has often rendered their theoretical notion obsolete or even completely forgotten. Hence, researchers on social stratification (like the majority of contemporaneous sociology researchers) during this particular period focused most of their attention on observation, recording and description of the process of social differentiation, attempting to figure out the changes that have taken place in the field of social stratification, what results would be brought by these changes and hoping to extrapolate future trends. Meanwhile, the research on social stratification during this period also had evident inclination for policy suggestions. There was an intense debate in the theoretical world over whether it was necessary to stick to policies regarding market-oriented economic reform and how to deal with subsequent socioeconomic differentiation. The majority of researchers on social stratification were actively embracing policies concerning economic reform and they have adopted a relatively positive and approving attitude towards the phenomenon of socioeconomic differentiation. It was believed by the researchers on social stratification that even though socioeconomic inequality aggravated, the rapid economic growth has benefited the majorities. The income and quality of life for people from both the upper rung and bottom barrel of the social hierarchy have generally improved, which makes social stratification caused by economic reform a reasonable, rational and acceptable phenomenon.

## 2. Major Research Discoveries and Opinions

### Social Stratification Prior to Economic Reform in China

The research on social stratification during this particular period of time invariably focused on analyzing social stratification before reform and took the changes of social stratification since economic reform into consideration. Hence, researchers in this period raised some mature, sophisticated and systematic perspectives towards the social stratification system before the reform. It was discovered by researchers that before the economic reform, Chinese society was characterized by unique hierarchical patterns and characteristics – a result of innate factors inherent in the system. The three types of “system structure”, which refer to “identity system”, “company system” and “administrative system”, led to differences in social status of people in our society. “Identity system” refers to the practice of classifying social members into three distinct groups of unique social identity by the system rules (national administrative rules) – “leaders”, “workers” and “farmers”. Once the identity has been confirmed, it is not subject to changes on account of personal preference or will (Li Lulu, Wang Fenyu, 1992; Li Qiang, 1993; Zhang Wanli, 2000).

One of the most important identity differentiations was by residential registration, or household registration. Differentiation of rural and non-rural residential registrations led to hierarchy of rural-urban segmentation, and the identity differentiation of leaders and workers further led to stratification of urban societies (Li Qiang 1993). “Company system” referred to the fact that the differences in social status of people in our society were largely dependent on the inter-relationship between different types and classes of companies. Social resources were distributed to individuals through companies and different companies had access to different amounts of resources. Hence, people working in different companies had different resources, social status and reputation and how much resources to which each company was entitled depend on its class location in the national administrative system (Li Qiang, 1993; Li Lulu, Wang Fenyu, 1992).

“Administrative system” referred to the situation where individual social status was largely determined by administrative relationship and administrative status (Li Lulu, Wang Fenyu 1992), which was referred by Li Qiang as “official standard system” that caused further differentiation among leaders (Li Qiang, 1993; Li Qiang, 1995). The abovementioned three types of national administrative systems constitute the fundamental system for social stratification in China prior to economic reform, which was composed of three major groups – farmers, workers and leaders. There was a class hierarchy hidden in the differences of social status of these three groups of people: farmers dominated the bottom barrel and leaders occupied the upper rung, with workers stuck in the middle. Within the leaders, further sub-differentiation could be made in distinguishing senior-ranking leaders, medium-ranking leaders and junior-ranking leaders. Workers could also be categorized into those working for state-owned enterprises and those working for public-owned companies by the company system. However, due to the ideological constraints and restrictions, few scholars were capable of explicitly outlining



this hierarchical structure of class, but the underlying implications could be still perceived in their statements and elaborations.

## (2) Changes of Hierarchical Mechanism since Economic Reform

Many researchers on social stratification had already noticed the changes of rules of social stratification as a result of economic reform. At the inception of these changes, the original systemized hierarchical mechanism was still exerting measurable effect, despite being weakened or altered and the new hierarchical rules still remained unclear. Researchers in this particular period of time failed to carry out as many and profound discussions on hierarchical mechanism (compared with the research on social stratification system prior to the reform and analysis of group stratification after the reform). Sun Liping noticed the emergence of an entirely new field of market economy outside the original system of planned economy. He termed it “free flow resources” and “free flow space”. In this new field, the rules applicable to resource allocation are definitely different from the system of planned economy.

However, he failed to shed light on the hierarchical rules outside the system. (Sun Liping, 1993) Li Qiang carried out analysis of changes of identity system of household registration and official standard system. He was convinced that the sudden influx of rural people into city seeking for better employment opportunities produced a tremendous impact on the original rural-urban bipolar structure. However, the new rural immigrants failed to obtain legal identity in the city; so somehow, they wandered in the grey zone between “cities and rural areas”. In this way, the bipolar structure has been transformed into a tri-polar structure (Li Qiang, 1995). This implies that identity system still remained the important mechanism in social stratification. Regarding the official standard system, Li Qiang believed that economic reform has brought “sever impact” upon the official standard system”, “this particular system was clearly on the decline”. He pointed out that income reform has narrowed down the income gap between leaders of different ranks, as well as leaders and ordinary employees, transforming the “leaders” from “high-income groups” to “medium-low” or even “low income groups). It was thereon deduced by Li Qiang that “planning economy is giving way to market economy” and official standard system was no longer the major mechanism in the system of social stratification in China. (Li Qiang, 1995)

It was claimed in the research conducted by Wang Hansheng (1994) that “there is a relatively appreciable decrease in the dominant political resources following the economic reform, thus considerably raising the importance of cultural and economic resources”. (Excerpt from Zhang Wanli 2000) The notions raised by Li Qiang and Wang Hansheng were consistent with the “theory on market transition” propounded by some contemporaneous western sociologists. (Nee, 1989; 1991) Based on this theory, during the transitional process from planned economy to market economy, the effects of political authorities on social stratification were diminishing, causing the income level and social status of leaders to fall gradually (compared with other classes and stratifications). When market economy is developed, leaders will lose their advantageous position they

comfortably enjoyed in times of planned economy. However, the subsequent trend of development ran contrary to this theory.

A lot of researchers during this particular period discussed a prominent social phenomenon – “huge wage disparity between white-collars and blue-collars”. This involves the influence of human capital (educational level) on social hierarchy. Undoubtedly, in times of the planned economy, human capital was not the significant factor that affected social hierarchy. However, when it came to market economy, human capital was one of the most prominent factors determining personal income level and social status, implying that economic reform should have boosted the effects of human capital. However, in times of this particular period, people have observed tremendous occurrences of “huge wage disparity between white-collars and blue-collars”: some of low educational level managed to make a huge fortune whereas their much better educated counterparts had relatively low income. In light of this, some scholars believed that this peculiar phenomenon has proved that educational level was not a decisive factor of social hierarchy. However, Li Peilin held opposite opinions. He pointed out this phenomenon has been overly exaggerated and over-generalized. Ever since the economic reform, the educational return (its influence on personal income) has been on the rise and human capital would become an important mechanism in social hierarchy. (Li Peilin, 1995)

The researchers on social hierarchy during this particular period also discussed the importance of economic hierarchy. From the perspective of multi-polar hierarchy, researchers believed that Chinese societies were basically a kind of political hierarchy prior to the economic reform. However, after the economic reform, as the income gap increased, particularly following the emergence of clusters of private business owners, economic stratification would become more important than ever. However, researchers also noticed that despite the high income, private business owners and self-employed had a low social status (Dai Jianzhong, 1995), implying the inconsistencies between economic hierarchy and social reputation hierarchy.

### (3) The Phenomenon of Group Polarization since Economic Reform

The major focus of concern shared in the research on social stratification during this period was the differentiation of social groups. Researchers collected huge amounts of data and materials to carry out analysis of differentiation of each type of groups. It was commonly believed by researchers that economic reform caused social restructuring and sweeping differentiation of social classes and strata. (Wang Hansheng, Zhang Xinxiang, 1993; Zhang Wanli, 2000) The research on differentiation of working class, namely Feng Tongqing, evidently pointed to the fact that the original working class started to undergo “internal stratification and differentiation”. Disparate classes and groups emerged – managers, technicians and workers. Among them, managers and technicians had a much higher social status above that of workers. “There are evident differences in income, social status, and reputation among different classes of managers, business owners and workers (particularly the working class)”. “The working class can feel perceivable fall in their social status”. “The conflict of interests between the working class and managers,

and business owners deepens”. (Feng Tongqing, Xu Xiaojun 1993)

The “Research on Differentiation and Stratification of Chinese Farmers” conducted by Lu Xueyi and Zhang Houyi, among many others, indicated that the original rural class has been sub-divided into 8 distinct classes: rural laborers, rural workers, employees, intelligent employees (referring particularly to specialized technicians in rural areas), self-employed and individual laborers, private business owners, public-owned enterprise managers, and rural community managers. Meanwhile, it was also pointed out by the authors that during this particular period, the differentiation of farmers was still in its nascent stage. Uncertainties lingered over the individual class identity and the class awareness was pretty weak (Lu Xueyi, 1992). In the analysis of the effects of economic reform on leaders, Li Qiang and Wang Hansheng concluded that the advantageous position of leaders showed a marked fall. It was claimed by Huang Ping in his research on the group intellectuals that following the advent of the market economy, the original group of intellectuals were divided into intellectuals within the system, outside the system and against the system. (Huang Ping, 1993) Researchers on social stratification also carried out a series of research on some newly emerging social groups (including private business employers, self-employed and employees) and one of the focuses was on the research on class attributes of private business employers. Some conservative theorists were convinced that private business employers still fell in the category of bourgeoisie for they ruthlessly exploited the remaining value of workers – a notion that was dissented by the majority of researchers on social stratification. It was believed by Zhang Houyi that “private business employers have already formed a new social hierarchy and it has become an integral part of contemporary social structure in China. It aids socialistic development rather than being misconstrued as the emerging bourgeoisie. (Zhang Houyi, 1994)

The research on social stratification spanning the period from 1990 to 1995 could be deemed as a transitional phase: on the one hand, the resurgence of extremely leftist ideology inhibited the research on the theories of social stratification. Researchers started to eschew research on theories of social stratification related to official ideology, which produced negative effects on the development of the research on social stratification in China. On the other hand, it led researchers to shift their focus onto empirical and anecdotal research, conducting profound investigation into the phenomenon of social differentiation in each field, collecting large amounts of research materials and laying some foundation for scientific empirical research in the next phase. Besides, the research on social stratification in China confirmed the means of research characterized by empirical investigation and analysis.

### **III. The Third Phase (1996-2000): Separate Research on Social Stratification: Native and Popular Stratification Research and Westernized and Academy Stratification Research**

The research on social stratification spanning the period from 1996 to 2000 is the

third phase of research and development on social stratification in China. During this period, the research on social stratification was divided into two very different types of research: the first type of social stratification research was profoundly influenced by relevant theories and methodologies of western sociology and pursued academically standardization; the other type focused on practical problems but lacked theoretical explanations and scientific methods. These two types of research differed vastly from each other in their themes, theoretical orientation and research methodologies. Given the context that the entire field of sociology in China was pursuing academic standardization, the research on westernized and academic social stratification was gradually becoming the mainstream, accumulating adequate theoretical knowledge and methodology for the next phase of research on social stratification. However, due to the westernization of the research themes and complexities involved in the research methodology, this type of research had limited effects.

#### 1. Social Context that Stimulated the Two Types of Research

In the second half of 1990s, there was an increased communication between Chinese sociology and western sociology. Chinese sociologists gradually came into contact with all sorts of western sociological theories and research methodologies, setting off a movement characterized by pursuit of academic standards in the field of sociology in China – promoting the theoretical and methodological level of research on sociology in China. The research on social stratification took the leading position in this movement, due in part to the increasing fervor in the US sociology field that studied the evolution of social stratification in China and other former East European socialist countries. Some American sociologists (including a batch of Chinese American sociologists) made their way to China to collect research data and analyze them, proposing some theoretical models (theory on market transition and proposition of a series of theoretical explanatory model in response to this theory).

Sun Liping, among others, offered a systematic introduction to the research conclusions and theoretical notions propounded by these American sociologists, which triggered intense interest from a bunch of young Chinese sociologists. They started to study the research methodologies employed by American scholars, drawing on the theoretical notions of American scholars and launching a series of similar researches. Engagement in this type of research required better understanding of relevant theories of western sociology (demanding higher English level), and the majority of this type of research employed quantitative research methods (requiring certain techniques in statistical analysis). Given this situation, many scholars who were previously engaged in research on social stratification gradually extricated themselves from the field of stratification research and shifted their focus onto other problems. The pure academic stratification research was normally intensive, topic-oriented research conducted by individual scholars and the influence of its research results was limited. The previous large-scale research on social stratification that may affect public opinion and policy-making process was rarely seen in this phase.

Meanwhile, as social differentiation deepened approaching the end of 1990s, a new

trend revealed itself in the phenomenon of stratification. During the inception of economic reform, the phase in which every single individual reaped benefits appeared to be over; the new round of differentiation indicated bipolarization of struggle over interest and income distribution. The reform policies implemented in the mid- or later half of 1990s – particularly reform of state-owned enterprises and tax system, financial system reform – evidently fueled the bipolarization of resource allocation and income distribution. During this particular period, large-scale pushing of reform and privatization of state-owned and public-owned enterprises had caused the social status of working class to fall drastically and the financial conditions of large numbers of laid-off workers to deteriorate, making them fall to the bottom barrels of social hierarchy. On the other hand, some original state-owned and public-owned management staff members rapidly gained their wealth by gobbling up state-owned and public-owned assets to become employers. The batch of employers of large- or medium- private business owners emerged during this particular period experienced rapid rise of their wealth and social status.

The other reform measures – tax revenues and financial system reform – concentrated increasingly more resources of all sorts in the hands of relatively high-ranking governmental organizations and large cities. The resources, on the other hand, available for low-ranking government bodies and rural areas were in short supply. The discrepancy between rural and urban areas as well as between different regions was rapidly expanding and the income for farmers and rural workers was experiencing a slow growth. The aggravation of social polarization led to intensified social conflicts. In cities, the protests of the unemployed were breaking out on a frequent basis; in rural areas, the conflicts between farmers and rural leaders were happening regularly as well. The widening income gap and intensified social conflicts caused the general public to be more concerned of the issue of social stratification. Income gap, inequality, group conflict, classes and hierarchy have become the hot terms that were widely discussed by the public. People were starting to feel that a society characterized by a class or hierarchy was emerging. Even though during this period, the majority of sociologists refused to believe that China was turning into a society characterized by a particular class or stratum – sociologists were inclined to categorization of different groups of people by interest rather than the concept of class or stratum (Gu Jieshan, 1995). However, some non-sociologic people emulated what Mao Zedong did in the “analysis of all social classes in China”, which drew a lot of feedback from the society. Even though the analysis of this type of so-called stratum or class failed to be acknowledged by sociologists, its populist and more realistic understanding enjoyed widespread popularity among the public.

## 2. Main research contents and viewpoints

### 2.1 Popularized social strata analysis

The most typical representative book on popularized social strata analysis is the “Report of Analysis on Social Strata in China” (2000) written by Yang Jishen, the former journalist in the Xinhua News Agency, and in addition, the more influential books are the writer Liang Xiaosheng’s “Analysis on Social Strata in China” (1997) and the politician Zhu Guanglei’s “Analysis on Social Strata in Contemporary China” (1998). The authors of these books are not sociologists, but they often quote sociologist’s viewpoints, and they

mostly agree on some theoretical viewpoints proposed by sociologists in late 1980s, for example, it is normal that the society is differentiated into different populations (classes or strata), social differentiation is pluralistic, social stratification in contemporary China is mainly economic stratification, there are strata but not classes in present China, etc, and they also think that contemporary Chinese society has been differentiated into a series of social strata, which have class differences at the aspects of economic income, social status, etc, with conflicts of interests between them. On common characteristic of these books is that they make detailed descriptions to the differentiated social strata.

## 2.2 Social mobility research

In this period, social mobility research makes the most prominent academic progress in the field of social stratification research. Social mobility research is one of the most important subjects in social stratification research of international sociology, and it includes two kinds of analysis patterns: the one is status attainment research – mainly analyze that which factors have influenced people’s economic status, occupational status, educational level and comprehensive social and economic status; the other is inter-generational or intra-generational mobility research – under a certain hierarchical structure, how people move upward (move from lower hierarchical status to higher hierarchical status) and move downward (move from higher hierarchical status to lower hierarchical status). The purposes of these two researches are to discover the reasons of social stratification (stratification mechanism) and observe the evolution tendency of social stratification through the comparison between different decades, which is just the issue Chinese social stratification researchers are most interested in, so social mobility research becomes a hot point of social stratification research in this period. Three academic books on this research subject represent the progress in this research: Chen Yingying’s “Occupational Structure and Mobility” (1995), Li Chunling’s “Social Mobility in Chinese Cities and Towns” (1997) and Xu Xinxin’s “Social Structural Change and Mobility in Contemporary China” (2000). Main conclusions drawn from the above research include that: ① Before economic reform, Chinese society is a highly closed society with lower social mobility, and after economic reform, the promotion of marketization and modernization raises the mobility, the openness of Chinese social structure rises, and Chinese society is in the process of transforming from a highly closed identity society to a comparatively open differentiated society (Chen Yingying, 1995). ② The transition from planned economy to market economy leads to two co-existing systems – redistribution system and market system, and the mobility types and mobility rules of these systems are different, but they influence people’s social mobility (Li Chunling, 1997; Xu Xinxin, 2000).

## 2.3 Occupational prestige research

Occupational prestige research used to be the mainstream of American social stratification research, and it sets forth from Weber’s pluralistic (economy, identity and political power) social stratification theory and then thinks that identity stratification is the foremost stratification type in contemporary society. The so-called occupational prestige means people’s evaluation on the status of various kinds of occupations (usually measure by means of scoring), and everyone’s status in social stratification system is decided by the prestige of his/her occupation. In 1980s, Lin Nan, the Chinese sociologist in American, who influenced Chinese sociology development at that time, once published some theses

about occupational prestige in China, and then more and more Chinese scholars carried on this research. In which, two theses are most influencing, Zhe Xiaoye and Chen Yingying's "Chinese Rural 'Occupational – Identity' Prestige Research" (1995) and Xu Xinxin's "Seeing Chinese Social Structural Change from Occupational Evaluation and Occupational Orientation" (2000). Zhe Xiaoye and Chen Yingying's thesis is to verify that whether one basic theoretical assumption in occupational prestige research is true in China, i.e. all industrialized societies have similar occupational prestige ranking system, which also means that all industrialized societies have similar stratification system. Zhe Xiaoye and Chen Yingying draw the conclusion from the research on rural occupational prestige ranking in mid 1990s that Chinese occupational prestige evaluation is influenced by the specific differentiation mechanism in Chinese society – unit system, administration system and identity system, which indistinctly deny the above theoretical assumption. Xu Xinxin's thesis compares the changes of Chinese occupational prestige ranking in different years (1983, 1987, 1993 and 1999), and the conclusion shows that the promotion of marketization and industrialization makes Chinese social occupational prestige evaluation gradually more and more similar to other industrialized societies. Afterwards, on the basis of these two researches, Li Chunling adopts nationwide sampling survey data in 2001 to make further research (2005), and the conclusions are that on the one hand, Chinese prestige stratification moves close to market-economy industrialized society – income and educational level decide people's prestige status, and on the other hand, Chinese special institutional factors make Chinese social prestige stratification special – power and unit factors also produce important influences on Chinese prestige status.

#### 2.4 Private entrepreneur and elite research

Private entrepreneur research is a hot issue in Chinese social stratification research in this phase, and its theoretical subject is influenced by market transformation theory. One theoretical assumption of market transformation theory is that the advantage group (elite) in redistribution economy (in the period of planned economy) is cadres, who master political power, and the advantage group (elite) in market economy is entrepreneurs, who master economic capital. In the process of transforming from redistribution economy to market economy, the interchange of elite types occurs – private entrepreneurs replace cadres and become the elites in the society. The question argued by researchers is that does the interchange of elite types adopt the method of "elite reproduction" or "elite circulation"? Elite reproduction means that former cadres turn to private entrepreneurs, and they the same people – although their identity and possessed resource types make changes. Elite circulation means that new private entrepreneurs are not the former cadres, they are other people, and the former elite (cadre) status decreases and the cadres have lost their elite status. The researches on private entrepreneur made by Li Lulu (1998), Dai Jianzhong (2001), etc, verify the above theoretical assumptions through investigating the background of private entrepreneurs and the factors influencing private entrepreneur's success. Li Lulu's research conclusion is that the generation of Chinese private entrepreneurs adopts the "mixed" pattern with the combination of elite reproduction and elite circulation, i.e. the former redistribution power (cadre identity or party member identity) still has influence on new elite generation, but he predicts that the effect of this redistribution power would weaken along with the development of market economy. Dai

Jianzhong's conclusion is on the contrary, and he thinks that early private entrepreneurs (before 1988) mostly come from the bottom of the society outside the system, while after 1992, private entrepreneurs show more and more system background – with party member identity or professional technicians and cadres from party and government organizations. It means that the generation of private entrepreneurs is “elite circulation” at early stage and later tends to “elite reproduction”, i.e. the effect of redistribution power does not weaken along with the development of market economy, but strengthen on the contrary.

#### 2.5 Political stratification and economic stratification

In this period, Li Qiang published an influential article “Political Stratification and Economic Stratification” (Li Qiang, 1997). Li Qiang points out in this article that one particularity of Chinese social stratification is the division between political stratification and economic stratification, and he thinks that before economic reform, Chinese social stratification is mainly a kind of political stratification, the inequality is mainly manifested as political inequality, and the degree of economic inequality is comparative low, and after economic reform, Chinese social stratification develops into economic stratification, the degree of political inequality decreases, while the degree of economic inequality increases. He proposes the division of political stratification and economic stratification, because he wants to evaluate the variation trend of inequality at multi-dimensional angle, and he points out that after economic reform, the degree of economic inequality increases, but the degree of political inequality decreases greatly, and the decrease of the degree of political inequality is in favor of “easing group conflicts and integrating group benefits”.

In 1996-2000, academic social stratification researches are greatly developed in China, these researches mostly investigate the changes in social stratification mechanism, and compared with the related researches in the previous phase, these researches are far more thorough, the methods are more rigorous, and the research conclusions are more reliable. On some issues, they are integrated with related researches in international sociology. However, it brings about another issue that the westernization of theoretical issues and the technicalization of research methods make social stratification research gradually turn into self-appreciation inside small academic circle, while almost ignore the actual problems and related expressions generally focused on by the public.

#### **Phase 4 (since 2001) Complete and thorough social stratification research: focus on practical questions and theoretical questions**

Since 2001, Chinese social stratification research has formed a research climax with great achievement, research contents are comprehensive and thorough, and part research achievements have aroused the focus of the public and government decision makers. In this period, the shackle of traditional ideology to social stratification theory has break through – although till now, there is still shackle, social stratification researchers make responses to the practical questions and related discussions focused by the public, and meanwhile, they also focus on policy issues gradually. On the other hand, academic social stratification researches continue developing and make great achievements in special researches.



## 1. Social background of research climax

After more than 20 years of social economic differentiation, Chinese society has formed a stratification pattern completely different from that before economic reform, and not only sociologists realize that a new stratification structure comes into being, but also common people feel the existence of this stratification structure in everyday life. Income gap keeps widening in this period, and it becomes one main root cause of social discontent. In the previous period, some economists and sociologists think that the income gap in China is in a reasonable range, and the further economic development may automatically release it, but in this period, the scholars think income inequality has reached the intolerable status and should be controlled and intervened by national policy. Meanwhile, the feeling of the public to inequality is not only limited in income distribution, but also expanded to more comprehensive social inequality – including official abuse of power, discrimination to vulnerable groups (such as rural migrant workers), inequality in education opportunity, unfair competition in monopolized industries, various kinds of corruption, etc. Some local social contradictions occurred at the previous phase – the contradictions and conflicts between laid-off workers and enterprise managers or supervising government departments and the contradictions and conflicts between peasants and village officials caused by rural taxes and fees – are partially eliminated at this phase, but more comprehensive new contradictions and conflicts emerge, such as the contradictions and conflicts between the poor and the rich; labor disputes between workers and bosses; the contradictions and conflicts between government departments and the groups (land-requisitioned peasants, relocated households, etc) involved in related policy. The comprehensive discussions on social inequality stimulate the strong dissatisfaction of the public to the advantage groups (such as the rich, officials, capitalists, personnel in monopolized industry, etc) – someone call it as the “hostility to the rich”. In this situation, inequality issue and class and strata differentiation issue – the subjects of social stratification research – become the hot issues focused by the public, and people urgently need scholars provide related knowledge and information to answer their questions.

On the other hand, policy makers gradually focus on these questions and hope that they could get accurate information and corresponding policy suggestions to make related policies, inhibit the sharpening of inequality and release social contradictions and conflicts. In this period, government decision makers view and handle social economic differentiation with more objective attitude. Especially, the thought of “Three Represents”, the ideology of “Building a Harmonious Society” and the concepts of “Median Income Group” and “New Strata” proposed by the Party Central Committee show the decision makers’ attitude of keeping pace with the times, which provides a more open space for theoretical exploration made by social stratification researchers. In such atmosphere, some social stratification researchers begin to touch upon sensitive practical questions, break through the shackle of traditional ideology, objectively and realistically probe into the phenomena of social economic differentiation, and make macro theoretical analysis to the social economic differentiation of more than 20 years. These researches are welcomed by the public and focused by the decision makers.

## 2. Main theoretical viewpoints

In this period, the contents of social stratification research are very comprehensive, research achievements are numerous, in which, the most influential books include Lu Xueyi edited "Report of Social Strata Research in Contemporary China" (2002) and "Social Mobility in Contemporary China" (2004); Sun Liping's "Fracture: Chinese Society since 1990s" (2003) and "Unbalance: Action Logic in Fractured Society" (2004); Li Peilin, et al "Social Conflicts and Class Consciousness" (2005); Li Peilin, et al "Chinese Social Stratification" (2004); Li Qiang's "Chinese Social stratification Structure in the Transition Period" (2002) and "Rural Migrant Workers and Chinese Social Stratification" (2004); Li Lulu's "Reproduction Continuity – System Transition and Urban Social Stratification" (2003); Li Chunling's "Fracture and Fragment: Positive Analysis on Social Strata Differentiation in Contemporary China" (2005), etc. In addition to these, there are many specific research articles, but due to limited length, they cannot be listed and concluded here. Then, I just can briefly introduce some macro theoretical explanations proposed by some famous social stratification researchers on social stratification and its variation trend in contemporary China (refer to Li Chunling, 2005).

### 2.1 Structuration or fragmentation

One focus question argued by Chinese social stratification theoreticians at present is that whether Chinese society has formed some kind of determined class or stratum structure? In other words, whether has formed a series of class or strata? Some sociologists give a positive answer, while some other sociologists give a negative answer. One typical representative with the positive answer is the "Ten Major Strata in Chinese Society" (Lu xueyi, 2002) proposed by Lu Xueyi, et al, who think that after the social economic differentiation for more than 20 years since the economic reform, a stabilizing stratum structure has appeared in Chinese society, and social members are differentiated into 10 strata – stratum of national and social managers; stratum of managers; stratum of private entrepreneurs; stratum of professional technicians; stratum of staff; stratum of individual industrial and commercial households; stratum of employees in business service industry; stratum of industrial workers; stratum of agricultural laborers; stratum of urban and rural jobless, unemployed and partially employed. These ten strata have significant difference in occupational status and the ownership of economic resources, cultural resources and organization power resources, according to which, the ten strata form a structure ranking downward. Lu Xueyi, et al have marked out the ten strata on the basis of these objective status differences, but they have not determined that whether these strata have common identity, whether they have formed stratum consciousness, and whether they may take stratum actions. However, the social mobility research (Lu Xueyi, 2004) made by them later proves that this hierarchical structure definitely produces influence on people's status attainment and status change (upward mobility and downward mobility). Li Lulu's viewpoint is further than that of Lu Xueyi, et al, and he does not propose class or stratum differentiation, but he adopts the two concepts of "Structuration" and "Reproduction" to show that the present Chinese society has formed stable class and stratum structure (Li Lulu, 2003). The word "Structuration" comes from Anthony Giddens' analysis on social class differentiation in contemporary western developed countries (1973), and "Structuration" means that the social economic difference between people is persistent and stabilized, so as to cause the occurrence of

class and stratum structure, and it specially emphasizes on that the difference of economic status is spread to every field of social life, i.e. class and stratum status influences people's mobility opportunity, life style, social attitude and behavior orientation. The theory of "Reproduction" is mainly proposed by Bourdieu (1984), et al, and adopted to analyze the continuity of class status in contemporary western society, and it also emphasizes on the persistent influence of class status. Li Lulu finds in the research on urban social mobility in contemporary China that Chinese society has made drastic changes, but the order, relative status and relative relationship of social stratification have continued. That is to say, he tends to think that in contemporary Chinese society, social economic difference has been structured, or class and stratum structure has been stabilized, and this class and stratum structure will be continued (Li Lulu, 2002). Sun Liping also tends to this viewpoint, he does not adopt the concept of "Structuration", but uses the two words of "modelization" and "normalization" to describe the present social economic difference (gap between upper level and lower level" and resource distribution mechanism, as well as the clearing of class and stratum boundary line, and the meaning is that a relatively stable and boundary-clear class and stratum structure has occurred (Sun Liping, 2003; 2004).

Li Qiang, et al, holds the opposite viewpoint, they deny that Chinese society has formed class or stratum structure, and they emphasize on the characteristic of fragmentation of social economic differentiation in contemporary China. Li Qiang, et al, thinks that the present social differentiation is a kind of pluralistic and intercrossed differentiation, it has not caused boundary-clear class or stratum, impossible to form certain class and stratum structure, and at most, some benefit groups may occur, however, these benefit groups are intercrossed on different differentiation coordinates, and no absolute and impassable dividing line exists between them. Traditional several major classes or strata – the worker class, the peasant class and the intellectuals are differentiated into many small groups, which are like many fragments, and these fragments do not show the sign of gathering into several major classes or strata (Li Qiang, 2004). Li Qiang tends to adopt the concept of "Benefit Groups" but not the concept of class or stratum to describe the present phenomenon of social economic differentiation. He explains that class or stratum means the group with competed benefit differentiation and relatively stabilized material benefit status, however, in present Chinese society, the change of benefit structure is very fast, and every social benefit group is differentiating, assembling and disassembling, and "reintegrating", therefore, the use of the relatively stable class and stratum concepts does not fit the actual situation in China. He divides Chinese social members at this phase into four benefit groups: special beneficiary group, ordinary beneficiary group, relative benefit losing group and social bottom group (Li Qiang, 2002). The conclusions drawn from Li Peilin, et al, "Survey and Analysis on Chinese Urban Residents' Social Attitudes" partially support the viewpoint of fragmentation. They find that the strata divided according to objective status difference is different from people's subjective status identity, so they think that people show the characteristic of fragmentation on subjective level but have not formed uniform class or stratum consciousness. They point out that due to the benefit and individual development of social attitude, it has caused the fragmentation of ideology, and people's social attitude and

behavior orientation do not depend on the so-called class and stratum status, or class and stratum status is disjointed with social consciousness. Their conclusion is that “the trends of the relative stabilization of social objective stratum structure and the fragmentation of subjective stratum consciousness are simultaneous” (Li Peilin, 2005).

## 2.2 Fracture orientation or middle class orientation

Another argument in the field of social stratification research is that whether Chinese social stratification walks toward a fractured society with polarization or an increasing number of people in middle class so as to gradually form a middle-class society dominated by the middle class? The argument of the “fracture orientation” is proposed by Sun Liping, et al, and he thinks that since middle 1990s, social differentiation leads to a “fractured society”, which manifestation is that: the whole society is divided into two isolated and different parts – upper society and bottom society (sometimes, he calls them as advantage group and disadvantage group), economic wealth and other resources are more and more gathered in upper society or minor elites, while disadvantage group shares less and less benefit, and the social economic gap between them and the elites in upper society is widened, so as to form the bottom society isolated from the upper society (Sun Liping, 2003). Sun Liping further points out that the two parts (upper and lower) in fractured society are in opposition to each other, although it is impossible for social disturbance to occur immediately, social conflicts are possible to occur once the contradictions are intensified. In the words usually used in social stratification research, the trend of Chinese social economic differentiation described by Sun Liping is toward a polarized society, the minority is at the top of the society and controls most of resources in the society, the majority is at the bottom of the society and shares few resources, while rare people is at the middle of the society, and this kind of society is easy for social conflicts.

The viewpoint completely opposite to the “fracture orientation” is the argument of “middle class orientation” or “middle layer orientation” proposed by Lu xueyi, et al (Lu Xueyi, 2002). The viewpoint of this school is that the promotion of industrialization and urbanization leads to the upgrading of industrial structure and occupational structure, and correspondingly, white-collar occupations expand rapidly and blue-collar occupations gradually reduces, so as to provide people with more and more opportunities for upward mobility, followed by the inevitable gradual development and strengthening of the middle layer of the society, while the top and the bottom of the society will shrink, and the trend of the whole social structure is from “pyramid shape” to “olive shape”, i.e. the “modern social stratum structure” dominated by middle class or middle stratum.

## 2.3 Whether middle class is the power for maintaining social stability or the power for promoting social transformation

Middle class is a hot issue in social stratification research in recent years, and sociologists published many research results, involving middle-class definition, the number of people, life style, consumer behavior, identity, value attitudes and social functions. A few years ago, sociologists debated on that “if there is a middle class in China?” In recent two years, most sociologists think that the middle class group in Chinese society is in existence - although it is not able to determine whether they have form a class. Thus, the focus of current debate is that: whether middle class is the power

for maintaining social stability or the power for promoting social transformation?

Li Qiang thinks that middle class is a kind of power for social stability. He points out that "in any society, the middle class is the most important power to maintain social stability. Firstly, the middle class is the buffer layer between upper layer and lower layer of the society, and when it becomes a social subject, the conflicts between the upper layer and lower layer would be prevented and social contradictions would be greatly released, which is the political reason for social stability. Secondly, the middle class in the society is on behalf of the moderate and conservative ideology, and when this ideology is in dominance, the extreme ideas and concepts of conflict are difficult to have a market, which is the ideological reason for social stability. Thirdly, the middle class is the most primary group to guide social consumption, and when the middle class accounts for the majority of society, the middle-class life style ensures the large and stable consuming market in the society, which is the economic reason for social stability." (Li Qiang, 2001). This is a mainstream viewpoint from the 1990s to the beginning of this century, and most sociologists agree with this statement.

However, in recent two years, some researchers question the above statement, and they propose that seeing from the rise of the middle class in other countries, the middle class should be the power to promote the changes in political democracy. When comparing the differences in social attitudes of the middle class and other classes, Zhang Yi (2008) finds that the middle class shows more radical social and political attitudes than other classes, and they are less satisfied with government work, less trust in government, have stronger feelings on social inequality degree, and have higher expectation of the likelihood of social conflicts. Zhang Yi concludes that "the middle class is not necessarily the social stabilizer." When comparing the differences in social and political attitudes of all the classes, Li Chunling (2008) also find that compared with other classes, the middle class has stronger consciousness of political democracy and weaker consciousness of state authority, however, because between the core of the middle class and the country has maintained relatively close connection – for the personnel working in political and party organizations, institutions and state-owned enterprises, their economic interests and welfare have a strong dependence on the country, and overall, the middle class is the great beneficiary in economic reform and economic growth, therefore, the middle class still shows the attitude of satisfaction and hoping social stability and supports the powerful government. Li Lulu (2008) thinks that attitude of the middle class tending to political conservation or political aggression depends on the particular social conditions - including the social environment variables of economic development status, political system nature, degree of order, etc, and it is not necessarily the power for social stability or the power for social change.

#### 2.4 Rise of class or class analysis

In recent five years, a surge of new theoretical thought - "returning to class analysis" – gradually develops in the field of social stratification research, which is advocated by part of the non-mainstream social stratification theorists, and has attracted some young researchers to follow (Feng Shizheng, 2008). The slogans proposed by the theorists of this school are "Back to Marx" class analysis (Qiu Liping, 2006; 2007) and "Bringing the working class back to the center of the analysis" (Shen Yuan, 2006), they believe that the

current Chinese society differentiation has reached the degree of macro-structural transformation and structure forming, causing the whole society in tension and conflict state (Shen Yuan, 2006; Sun Liping, 2008; Qiu Liping, 2006), and in this case, the stratification researchers should adopt the class analysis model with conflict theory orientation examine the social stratification phenomenon, and it is the only way to grasp the "true problems" in the process of Chinese social transformation (Shen Yuan, 2006) and "make adequately complete and deep research on Chinese social inequality" (Feng Shizheng, 2008). The viewpoint statements of these theorists imply their basic judgment on current Chinese social stratification situation, i.e. Chinese society is forming certain kind of class structure, or at least some classes are forming, fierce interests struggle and conflicts exist between these classes, and they are taking or may take certain form of class actions to safeguard their own interests or take the interests of other classes, which also means that the conflicts and actions will intensify between classes. At present, this kind of theoretical viewpoint is in a relatively marginal status in the field of social stratification research, and has not yet got the agreement of a majority of mainstream researchers, but its theoretical impact is in the gradual expansion. In addition, the above mentioned theorists do not adopt the class analysis method to implement large-scale empirical researches to verify their theoretical viewpoint, therefore, the macro-analysis on current Chinese social differentiation phenomenon proposed by them merely stops at the phase of theoretical discussion, and has not got the support of reliable empirical data.

Since 2001, Chinese social stratification research presents a situation of pluralistic theoretical orientation, pluralistic subject and great achievements, and is more open at the aspect of theoretical discussion and more professional and deeper at the aspect of empirical research. At the level of macro structure, social stratification theorists are thinking and developing certain systematic theoretical explanation; at the micro level and thematic research, the researchers' empirical researches keep advancing. The most important is that in this period, Chinese social stratification researchers no longer simply follow the western stratification theories and simply imitate western research methods, but draw on the relevant western theories and methods to analyze the key issues of social development in China.