

Zygmunt Bauman Liquid Modernity and Social Stratification: Industrial Transformation, Social Mobility and Inequality in Contemporary China

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Abstract: This paper uses Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity and "wasted lives" to examine social stratification, mobility, and inequality in China. While economic growth has surged, social segmentation and exclusion have intensified. Focusing on urban-rural inequality, migrant labor, and industrial restructuring, the study reveals how economic flexibility and institutional fragility coexist. It argues that China's development is marked by a "robust-yet-fragile" condition: resilient economically but socially vulnerable. The paper critiques market-oriented governance and fragmented social protections, suggesting that sustainable modernization requires both technological progress and inclusive policies to address social exclusion.

Keywords: Liquid Modernity; Social Stratification; Inequality; Migrant Labor; Boundary Blurring

1. Introduction

Social mobility and class transformations are central features of modern societies under the forces of globalization and marketization. Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity provides a framework for understanding the instability, fluidity, and uncertainty that characterize contemporary society. Unlike "solid modernity," which is grounded in stable institutions and predictable life paths, liquid modernity depicts a society where structures dissolve, boundaries blur, and individuals must adapt to shifting environments [1].

Bauman argues that the liquidity of modern society destabilizes social integration, weakens collective identities, and erodes institutional guarantees. As a result, groups and individuals who fail to keep up with rapid change are increasingly marginalized, excluded, and rendered socially invisible—becoming "wasted lives" produced by global capitalism and systemic transformation[2].

China's transformation since the Reform and Opening-up policy reflects many of these dynamics. While economic growth has reduced poverty, it has also deepened inequality and social exclusion. The urban-rural divide, widening income gaps, and vulnerabilities of migrant and low-income populations have become prominent issues. China's social stratification is shaped by unique factors such as the urban-rural dual structure, the hukou system, and state-led industrial transformation.

This study raises the following central questions:

- How has social stratification and inequality in China evolved under the dual pressures of liquid modernity and globalization?
- In what ways have industrial upgrading and the rise and decline of specific industries reshaped the boundaries of social classes?
- Do these processes expand social mobility, or do they generate new forms of exclusion and marginalization?
- How does the shifting relationship between mobility and social exclusion affect social equity and long-term cohesion in contemporary China?

By integrating Bauman's theory of liquid modernity with China's post-reform development, this paper seeks to illuminate the mechanisms through which class boundaries are reconstructed and "wasted populations" are produced during economic modernization[3].

2. "Wasted Lives" in Bauman's Theory of Liquid Modernity

Bauman's concept of liquid modernity offers a critical analysis of late modern societies characterized by volatility, uncertainty, and eroded stability. Unlike solid modernity, which relies on stable institutions like employment and welfare, liquid modernity is defined by the dismantling of long-term guarantees and the dissolution of social structures.

In liquid modernity, identities become provisional, social relations fragment, and institutional protections weaken. Individuals face a world where risks are individualized, and success or failure depends on personal adaptability rather than structural position. This leads to greater inequality and widespread insecurity [4-5].

Bauman introduces the idea of "wasted lives," individuals who, due to a lack of skills, education, or institutional support, are made surplus by global capitalism. These people, such as discarded workers and marginalized communities, face economic redundancy and social disposability, a condition rooted in the logic of liquid modernity, where capital's flexibility contrasts with labor's insecurity.

Social exclusion in liquid modernity is driven not just by formal barriers but by market competition, consumption standards, and cultural stigmatization. Those excluded from consumer culture lose not only material resources but also social recognition and dignity.

The constant reshaping of social spaces exacerbates isolation and disintegration. Traditional communities and solidarities dissolve, and social bonds become temporary, making collective resistance and long-term protections harder for marginalized groups to secure.

The paradox of liquid modernity is the coexistence of unprecedented mobility for elites and immobility for the marginalized. While capital and elites enjoy freedom, those at the bottom are trapped in spaces of exclusion and insecurity, highlighting a fundamental contradiction of contemporary society [6].

3. The Chinese Social Context: Urban–Rural Division and Social Mobility

China's rapid modernization since the late twentieth century reflects many dynamics identified by Bauman, with distinct institutional features. A key factor is the urban–rural dual structure, which has been central to social stratification for decades[7].

Significant gaps persist between urban and rural residents in income, access to public services, and social welfare. In 2020, urban residents had an average disposable income of 32,189 yuan, compared to 17,132 yuan for rural residents, about 39% of the urban level. Disparities in education, healthcare, housing, and pensions further entrench rural disadvantages.

Recent research using satellite imagery reveals pronounced spatial polarization in rural wealth, with a bimodal pattern: "higher in the south and east, lower in the north and west." This suggests that rural poverty is not just transitional, but a persistent structural condition in many regions[8-9].

China has also experienced the largest internal migration in history, with hundreds of millions of rural residents moving to cities. These migrant workers are crucial to urban construction and low-end services, yet remain excluded from full access to urban welfare, including education, healthcare, and social security due to the hukou system.

Migrant workers occupy a precarious position: economically essential but socially marginalized. Their lives are marked by unstable employment, long hours, low wages, poor living conditions, and limited mobility. Many face intergenerational insecurity, with children facing educational barriers in urban settings.

From the perspective of liquid modernity, migrant workers represent "wasted lives" produced by rapid modernization. They are absorbed into urban capitalism during economic booms and expelled in downturns, with their worth defined by labor utility, while their broader needs for security, belonging, and recognition remain unmet.

The erosion of traditional rural communities, combined with urban exclusionary mechanisms, creates relational dislocation. Migrant workers often feel suspended between village and city, hindering stable identity formation and long-term social integration.

This marginalization goes beyond material deprivation, fostering social invisibility, political voicelessness, and cultural inferiority. In Bauman's terms, these populations are not only poor but symbolically devalued and excluded from the success, consumption, and mobility narratives of liquid modern societies [10].

China's urban-rural divide and migrant labor regime illustrate how liquid modernity functions through unique institutional forms. While fostering economic dynamism and mobility, the system also generates fragile, expendable, and insecure populations. Bauman's theory reveals a social condition of fluidity, uncertainty, and constant movement, where those unable to adapt are relegated to "wasted lives" within the dominant economic order.

4. Class Differentiation and the Paradox of Boundary Blurring

Alongside rapid economic growth, China has undergone a profound restructuring of its class structure. Income inequality has widened, and traditional pathways for upward mobility have become more uncertain. Paradoxically, these changes have not stabilized class boundaries but blurred and reconfigured them, creating a tension between intensified stratification and boundary ambiguity, which is a central contradiction in China's social order.

Wealth concentration among high-income groups has accelerated, with elites in corporate, real estate, and finance sectors accumulating disproportionate advantages. Meanwhile, low-income groups, including rural residents, migrant workers, and informal-sector laborers, face slow income growth and job insecurity. Regional disparities between coastal and inland areas further reinforce this polarization.

However, class mobility seems more fluid than before. Educational expansion and labor market flexibility have created more opportunities for movement across sectors. Yet, this mobility increasingly takes the form of "circulating instability," where individuals move between unstable positions without securing stable upward mobility.

This reflects Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, where social positions are no longer secured through stable institutions but are constantly renegotiated under market uncertainty. The blurring of class boundaries doesn't eliminate hierarchy but obscures it by dissolving the institutional markers that once defined stable positions. As a result, inequality becomes more opaque and harder to contest.

Industrial restructuring has played a key role in this. As traditional industries decline, workers face deskilling, unemployment, or downward mobility. Meanwhile, emerging sectors create new elite positions, but these remain inaccessible due to high skill and education barriers, fracturing traditional class boundaries.

Boundary blurring doesn't signify the erosion of inequality but its reconfiguration. Traditional markers like lifetime employment and work-unit affiliation have disappeared, replaced by new markers based on consumption capacity, housing ownership, and access to education. These boundaries are less visible but more rigid in their long-term effects.

Symbolic boundaries have also intensified. Lifestyle, taste, digital connectivity, and cultural capital increasingly define social distinction, excluding individuals who cannot meet dominant consumption norms both economically and symbolically, reinforcing Bauman's view that poverty in liquid modernity involves moral and cultural degradation.

Thus, China's paradox lies in the coexistence of boundary blurring and structural closure. Class lines appear more fluid on the surface, but the mechanisms of inequality have become embedded in market-driven institutions, education systems, and intergenerational resource transmission. Social mobility increasingly occurs within stratified zones rather than across them.

5. Industrial Upgrading, the "Robust-yet-Fragile" Condition, and the Transitional Restructuring of Class Boundaries

Industrial upgrading and technological innovation have driven China's economic growth, yet this process exhibits a "robust-yet-fragile" dual character: economically resilient on the surface, but socially vulnerable and unstable at the structural level. China's industrial system can absorb global shocks and rapidly cultivate new growth sectors, but the flexibility this creates also produces fragility. As industries rise and fall quickly, large social groups face disrupted employment, deskilling, and uncertain life planning.

Technological progress has created new job opportunities, but these are highly polarized. High-skill, high-education groups benefit disproportionately from sectors like digital industries and finance, while low-skill labor is pushed into unstable service jobs or excluded from shrinking traditional industries. Industrial restructuring often leads to downward mobility and occupational displacement rather than upward mobility, making workers vulnerable to becoming surplus to the new production regime. In Bauman's terms, they risk becoming "wasted lives".

This fragility extends beyond lower strata to the middle class, traditionally the stabilizing core of society. Professions in finance, law, education, and media face disruption from automation, digital technologies, and AI, leading to skill obsolescence and occupational displacement. The middle class now faces a new anxiety—economically "robust" in appearance but institutionally and psychologically "fragile." While they retain housing assets and education, their long-term security is uncertain, and their identity is suspended in a "transitional zone."

At the same time, consumer culture amplifies these pressures, as middle-class identity is increasingly shaped by consumption and lifestyle. With slowing economic growth and rising uncertainty, sustaining these consumption-based identities becomes more difficult, reinforcing the "robust-yet-fragile" condition.

This condition reflects deeper structural shifts in China's long-term transition. Since the Reform and Opening-up policy, China has moved from a planned economy to a market one, from an agrarian to an industrial society, and from a closed system to global integration. This multi-layered transition has caused successive waves of institutional dislocation, social re-stratification, and boundary reconfiguration.

A "cocoon-like social structure" has emerged, with classes increasingly withdrawing into closed compartments defined by income, education, and cultural capital. Interclass interaction diminishes, while intergenerational transmission of advantage and disadvantage intensifies. Migrant workers, low-income urban residents, and displaced industrial workers face prolonged transitions with limited social integration, while the middle class is drawn into new forms of "transitionary precarity."

China's "robust-yet-fragile" condition reflects contradictions in its long-term civilizational transition, where economic growth is accompanied by social vulnerability. The coexistence of economic strength and social fragility reveals the limits of growth-centered modernization. Industrial upgrading boosts competitiveness but generates new forms of structural risk, making the production of "wasted lives" a systemic by-product of the acceleration-oriented development model.

6. Policy Reflection and Social Critique

From the perspective of liquid modernity and the production of "wasted lives," China's social transformation reveals not just an economic issue but a deeply institutional and moral one. Over recent decades, large-scale interventions aimed at poverty alleviation, rural revitalization, and regional development have made significant progress, particularly in reducing poverty and improving infrastructure. However, when viewed through the lens of social stratification, mobility, and exclusion, the limitations of these policies become apparent.

A central issue is the imbalance between economic growth and social integration. While policies prioritized GDP expansion, industrial output, and market efficiency, social security and inclusion of vulnerable groups have lagged. As a result, many people are lifted out of poverty economically but remain socially marginalized and institutionally excluded, embodying Bauman's notion of the coexistence of economic inclusion and social abandonment.

Rural revitalization policies, despite significant investment in infrastructure and poverty alleviation, still face uneven distribution of resources in education, healthcare, and welfare. Economic aid cannot address the long-term disadvantages in human capital and social networks, leaving many rural residents and migrants excluded from urban opportunities and trapped in development-dependent marginality.

Migrant workers highlight the institutional roots of "wasted lives." Despite their role in urban prosperity, they remain treated as a "temporary population" within the hukou system, lacking access to urban welfare benefits. Even after years in cities, many remain excluded from stable welfare, reinforcing their status as socially disposable, despite being economically indispensable.

Consumer culture exacerbates this, as consumption becomes a primary means of identity and social belonging. In China's market-driven society, housing ownership, brand consumption, and lifestyle are

key status markers. Those unable to meet consumption standards are not only materially deprived but also symbolically disqualified, resulting in "unconscious degradation" and loss of hope among marginalized groups.

China's social security system further complicates this. Although coverage has expanded, it remains fragmented and unequal, with access to services tied to employment status, hukou registration, and local fiscal capacity. This institutional fragmentation reinforces class boundaries, making mobility surface-level while leaving core social protections structurally unequal.

The core issue is not merely insufficient redistribution but the lack of a fully inclusive social citizenship model. While development has been fast, the institutional integration of those displaced has been slow and incomplete, producing not only wealth and opportunity but also structural vulnerability across generations.

In conclusion, economic modernization alone cannot replace social integration. Without synchronized reconstruction of social protection and collective responsibility, the production of "wasted lives" becomes systemic. The long-term risk is not only inequality but the erosion of social trust, solidarity, and institutional legitimacy.

7. Conclusion

By applying Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity and "wasted lives," this study has examined the transformation of social stratification, mobility, and inequality in contemporary China. It argues that while China's rapid marketization, urbanization, and industrial upgrading have led to unprecedented economic growth, they have also caused profound social disruptions. In a context of intensified liquidity, social positions become unstable, class boundaries blur, and large segments of the population are pushed into insecurity and marginality.

The analysis of urban-rural inequality and migrant labor highlights that China's dual institutional structure remains a central axis of stratification. Despite significant progress in poverty reduction, disparities in access to education, healthcare, and welfare persist. Many rural residents and migrant workers remain economically included yet socially excluded, exemplifying Bauman's "wasted lives."

The discussion of boundary blurring reveals a paradox: while occupational mobility seems more frequent, genuine class mobility has become constrained. Industrial restructuring destabilizes traditional class positions without establishing stable paths for advancement. Inequality is now reproduced through market competition, spatial segregation, and intergenerational transmission.

Industrial upgrading amplifies this contradiction with its "robust-yet-fragile" nature. While China's economy shows resilience, its social foundations, including employment and security, remain fragile. Technological changes affect not only low-skilled workers but also deeply penetrate the middle class, creating anxiety over downward mobility and insecurity.

The rise of a cocoon-like social structure signals the hardening of stratified compartments. Different classes withdraw into closed networks, reducing cross-class interaction and intensifying intergenerational inequality. Social mobility becomes more selective, and the structural reproduction of advantage and disadvantage becomes entrenched.

On the policy level, this study shows that while China has achieved material development, institutional incorporation of vulnerable groups is incomplete. Market-oriented governance and fragmented welfare systems contribute to the production of "wasted lives." The challenge is not just economic redistribution, but the reconstruction of inclusive social citizenship that integrates economic participation, institutional rights, and cultural recognition.

Looking ahead, the sustainability of China's modernization will depend not only on technological innovation but also on reducing structural exclusion, rebuilding institutional trust, and restoring the foundations of security and dignity. Without this, risks embedded in liquid modernity—instability and social fragmentation—may continue to accumulate beneath economic strength. Bauman's critical diagnosis thus provides a theoretical lens and a warning: a society may appear economically strong while remaining socially fragile, with future risks embedded in this contradiction.

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