

Class, stratum and group: the politics of description and prescription

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Chinese analysts are agreed that the destratified Chinese society before 1978, comprising two classes (workers and peasants) and one stratum (intellectuals), has stratified into much more complex structure as a result of three decades of reform. This fundamental change has been the subject of burgeoning research in the last decade or so, which has sparked a nation-wide debate on China's actual and ideal social configurations. The most contentious question in the debate is whether stratification is creating relations of conflict and how it is impacting on the country's socio-political order. Though the answers differ vastly, there have been two interrelated trends: One is the increasing downplay of social polarization; the other is the gravitation of interest towards the middle classes by various names.

Since 2002, interest in the middle classes, and the new rich, has evolved into something approaching a fetish. Not only that, there have been increasingly more claims that a middle class or middle stratum has actually emerged in China (Lu et al. 2002; Zheng 2002; Zhang et al. 2005; Chen Xiaoya 2002a and 2002b; Luo 2002; Chen et al. 2004; Zhou 2005; and He Li 2006). Comments to that effect have prompted sensational writers to announce that China has entered 'the age of the middle class' (Xu 2002). According to Lu et al., as of 2001, 80 million people belonged to the middle stratum of society (2002: 29-30). But Xu Jiang (2002) and Chen et al. (2004) estimated that the Chinese middle class was 350 million strong in 2001 and 450 million strong in 2002.

Party-state officials and official media, too, have contributed to the middle class fetish, despite their unease about the term. As early as 2001, the State Information Centre added fuel to the fire by claiming that 200 million Chinese would enter the 'middle stratum' between 2001 and 2006, (*Xinxi shibao* 21 July 2001). In the same year, the forecast of Long Yongtu, then deputy trade minister, made the country buzz with excitement again. By his calculation, China's 'middle-income groups' (*zhongdeng shouru qunti*) by 2010 would include 400 million people (*Xinhua*, 1 December 2001). More recently, the Economic Research Institute of the State Development and Reform Commission has stated that there are about 100 million people in China who can be categorized as 'the middle class group' (*Xinhua* 10 May 2007).

The estimates differ not least because the pundits are not talking about the same thing. Some speak of 'classes'; others, of 'strata'; and still others, of 'groups'. The construction of these categories, accompanied by contestation and conflation, is not simply a matter of academic concern but also one with wider implications. For it is related to the socio-political context and competing values, theories, paradigms and ideological positions. From a constructivist perspective, China's newly devised class schemes are no different from other social facts which, once brought under scrutiny, are no longer available as a topic in their own right, that is as something to be described and explained, but 'instead become an accomplishment of the accounting practices through

and by which they are described and explained' (Zimmerman et al. 1971: 293-4; Colin 1997: 3).

The effect of extrinsic factors on Chinese class schemes can be seen, first of all, from the fact that the shift of academic attention from social polarization to the middle classes has taken place regardless of much evidence that China has become a highly polarized society and that social conflict is on the rise (Macroeconomic Research Group 2000; *Jingji da cankao* 18 July 2000; Sun 1994 and 2003; Wu and Perloff 2004; Harvey 2006; Zhou 2005; Li Peilin et al. 2007; Zhu 2007). It is thus plausible to argue that the shift is not so much attributable to changing realities as to alternative ways of approaching the subject.

To start with, the trend is related to the consensus among Chinese elites of varying persuasions that the middle class or stratum can only be a good thing. The consensus has consolidated since the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) adoption of a policy aimed at 'controlling the growth of the upper stratum of society, expanding the middle, and reducing the bottom' at its 16th national conference in 2002 (Jiang 2002), and particularly as a result of the Party's recent emphasis on 'harmonious society'. In addition, it has much to do with the dilemma of China's political elites and social scientists struggling with the various manifestations of the new rich and the new poor. The dilemma is detectable in official communications and academic literature, which typically refer to the poor as 'disadvantaged' groups (*ruoshi qunti*) rather than an underclass and rarely treat the rich as a separate grouping but as interchangeable with the middle class or part of it.

The socio-political context and contestation have added a complex political dimension to the description of social groupings and structures, and descriptions have become entangled in webs of theories, paradigms and ideological positions, as well as prescriptions for idealized social configurations. The 'middle class' in particular, is not so much a uniform, unproblematic concept or an actual, homogeneous grouping as a hodgepodge of intermediate groups, an embodiment of desirable values, and a shorthand for new progressive actors, the mainstream of a harmonious well-off society, or new masters of the country in place of the working class.

New Masters of the Country: the middle class replaces the working class

There can be no doubt that the CCP's shift from continuous revolution under Mao to economic development and wealth creation in the reform era has dramatically transformed social relations and altered the status order in the country. In Mao's China, the proletariat was said to be the most progressive force of history and the embodiment of the most advanced forces of production. Together with the peasants, they were the 'masters of the country' and constituted 'the regime's only, or surely, most legitimate, political actors' (Solinger 2004: 54-55). Today, the key players in China's socialist market economy are those who generate material wealth by producing, providing and consuming goods and services.

Despite that shift, the current constitutions of the Party and state still define the CCP as the vanguard of the proletariat guided by Marxism, Leninism and Mao-Zedong-Thought, and the PRC as a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the proletariat and based on the alliance of the workers and peasants. In one of his keynote speeches in 1989, Jiang Zemin reiterated that the CCP was 'the class organization of the Chinese working class' and that 'the working class needs the Party

and the Party cannot do without the working class' (Jiang in Zhang, 1995: 1673). Though his position on the issue moderated later, it was not advisable for him, or any other Party leader, to forsake the Party's revolutionary mandate.

However, the reality in the reform era is quite different. In the words of Blecher, 'China's workers have lost their world' (Blecher 2002: 283). Or, as Solinger has put it more strongly, the Chinese proletariat has shifted from master in name and privilege to mendicant (2004: 50). Some may disagree with Blecher and Solinger on this account, but there is no denying that large sections of the working class have lost their privilege and joined the new poor since losing their 'iron rice bowl' and becoming detached from the CCP's historical mission.

The size of these social categories will depend on the definition of poverty. According to official statistics, as of January 2007, China had 23.65 million people below the official poverty line, earning less than 85 US dollars a year (*Xinhua* 18 June 2007). If the poor include the recipients of the government's 'basic subsistence' payments (*dibao*), their number approaches 35 million (*China Civil Affairs Yearbook* 2006). The situation is bleaker in the vast western region, where 9 percent of rural residents and 13.5 percent of urban residents lived below the poverty line in 2006 (Zhao et al. 2007: 77). If one counts the unemployed, estimated at a dozen million to 100 million, and those among the 120 million or so migrant workers who are poorly paid or owed wages on a regular basis, the number of the poor increases considerably.¹

The plight of the new poor may or may not be related to natural inequalities of personal endowments, but they are justified to hold the Party responsible and demand that it live up to its own claims, as it is the CCP which has set in motion and presided over a reform that has taken away their job security and social welfare. The CCP's dilemma was exemplified when, in rising to a defence of a worker brought to trial for leading a violent factory walk-out, a prominent lawyer argued that in the past 'the Communist Party stood alongside the workers in their fight against capitalist exploitation, whereas today the Communist Party is fighting shoulder to shoulder with cold-blooded capitalists in their struggle against the workers' (Cody. 27 Nov. 2004)

In the eyes of these and other victims of reform, socialism and the leadership of the proletariat have probably become meaningless, except as a reminder of the CCP's ideological inconsistency or as grounds for challenging the Party. From the Party's viewpoint, it does not matter at all whether the proletariat loses its status as the most progressive force of history; it is all the better that the poor working class no longer constitutes the core of society. For the Party's new mission is economic development, which requires advanced productive forces and consumers with ample purchasing power rather than revolutionary forces ready to wage class struggle. The mission has therefore entailed a fundamental shift from a primary concern with the working class to the principal creators of wealth.

¹ According to official reports, the number of laid-off workers is only a dozen million. See Ministry of Labour and Social Security, National Bureau of Statistics 2001, p. 36. Estimates in internal reports and scholarly papers are much higher. Wang Depei's estimate is 60 million (Wang 2001, p. 25). Hu Angang stated that China had laid off 55 million people from 1995 to mid-2002 (*China News Digest* 9 July 2002). In a 1999 report, some government officials are cited as saying that the real number of unemployed, including those 'waiting for work', was as high as 100 million (William Overholt 1999). In 2006, there were 120 million rural migrant workers. About 20 percent had monthly salaries lower than 500 *yuan* (Research Office, State Council 2006).

But it remains important for the CCP to make believe that it has not betrayed its own class base or abandoned its ideology. In this regard, it has been plagued by a couple of remarkable contradictions, namely dissynchronized structures of value and a dissynchronized value-environment nexus. The former is exemplified by glaring ideological inconsistencies and the latter by the ideology's failure to legitimize the trial-by-error arrangements by which the Party-state has been adapting to the socio-economic environment. If one agrees with Chalmers Johnson that values and the requirement of environmental adaptation both determine a social structure and produce conflicts within it (Johnson 1966: 35) the contradictions may well be seen as sources of tension and structural determinants of Chinese society.

Instead of revamping the Party and state constitutions in response to new realities, the CCP has chosen to paper over the inconsistencies by redefining key concepts by a sleight of hand. Hence, socialism is no longer characterized by public ownership but by 'three advantages', that is, it should be 'advantageous to the development of productive forces, to increasing the comprehensive strength of a socialist nation, and to raising people's standards of living' (Deng 1993: 372). And the 'vanguard of the proletariat' is accordingly transformed into a Party that represents advanced productive forces, the whole nation, and advanced culture.

Once the advancement of productive forces becomes its overriding objective, the CCP is freed from the shackles of socialist relations of production, or the basic principles of Chinese socialism, as productive forces, or the ability to use tools to act upon nature, define individuals' relations with nature instead of class relations and are ideologically neutral (Guo, 2004: 41). It is also able to sever its ideological bond with the working class. Non-socialist forms of ownership are then accepted and encouraged, and the new clarion call is 'to get rich is glorious'. Moreover, the CCP has to throw open its doors to private businesspeople (Jiang 2001), although the latter cannot be fully trusted but 'must be educated and guided', like the national bourgeoisie in the 1950s.²

Ideological revision has been contested vigorously by the old left. In September 1992, for example, a *Xinhua* editorial included a warning inserted by leftist ideologue Gao Di that 'While carrying out reform and opening up to the outside world, we must ask ourselves whether we are practising socialism or capitalism' (Fewsmith, 2001: 53). Deng Liqun, a key spokesman of the left, struck out again in 1994, asserting that a new bourgeoisie had already taken shape as a class in itself (Fewsmith, 2001: 169). Jiang's theory drew even more fire from leftists, who accused him of weakening the Party's social base and changing the colour of the Party (Lam, 2001; Dickson, 2004: 152-153).

Leftists within the CCP are certainly not the only ones to find a new bourgeoisie in the ranks of the new rich. Overseas writers, such as So and Dickson, have argued that 'a cadre-capitalist class has emerged to monopolise economic capital, political capital, and social/net capital in Chinese society' (So, 2003: 478), as well as that there is a class of 'red capitalists' in China (Dickson, 2003). The irony of the CCP recruiting the new rich has also been noted by no small number of Party theorists (Lin, 14 July 2001).

The CCP can only deny the existence of such a class. As early as the 1990s, Deng Xiaoping stated that 'we will not allow a new bourgeoisie to take shape' (2003: 172), that 'if a bourgeoisie has emerged, we must have gone astray' (2003: 110-11). Yet, as much depends on how 'bourgeoisie' is defined, Deng's statement is meaningless.

² The CCP's Department of United Front Work coordinates Party policies towards private entrepreneurs. It used to be the primary function of this department to liaise with non-communist allies (Ye, 2007, p. 1).

Indeed, the CCP's mouthpieces have routinely stressed that today's private entrepreneurs are not capitalists, because they were originally members of the working class, and work under a political system opposed to exploitation (*The People's Daily* 17 February and 25 April 2001). This is not a convincing argument, to say the least, and it betrays the Party's dilemma over the new rich. The dilemma is compounded by the common perception that the rich got rich dishonestly or unscrupulously, and by what the Chinese media call the 'original sin' of the rich; many were guilty of suspect or unlawful deals in the early days of their business (Wang Junxiu 2006).

In contrast, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao have steered away from ideological debates, focusing instead on practical problems, such as education, health care and social welfare. Nevertheless, they are clearly interested in a different kind of society from that which emerged in the previous decades. Their well-known model is a 'harmonious society' as well as a '*xiaokang* society' ('an all-round well-off society'³). The model has been variously interpreted as harmonious *xiaokang* for the majority (*dazhong xiaokang*), middle-income *xiaokang*, or middle-class *xiaokang*, and so on. It has entailed the 'second redistribution of social wealth' to balance social justice and economic efficiency, unlike the first in the early days of reform, which focused on efficiency without taking social equality seriously.

This new social blueprint has drawn more attention to the middle reaches of society and encouraged the middling of wealth. At the same time, it has also highlighted the current status of the new rich and the working class. The former may be recognized as legitimate players in wealth creation, but cannot be described as the backbone of the socialist market economy due to ideological constraints and negative popular perceptions. The latter have become a disadvantaged grouping, a burden to the government, and a source of instability and unrest, rather than one that constitutes the 'masters of the country'. Their best prospect is to move out of poverty and get rich if they can. Unless they do, their status in society remains lowly, in contrast to the rising middle classes, the new masters of the country.

Naming the Middle Classes: conflation and contestation

While Chinese elites are united on the importance of the middle reaches of society, there is much dispute over names, most notably '*jieji*' (class), '*jieceng*' (stratum) and '*qunti*' (group). The water is muddied by three major factors. Firstly, it is not easy to tell if the terms are singular or plural. Secondly, these words are often translated into 'class' in English. Finally, the Chinese words for 'middle' include '*zhongchan*' (middle-propertied), '*zhongjian*' (intermediate) or '*zhongdeng*' (middle range), and if class, stratum and group are modified by those words, then nine synonymic phases are possible, most of which are in wide circulation. In China's discursive context, these phrases have different political overtones and may or may not refer to the same groupings, and the use of different terms is part of the contestation over the constitution of the middle class and its implications for China.

³ The vision of a *xiaokang* society is one in which most people are moderately well off and middle class, and in which economic prosperity is sufficient to move most of the population in mainland China into comfortable means, but in which economic advancement is not the sole focus of society. Explicitly incorporated into the concept of a *xiaokang* society is the idea that economic growth needs to be balanced with sometimes conflicting goals of social equality and environmental protection (*Xinhua* 10 November 2002.)

For the mass media inside and outside China, naming the middle class seems to be a straightforward matter; it refers to what analysts call middle class, middle stratum intermediate group or any other variant. There are academics too who take the same approach (Zheng 2002; Zhang Wanli et al. 2005; Chen Xiaoya 2002; Luo 2002; Li and Niu 2003; Chen et al. 2004; Balzer 2004; He Li 2006). There are still others who consider 'class', 'stratum' and 'group' to be more or less equivalent or undistinguishable, as can be seen from common expressions such as 'class/stratum', 'class and stratum', 'class or stratum', 'class (stratum)', 'stratum (class)', 'middle class group', and 'middle income stratum group'. As a result of conceptual conflation and confusion, 'middle class' appears to have become a standard term by default.

By contrast, some analysts deliberately distinguish between the various concepts, particularly between 'class' and 'stratum', as much is at stake. The word 'class' appears almost exclusively in five collocations in contemporary Chinese: 'unpropertied class' (proletariat), 'peasant class', 'middle class', 'propertied class' (bourgeoisie), and 'petit propertied class' (petit bourgeoisie). The first two are still acceptable, although they have turned into academic jargon and are rarely found in official communications or daily conversations. The last is not used in serious academic discussions but mostly heard in joking remarks about bohemian or yuppie tastes and lifestyles. These three terms are the least controversial. It is a different story with 'bourgeoisie' and 'middle class'. The former, as already noted, cannot be attached to any group with official endorsement, while the latter is controversial for ideological reasons, though both *Xinhua* (The New China News Agency) and the *China Daily* now use the term.

From the CCP's viewpoint, the middle class is a problematic concept and grouping. For one thing, 'middle class' in English versions of the works of Marx and Engels was sometimes translated into '*zichan jieji*' (bourgeoisie), causing much confusion about how the class was perceived by the communist pioneers (Liu, 2006). To this day, the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* still defines 'middle class' as 'middle-ranking bourgeoisie'. For another, Mao equated the 'wavering middle class' with 'national bourgeoisie', and most of the groups now included in the middle class would fall into the categories of 'national bourgeoisie' or 'petit bourgeoisie' in Mao's classification (1991: 3).

Worse still, some Marxist writers dismiss the middle class as a dubious Western concept and look upon China's middle class fetish as a sign of Western influence eroding China's political system. Influential Party theorists Qing Lianbin and Zheng Bijian, for example, have criticized the uncritical adoption of Western terminology and the classification of intellectuals and other white-collar workers as middle class. That practice, Zheng stresses, 'is bound to degrade, weaken and obliterate the working class' (11 July 2001). Qing argues similarly that the privileging of the middle class in the West is meant to cover up class struggle and write off the working class (2001: 24). According to Zheng, that is why the CCP refuses to use the term 'middle class'; otherwise, it will fall into the trap set by subversive forces.

That is no doubt an extreme view. But it underlines a prevalent sense of unease amongst Party theorists and establishment intellectuals about dramatically different 'class maps' which fail to square with CCP orthodoxy. If, for example, the intellectuals in all the new professions are considered middle class, it does mean, as Zheng feared, that they are separated from the working class, into which Deng Xiaoping elevated them in the late 1970s. It also raises many questions about China's polity. The questions might be irrelevant to the average Chinese or academics dwelling on the middle class alone without referring to its relationship with any other groupings, but Party theorists must

find plausible answers. It is no easy job given the CCP's allegiance – perfunctory as it may be – to Marxism, as well as the workers and peasants.

For these reasons, those steeped in the Marxist approach to class analysis cannot easily come to terms with the middle class as a concept and a social reality and mostly opt for 'middle stratum', 'intermediate groups', 'middle-income stratum', 'middle-income groups', and so on. Many social scientists prefer these terms too, although for somewhat different reasons. For analysts who work within official frameworks, these categories are advantageous in that they can be accommodated within the established class schemes. One way of accommodation is to treat 'stratum' and 'group' as constituent groups of classes. It is thus possible for white-collar occupational aggregates to be labelled 'middle strata', while those located in the middle range in terms of income, purchasing power and so on may be called either 'strata' or 'groups'.

In this case, 'stratum' and 'group' are more or less interchangeable, the only difference being that the former can be a layer of a bigger structure and the latter, a smaller unit or a largely self-standing grouping classified on the basis of common interest or other characteristics. At any rate, what matters is that these categories are confined within the proletariat and peasantry and are therefore counted, theoretically, as members of the working class. In consequence, the constitutional polity of the PRC gains a measure of credibility and consistency, and social stratification, regardless of its scope and extent, can only be conceived to be intra-class stratification. If there is any conflict among any of the constituent strata, it is a resolvable 'internal contradiction' rather than one that leads to class warfare.

The problem with that approach is obvious: some new social groups or strata simply do not fit in the working class. Many businesspeople and entrepreneurs, for instance, not only rank among the richest in the country but also own a large amount of property and control the means of production within their enterprises. Moreover, if the extraction of surplus value constitutes exploitation (as many Marxists would argue) it is logical to see them as exploiters and their employees as exploited. It is surely not easy to convince the exploiters and exploited that they belong to the same class, not to mention the fact that very few in China are keen to identify themselves socially as working class these days. Even if exploitation and conflict are explained away, there is really no point in this exercise other than maintaining a semblance of ideological consistency.

A politically safe option is to acknowledge that some portions of the population no longer belong to the working class and have aggregated into new strata or groups in the middle reaches of society, while maintaining that these transitional formations do not constitute classes per se or significantly change China's two-class social structure (Qing 2001: 25; Guo Zhenshu 2003: 37; Wu 2004; Shen 2003). This approach makes a virtue of being vague about the position of the separate groups and their future prospect, but it goes against the quest for clarity and certainty and therefore holds little appeal to hard-headed academics.

Another alternative, which has predominated in academia in recent years, is to discard the concept of class – except for the middle class – break up the two-class structure, and rearrange all identified social groupings into a new hierarchy of strata. This alternative is called 'stratum analysis' as opposed to class analysis. Those who take this approach have turned their back on 'class' not because it has become an outmoded concept that is 'ceasing to do any useful work for sociology' (Pahl 1989: 710) or an 'an increasingly redundant issue' (Holton and Turner 1989: 194) but because they believe, like Margaret

Thatcher, that ‘Class is a communist concept’, that ‘it groups people as bundles and sets them against one another.’⁴

Moreover, class struggle has cost countless lives and caused suffering to millions of Chinese. Little wonder then that, starting from the 1980s, Chinese intellectuals called for a ‘farewell to revolution’ – to the violent act of one class toppling another (Li Zehou 1994; Li and Liu 1995). The thrust of the slogan is, first and foremost, the rejection of historical materialism, as it posits a model of society divided by classes and fraught with class conflict. In a historical materialist view, individuals are moulded as social beings by the material conditions of their production and divided into classes on the basis of their relationship to the means of production (Marx and Engels 1968: 32). The principal classes do not play complementary roles but occupy different or diametrically opposed positions in relations of exploitation, domination and subordination. Hence, Engels speaks of ‘these warring classes of society’ (Engels 1934: 37). And in the eyes of Marxists, class struggle is not a bad thing, for ‘No antagonism, no progress.’ (Marx 1956: 61)

The rejection of revolution has been carried on in the last decade by social scientists and translated into specific ways of reconceptualizing social structure and analysing social classes which depart from Marxist approaches, so that society cannot be conceived as comprising warring classes and class struggle cannot be said to constitute the motive force of history. For those social scientists, the Marxian concept of ‘class’ is merely a political instrument for identifying the motive force of the Chinese revolution and its enemies, whereas ‘stratum’ is a new ‘sociological concept’ to be used in the analysis and description of actual social structures (Lu et al. 2002: 2; Chen et al. 2004; Li Chunling 2005; Jia 2005).

However, ‘stratum’ is by no means as apolitical as Chinese sociologists claim; in fact, there is a common perception in China that class analysis is indicative of adherence to Marxist and socialist principles and stratum analysis amounts to rejection of these principles (Li Chunling 2005, 100-101). In that sense, ‘class’ and ‘stratum’ are not only hallmarks of oppositional, analytical paradigms but also a watershed between Marxism and subversive ideologies. Advocates of stratum analysis typically defend themselves by asserting that they are not anti-Marxist, that they prefer ‘stratum’ simply because ‘class’ cannot be understood differently in China from established connotations (Li Chunling 2005, 100-101; Chen et al. 2004; Jia Gaojian 2005). They are right about Chinese conceptions of class, but they are by no means pro-Marxist.

What ultimately sets ‘strata’ and ‘classes’ apart is that the former are hierarchical or gradational rather than relational. That is, a stratum is envisioned as a layer of a hierarchical structure, and its relationship with other strata is gradational, as determined by the possession of economic and cultural capital. Since it is not defined in reference to its direct structural relationship to processes of production and exchange, the dynamics and actualities of class relations that Marxists envision are ignored, and the constructed structure might be one of inequality but not one of exploitation and domination. In other words, relations of conflict are bypassed in the construction and antagonism is defined out of ‘stratum’. Furthermore, the issue of class consciousness and action, which is central to Marx’s work, is circumvented when a stratum is devised on the basis of objective indexes, such as income, occupation, consumption, education, and life styles.

⁴ Margaret Thatcher, cited in *Guardian*, 22 April 1992. In the words of a Chinese scholar, ‘the Marxist theory of class may be an effective theory for wars and revolutions, but it is harmful during peaceful times, as it destroys national unity and hinders modernization.’ (Tang 1989, p. 5)

From objective to subjective middle classes

Of all the indexes with which Chinese middle classes are classified, the most essential is income. This has much to do with the Chinese word '*zhongchan*' (middle-propriety) and the fact that income is probably the most reliable and quantifiable parameter of the economic position of individuals and households. For the same reason, consumption is also crucial to most schemes. A third index is occupation, which is related to both income and prestige. Education is considered important too, but only if it is positively correlated with income, consumption, and lifestyles.

As might be expected, the advertiser's image of the middle class is mostly associated with consumption and lifestyles. As Li Lin writes, 'the moment one opens the newspaper, turns on the TV, or walks into a street, one comes face to face with the lifestyle of the 'middle class': big mansions, private cars, fashion, jewellery, famous watches, banquets, tenpin bowls, golf courses, pubs, and every new trend and every form of fashion, entertainment and luxury are all marked as 'middle class' (Li Lin 2005: 63). The advertiser's message is simple: If you want to be regarded as middle class, you must own and do these things, which, constructed as they may be, become objectified as hallmarks of the middle class.

In contrast, income predominates in official schemes. In a 2005 survey, for example, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) defined middle-income households as having an annual income between 60,000 and 500,000 *yuan* (*Xinhua* 18 June 2005). In a more recent report by the Economic Research Institute of the State Development and Reform Commission (SDRC) the 'middle-income group' included individuals earning 34,000-100,000 *yuan* per annum and members of households with a total annual income of 53,700-160,000 *yuan* (*Xinhua* 10 May 2007). Those who earn more or less than this group fall into the categories of high- or low-income groups. Evidently, neither the NBS nor the SDRC refers to 'middle class', but their term 'middle-income group' was translated into 'middle class group' in English, for instance, by *Xinhua* and is often transformed into 'middle class' in the Chinese media.

Unlike advertisers and government agencies, most academic schemes use composite criteria. The best known and most elaborate scheme is that of Lu Xueyi and his colleagues at the Institute of Sociology of CASS (Lu et al. 2002). On the basis of a nation-wide sample, the team identified a 'modern' social structure comprising three gradational but otherwise unrelated strata (upper, middle and lower), which were further divided into ten sub-strata. These include Party-state cadres, middle- and high-ranking managers of large and medium-sized enterprises, private entrepreneurs, technical and academic professionals, public servants and office workers, employees of the service sector, manual and semi-manual workers, agricultural workers, and the unemployed and semi-unemployed in urban areas.

Using the same dataset, Li Chunling (2005: 490-507), a member of the CASS team, later classified as 'income middle class' those who had a monthly income ranging from 233.45 *yuan* to 1,250.02 *yuan*. The five middle-stratum occupational categories in the 2002 report were labelled 'occupational middle class'. The consumption index was the ownership of major durables, such as 1) coloured TV sets, refrigerators, washing machines, telephones, mobile phones, stereos, DVD players, air conditioners, and microwaves (1 point per item); 2) computers, video cameras, pianos, and motor bikes (4

points per item); and 3) cars (12 points per item). Those who scored 6 points or above qualified as 'consumption middle class'.

The only operationalized subjective classification criterion was self-identification; respondents who considered themselves middle class fell into the category of 'self-identified middle class'. Some data was collected about the subjects' satisfaction with China's socio-economic situation and their perceptions with respect to the benefits of reform and to social equality, but the responses were not differentiated along class or stratum lines, although there was an expected division between the winners and losers in the reform (Li Chunling 2005: 339-340).

All in all, 24.6 percent qualified as middle class by income, 15.9 percent by occupation, 35 percent by consumption, and 46.8 percent by status. Surprisingly, there were some relatively low levels of education behind these figures. 89.9 percent of those who were identified as middle class by income only had a senior high school education or below. The figures for the other definitions were similarly 75.3 percent of those identified as middle class by occupation, 89 percent of those identified as middle class by consumption, and 92.4 percent of those identified as middle class by status. This clearly does not resonate well with the perception that the middle class boasts high levels of education. It is also worth noting that 41.1 and 38.1 percent of the blue-collar workers and 11.5 and 18.3 percent of the farmers in the sample qualified as middle class in terms of income and consumption. Even more blue-collar workers (50 percent) and farmers (40 percent) considered themselves middle class.

It is evident then that the Chinese middle class identified by the CASS sociologists is rather mixed, ranging from farmers and blue-collar workers to the new rich. In terms of income and consumption, the range is too broad and flexible to give a clear idea about an individual's socio-economic position. As an example, there is little comparison between a rich businessman driving a new Mercedes and a middle-class blue-collar worker with a motor bike plus a coloured TV and a DVD player. It is also possible that the self-identified middle class are in error concerning their social status.

To be sure, the CASS scheme is only one of many. Other eminent sociologists, most notably Xiao Wentao (2001), Li Qiang (2001: 18-19), Zhang Wanli et al. (2005) and Zhou Xiaohong (2005) have also devised their own middle class schemes, but these differ little from the CASS scheme and are far less sophisticated. In any case, although one can easily modify the quantitative indexes of income and consumption, expand or reduce the range of middle class occupational aggregates, or have alternative categories, it is difficult to construct a clear-cut and homogeneous middle class. This raises many questions: Does such a diverse, objective aggregate as the CASS scheme constitute a grouping? If so, is the grouping a class? Is it inevitable for collective consciousness and values to emerge from a grouping or class? Is there such a thing as class without agency?

These are both theoretical and empirical questions. Theoretically, class can be defined with respect to positions within the technical division of labour or the positions within the social division of labour (Abercrombie and Urry 1983: 109; Wright 1979). Alternatively, a distinction can be made between a 'class in itself' and a 'class for itself', one which exists as a historical reality and one which has acquired a consciousness of its identity and a capacity to act (Marx 1955: 195; Bendix and Lipset 1967). This is the subject of an enormous body of literature. For the purpose of this chapter, suffice it to say that a class separable from agency is a problematic concept. As Giddens has put it, if classes become social realities, 'this must manifest in the formation of 'common

patterns of behaviour and attitudes' and 'differentiated class "cultures" within a society' (1973: 111 and 134).

As a matter of fact, most Chinese analysts are not just interested in objective but also subjective dimensions of the middle classes. There is even a habitual tendency to fall back on Marxian structural determinism and to take it for granted that social structures of various kinds naturally generate common values and collective consciousness and lead to interest aggregation and collective action. This reasoning moves from structure to consciousness and then to action. It is therefore incumbent on them to demonstrate empirically the attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of the middle classes. Yet few analysts have gone beyond self-identification and small-sample interviews in their investigation of middle class subjectivity, and searches in CNKI and qikan.com, two of the largest journal databases in the PRC, failed to bring up any in-depth analyses which allow generalizations about the subjective dimension of the middle classes as a whole.

Despite the lack of convincing evidence, however, commentators rarely refrain from making claims about the subjective attributes of what can at best be described as the objective middle classes. Liberal thinkers and democracy advocates, for instance, insist that the middle class, like civil society, is a driving force for liberalization and democratization (Chen Shujuan et al. 2005: 163; Chen Xiaoya 2004; He Li 2006; He et al. 2004; Huang 2003: 15; Ma 1999: 110; Sheng 2005). Economists and sociologists argue that a large middle class with stable purchasing power is indispensable to economic growth (Chen Dongdon, 2004; Chen Xiaoy, 2002; Li Yinin, cited in Lin Li, 2005: 64; Tan Yin, 2001; and Wu Jinglian and Xiao Zhuoji, cited in Chen et al. 2004).

China's social scientists are emphatic that a stable society is an olive-shaped structure rather than a pyramid-shaped distribution and that the middle classes should be the mainstream of a modern society (Dong 2003: 19; Huang 2003: 15; Li Qiang 2001: 19-20; Lu Hanlong 2005; Lu et al. 2002; Qin Yan 2002; Su 2004: 20; Zhang Jingrong 2004: 81; Zhang et al. 2005: 3, Xiao 2001: 95). Similarly, the CCP believes that the ideal model of society is an olive-shaped, harmonious and well-off society, with the majority of the population situated in the middle reaches.

There are hundreds of articles in the PRC's academic publications which expound the pivotal importance of the middle classes and the causes of their importance. It is customarily argued that

- members of the middle class are educated, cultured, civilized and creditable;
- the middle class, being the most secure and politically moderate, serves as a buffer zone and bridge between the rich and poor and maintains social stability;
- the size and characters of the middle class are critical for the establishment of democratic political institution;
- continued economic growth leads to demands for democratic reforms because the middle class naturally wants a say in government;
- the freedoms associated with liberal democracy are inseparable from the defence of property and profits by ordinary citizens;
- the middle class cherishes equality of opportunity and transparency in government decision making, and supports the expansion of civil rights and political liberty;
- the middle class has the political and organizational skills necessary to create political parties and other important democratic institutions, and it is best equipped to transmit, clarify, and endorse the people's demands.

The list goes on. Their inevitable conclusion is therefore that the middle classes should be expanded and regarded as role models. Whether the putative middle class qualities are acceptable or not is quite another question; most relevant here is whether the so-called middle classes are the actual bearers of these qualities. That is an empirical question, and yet the articles are mostly long on quotation and short on empirical evidence. They cite theorists such as Aristotle, Barrington Moore, Huntington and others who link political stability and democratization to the presence of a large middle class, while the 'middle class' under discussion by and large remains a phantom, as it either has no objective identity or there is no established link between the putative subjectivity of the so-called 'middle class' and any constructed schemes.

In other words, the discussion of the subjective dimension to the middle class is largely speculative, and extrinsic values and characteristics are imposed on objective social categories or projected onto imaginary groupings. This is better described as prescription rather than description, as political advocacy rather than scholarship. Its purpose is not to give one some idea about the size, composition or intrinsic characteristics of the middle class but to promote this class, together with its presumably attractive qualities, or advocate these values by riding on the wave of the fetishized middle class.

The middle class and the CCP

In sum, the current structure of Chinese society and its constituting classes can hardly be seen as phenomena independent of the analysts' volition and representation. Indeed, they are nothing but products of the very cognition, the very intellectual processes through which they are observed, classified, described and explained. An outstanding characteristic of these processes is the aversion to class struggle, which is translated into deliberate evasion of relations of conflict. On the one hand, Chinese analysts are keen to demolish the cornerstones of Marxian class theory; on the other, their description of non-conflictual, albeit unequal, social relations accords with the Party-state's emphasis on harmonious society. They are all too aware that relational class schemes almost inevitably lead to the identification of cleavage and conflict, whereas hierarchical and gradational schemes at worst reveal broad contours of inequality – inequality which can be easily managed and addressed.

A second prominent feature of the intellectual processes is the circumvention of class consciousness. The reason for this is not only the methodological complexity of investigating class consciousness but also the potential risk of capturing anything which may prove problematic politically. An additional advantage of this approach is that it enables analysts to impose presumed appropriate values and ideas on their favourite classes, so that the latter become models, to be embraced, emulated, nurtured, propagated, and elevated to central stage in Chinese society. In fact, adding values to the middle classes has been a major part of their construction.

The Party-state may not like the concept of 'middle class', but the 'middle class' by some other name is acceptable. In any case, the CCP's recent emphasis on social harmony encourages analytical methodologies which do not highlight social cleavage and antagonism and discourages those generating conflict-ridden class schemes and adding to the difficulty of constructing a harmonious society. Moreover, its vision of a harmonious *xiaokang* society requires the expansion of, and an increasing focus on, the middle reaches of society. The CCP's new focus on the middle legitimizes the middle

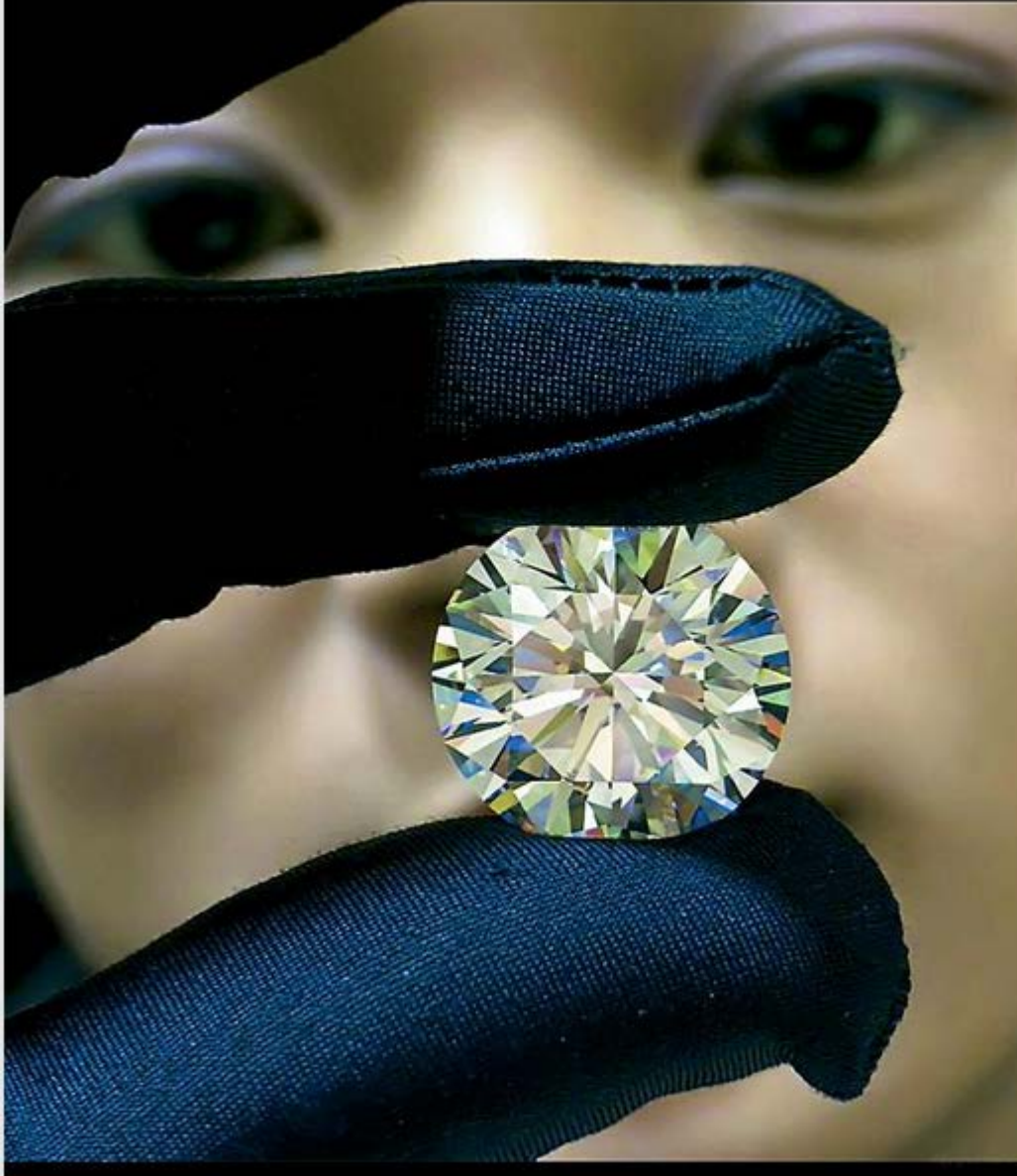
class in effect irrespective of lingering unease, and also means a shift away from the working class.

Promoting the middle classes in this way is designed to support the CCP's legitimacy, as the alleged aim is to expand middle China, enhance common prosperity, stimulate economic growth and ensure social stability. Taking advantage of the official discourse, intellectual elites have promoted the middle classes and putative middle class values which may differ from or even undermine Party-state values. Hence, the official social vision and the intellectuals' ideal society have actually converged on common ground in the middle reaches of society despite their differences. This new model of society, dominated by the middle classes – by whatever name – will necessarily differ dramatically from the Maoist two-class structure; so will the new status order as well as the nature and meaning of social life. But one thing has not changed, this society is still based on the 'doctrine of the mean' and suggests that the idea of age-old egalitarianism predominates.

THE
NEW RICH IN CHINA

Future rulers, present lives

Edited by
David S. G. Goodman



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