

# Government vs. middle class assignment



With China's recent ascension as a powerhouse on the economic world stage, the social structure of its 1.3 billion people is also changing to reflect this forward momentum. Chinese consumption in the realms of material goods, housing and education has experienced unprecedented growth, an essential characteristic of what many would define as the "middle class" in terms of income level and social statuses. This new phenomenon in a supposedly class-less Communist regime is an enigma within itself.

This enigma however has presented the Chinese Communist Party with a problem that it did not foresee: How to embrace this new class of intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and engineers that is single-handedly driving this economic rebirth after denouncing the same practices of the bourgeois middle-class for more than half a century. Years of economic boom have supplied this new social bloc of people with an enormous amount of political, social, and monetary capital, and many Western and Eastern scholars are curious as to whether or not "China's middle class will become a catalyst for political demagnification and social transformation in

China" (Jinx 2013: 3). Currently however, China's middle class has not followed the trajectory of the modernization theory towards democracy as many modernization theorists believed due to bias associated with the past. The Chinese middle class is highly dependent on the government for much of its economic prosperity and elitist status. This is in stark contrast with the reversal of roles between the American middle class and its subsequent plasticization by the government.

Modernization Theory The modernization theory seeks to determine the trajectory of social changes as a nation undergoes the transition from “ traditional” society to “ modern in terms of its economic, political and social advancements. The basic principles of the theory are derived from the Idea of Progress, which first emerged during the 18th century Age of transforming their own societies. Economically, modernization brings a “ rapid advancement of science and technology, whose achievements are substantively transformed into a more productive and efficient labor forces” (Fungus 2009: 8).

Production is altered to better fit the mass demand with the modes of production becoming continuous and standardized. Politically, the modernization theory conjectures that “ centralized bureaucratic systems and political powers in many countries see a highly visible change,” and their political systems become more open, leading to an increase in democratic consciousness among the people” (Fungus 2009: 8). This transformation society becomes more aware of the events happening around them, making it more difficult for the authoritarian regime to rein (Tang 2011: 1).

Socially, society becomes more stratified into classes with population concentrating in cities with a high rate of rural to urban flow. People become more and more defined by their occupation and achievements with a high yearning for success. This new categorization of people into high, middle, and lower classes exposes the inequality that exists and subsequently galvanism the “ have-onto” against the “ haves. ” This globalization is often initiated by people in the middle class, people with enough knowledge of what is happening around them and the resources to initiate the change.

China has followed this model with distinct variants of its own, but it is the political modernization that has people perplexed. China's Modernization and Middle Class China's age of economic prosperity came at end of the Collectivism Era with the rushing in of Deng Xiaoping's post-1978 economic policy of reform and opening after Mao's death. Under Mao's policy of equalization through agrarian distribution, China was "one of the most egalitarian countries in the world, but that simply meant that most Chinese were equally poor" (Dickinson 2011: 46).

Decades of bleak economic opportunities and tightly government-controlled social sanctions during the Cultural Revolution and Four Clean-up Campaign left many of China's rural population envious for the wealth of its offshore neighbors such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. They no longer wanted the self-sacrificing thought movement of the past nor the changing political and economic lines that only brought hollowed promises of a better life.

Especially in the village setting, the political pressures to fit in with the masses and conform to whatever changing political agenda the government set forward were retarding the villagers' already dire economic development. With the passing of Mao, Deng and his "modernizers" were able to move China in the direction that was the "antithetical to Maoist ideology" (Chain et al. 2009: 267). This meant encouraging foreign investments and setting up special economic zones, "where elements of capitalism are allowed to take roots" (Wassermann 2010: 198).

These once rural districts "have filled up with factories churning out export commodities, and increasingly producing for an expanding domestic

market,” (Chain et al. 2009: 331), a clear step towards industrialization and modernization and away from subsistence farming. Democratic Viewpoints Given the size of the ever growing middle class and all the prominence it has acquired, China’s middle class has not displayed democracy characteristics expected f it. Many believed that China would follow South Korea and Taiwan as “ examples of entrepreneurs” (Wassermann 2010: 123).

Thirty years of economic prosperity later, ‘ democracy has not yet happened and authoritarianism remains consolidated” (Tang 2011: 374). Empirical evidence from researchers has found that this new class recognizes its ability to greatly influence social changes, but is hesitant to take a proactive position. This is attributed to two main factors, prejudice toward the rural and migrant working class in order to maintain an elitist status and dependency on the overspent – both of which stem from the attitudes that developed during the period when Moist ideology reigned supreme.

Empirical Evidence Studies conducted by Joe Chin and Chugging Lu in their article “ Does China’s Middle Class Think and Act Democratically’ and Min Tangs “ Political Behavior of the Chinese Middle Class,” show that while the Chinese middle class is more interested in politics n China, they do not behave more actively than other groups in elections. This is evident in Chin and Lulu’s research with 98% of the Middle Class identifying themselves as having medium-high political interest as opposed to the 88% of the Upper Class and 68% of the Lower Class (2006: 6).

However, this is in stark contrast Ninth the responses from the participants as to whether or not they would engage in a self-government system

implemented in their neighborhood with the results showing the Middle Class with the highest percentage (42%) in non-participatory events and the lowest percentage in engaging in at least one of four political activities (58%) Tang found similar results with people who identify themselves as Middle Class show a statistically significant higher interest in politics than others in the society.

This political interest comes in the form of watching political news segments or discussing politics with people around them. On the other hand, the Middle Class did not show statically significant ( $p=.81$ ) in the other type of political behavior (2011: 382). Formal/institutional approach, confronting approach, and active participation in elections. In conclusion, both research results surmised that while the “ Chinese middle class holds a higher democratic orientation in high regards” (Tang 2011 : 376), it has not made efforts or summoned the courage to actively advocate for changes.

Attitudes toward Rural Classes After years of suffering under the hand of equalization, people are extremely hesitant to relinquish this newly found elitist status and fear the encroaching rural populace on what they perceive to be their own personal paradise. Much of this new middle class hold the migrant worker class in disdain, with the hukou system only perpetuating the divide, and “ did not and do not want China’s peasant majority to play a decisive hand in deciding who rules” (Tang 211: 375).

The Chinese Middle Class’ fear resides not in the lost of their own position and prestige, but in the rise of the ones they perceive to be beneath them. They are less concerned with using their newly emerged power for the public

good, but are more invested in seeking ways to enriching their personal lives through traveling abroad and overseas education for their children. This decline in public engagement came as a result of the dawned system “welfare housing” being phased out in favor of private housing (Jinx 2013).

During the Mao era and the years following his death, the lives of the Chinese people were tightly integrated into this dawned system, a system of state-owned and organized workplace units. This changed when people started moving into “upscale (10: 128), leading to class “specialization” as people’s social positional status becomes increasingly dependent on their location. This obsession with personal property and the creation of one’s own concrete paradise caused the middle class to retreat from public forums and find solace within their individual households (Ghana 2010).

The Chinese middle class recognizes the unique position that they are in, but are not interested in advocating for something that would level the playing field all over again due to the hardships experienced by their families all in the name of equalization under agrarian socialism. Even in the beginning of the reform era, when wealth was just starting to trickle into the economic zones, there was a clear tension between those who have reaped the benefits of this influx of monetary capital and those who were not as lucky to see their dire conditions change.

In Chin Village, the Dillinger “distrusted and feared the outsiders who did all their dirty work for them” (Chain et al. 2009: 303). The outsiders were considered to be untrustworthy, mysterious, and more importantly, dangerous. The Sheens conjectured that if they were on the other side of

the golden line-“ still improvised and living next door to idle occupants of villas such their own” (Chain et al. 2009: 303)-they too would feel resentful, so they imparted hostility and malicious acts to the newcomers as a protective measure against their own prejudice.

Now, the people living in these industrious cities see these migrant workers as a necessary evil, a source of income for them, but are not willing to give their control all in the name of democracy. This elitist status cannot be maintained if there is not a clear division between the “ inners and losers of the economic lottery. Attitudes toward the Government The other reason that the middle class is so hesitant to take a more pronounced political stance is because of how ingrained the government is in controlling the flow of resources and financial capital.

The middle class feels that the current system works for them, so they would rather “ work through the system to secure their interests rather than to rock the boat of a single party rule” (Tang 2011: 11). While the government was responsible for implementing socialist policies in the past and past which placed a whole country of already impoverished people under economic taxation, it has now granted the middle class with certain provisions and concessions that are contributed to the group’s success.

The middle class has relied on the “ close connection to state organizations and political elites for their survival and prosperity and thus is reluctant to challenge the existing political economic arrangement” (Tang 2011: 3).

China’s method of economic development has subjected the middle classes to a cycle of political and economic dependence, and this has only been



perpetuated by the state's continuous policy of economic welfare. This dependency can be traced back to the collectivism time period where the government had a definitive say on many aspects of private and public life.

During the Cultural Revolution and collectivism, people operated in a state-controlled environment with many of their needs supplied or facilitated by the government. Social interactions were shaped by propaganda, films, struggle sessions and daily radio broadcasting with Mayo's doctrine extolled as the only way to a fruitful and progressive life (Chain et al. 2009). No one questioned Mao or his policies because everything existed in a post-revolution haze, and people had a distorted idea of what Nor units with everyone sharing the work and cultivation.

They depended on the local government for their meal rations and housing to ensure that everyone was being treated "fairly." Identities conformed to arbitrary categorization of bad and DOD classes, and government paradigm sought to shape people's daily lives with dangerous results. So if the Chinese middle class is cognizant of the political power and intellectual capacity it possesses, why has it not done more in terms of political activism? The answer is that China is still an authoritarian regime with too many people dependent on the government for much of its wealth.

Challenging public policies might lead to "inconvenience or trouble in the future relationship with government" (Chin and Lu 2006: 22), and this would not suit the middle class' economic interest. The question is not why haven't they, but rather why would they openly advocate for something that carries with it a great deal of uncertainty. The DOD times will last as long as no one

rocks the boat, and it definitely won't be the people reaping the most benefit from it. While this middle class depends on the overspent for its successes, the American middle class holds the control in terms of political legitimacy.

America's Middle Class ere modern image of the American middle class comes from the post-World War II era as the United States was riding high on a post-war euphoria. The government's subordination for the returning veterans' education, businesses and home mortgages set Off residential planning boom that brought along with it the material possessions that many associate with the middle class. The cars, suburban homes, and college education are all tell-tale signs of the class finally " making" it, the ability o indulge in luxury goods and still have money in their savings accounts.

The symbolism associated with the middle class is not only prevailing, but powerful. A group born out of the American dream, whose parents migrated to the country in search of a better life, whose children will go off to become the movers and shakers of their generation, whose lifestyle acts as the standard for emerging middle classes around the world. Since more than 90% of Americans identify themselves as middle class, it is only natural to recognize the enormous political clout the group possesses grittier 1998: 653).

The American middle class exists in this perfect vacuum, not rich enough to be considered ignorant, but well-off enough to be able to assert their opinions. It is within this socio-economic entity that the American government politicized and tries to assert its legitimacy. During the 2012 Presidential Election, President Obama, the first African-American President

of the United States, and Mitt Romney, former governor of Massachusetts and founder of Bain Capital, were overshadowed by the Samuel Herbaceous CEO (the Plumber) of the world. It was clear that no matter who won, the real “winner” would be the middle class.

They had the pleasure of hearing how wonderful they are, how hard they have worked, and most importantly, what each candidate would do to make their lives easier. The ‘saving of the middle class’ was the campaign’s defining issue with Governor Romney trying to distance himself away from his privileged upper-class upbringing and President Obama asserting his “middle-classless,” a man of the common people. Each candidate’s policies would bring prosperity back to the middle class, a class that IS and will always be the backbone of this country.

After the financial collapse of white-collar jobs. People who had people doing the same jobs as their parents and grandparents suddenly found themselves unemployed and unemployable. They saw the things that defined them, their homes, cars, and ability to pay for their children’s education, disappear. They became angry and distrusting of the government. Many of the core assumptions of American culture – about hard work, about equality, about fairness – were shaken, and this frightened everyone. Both candidates capitalized on this fear for their political advantages.

Obama promised that there will be no tax-eaters and that the purely American manufacturing jobs will remain in America. Romney promised to support small businesses and job creators. To be middle class is to be American and to be American is to be middle class. The common people

becomes important only when it is important to someone else, and this political docile will exist as long as there are agendas that need pushing.

Obama is once again President, but it remains to be seen if the promises he made will actually materialize or was it all a political move in order to mobilize a significant majority of his constituents.

Conclusion China's transformation from a country of "backward" ideologies to an economic powerhouse has many people wondering about the future of its newly formed middle class. Will it become the potent agent for change and democracy that is often associated with its class categorization or will it continue to enjoy the close relationship it has with the government? As modernization deepens and the middle class grows as a product of this, the dynamics between the middle class and the Chinese government will be closely monitored to determine who is reaping the most benefit from this tightly integrated interaction.

It will also be exciting to see if this class will become a tool for political discourse as the American middle class has become and what effect this will have on the country as a whole.