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Farewell to Class, except the Middle Class: The Politics of Class Analysis in Contemporary China*

Yingjie Guo

Anthony Giddens was right to emphasize that '[a] large part of the chequered history of the concept of class has to be understood in terms of the changing concerns of those who have made use of the notion, concerns which reflect changing directions of emphasis within sociology itself' (1977: 99). It must be added, though, that those concerns also reflect value-ridden perceptions about the structure of societies and social models, and indeed the changing structures and prevailing political and social values in society. Even the shifting emphasis in social analysis that Giddens refers to may reflect emerging ideologies within the profession and within the broader context of social relations, notably paradigm shifts. This is certainly the case with the use of the class concept and methodologies of class analysis in the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the last two to three decades.

As social and political commentators in the PRC agree, the destratified Chinese society before 1978, which in official descriptions comprised of two classes (workers and peasants) and one stratum (intellectuals),[1] has evolved into a much more complex structure as a result of three decades of reform. But they are divided over how to analyse the emerging social structure and patterns of stratification, whether stratification is creating relations of conflict, and how it is affecting the country's socio-political order. Though their answers to these questions differ vastly, three broad interrelated trends have emerged: increasing downplaying of social polarization, the shift of interest from class analysis to 'stratum analysis', and the emergence of a middle class fetish.

It should not be inferred from the first trend that social polarization is decreasing in China; all evidence indicates that it has been on the rise since the late 1970s (Macroeconomic Research Group 2000; Jingji da cankao 18 July 2000; Sun 1994 and 2003; Perry and Selden 2003; Wu and Perloff 2004; Zhou 2005; Harvey 2006; Li Peilin et al. 2007; Lee and Selden 2007; Zhu 2007; Goodman 2008). In fact, as of 2006, 0.4 per cent of households in China own around 70 per cent of the wealth of the nation (Han Honggang 2009), and there were nearly 420,000 people whose personal wealth exceeded one million US dollars, whereas the Chinese farmers' average annual income was as low as 2,762 yuan (Li Peilin et al. 2007). In 2007, China's Gini Coefficient rose to 0.496 (Xinhua 17 January 2007) from 0.22 in 1978 (Adelman and Sunding 1987). Within three decades Chinese society has changed from one of the most egalitarian in the world to one of the least.

The second trend does not imply that class is no longer relevant to understanding social cleavages in China. So long as social classes exist, class politics is likely to remain salient and class analysis will continue to be relevant. Despite its salience, however, the class concept has declined largely due to the prevailing view that it is a controversial, tarnished or undesirable concept of little use in social analysis, except in the case of the 'middle class'. Differently stated, class has been largely deprived of discursive legitimacy. Likewise, the middle class fetish is not so much attributable to the emergence of a large, dominant middle class in the country as to a consensus among intellectual elites of various persuasions that the emergence of a large and strong middle class can only be a good thing, emblematic of China's maturing economy and society. That consensus is coupled with a fundamental dilemma: the relation to other social groupings or classes which cannot be named deprives the class concept of its power to frame social relationships, particularly exploitative relationships. The debate over terminology and approaches to social analysis has added a complex political dimension to the description of social groupings and structures, with descriptions entangled in webs of theories, paradigms and ideological positions as well as prescriptions for idealized social configurations.

The middle class fetish says much about the shifting status of dominant social groupings in the PRC's new status order and the fundamental identity of Chinese society as expressed by the dominant classes. The ascendency of the middle class in intellectual discourse in China contrasts with the decline of the working class. This is an important socio-political development in so far as the success of a class in elevating itself from a position of subordination to one of prominence or even dominance usually entails a fundamental reorganisation of the society (Giddens 1977: 29). While there is little evidence of a dominant Chinese middle class, the dominance of the middle class in intellectual discourse is well established.

At the same time, the construct illustrates the limitations of approaches to class analysis which obfuscate social relationships or lack rigorous empirical grounding. The utility of the class concept may well be confined to political discourse and political mobilization, as many Chinese analysts believe, unless class is empirically grounded and unless the political-ideological, social, economic and cultural consequences of the identified classes are empirically demonstrated. A conception of class divorced from agency is highly problematic, to say the least, and the utility of such a concept in social analysis is limited. Much of the continuing utility of class ultimately lies in the class structure-consciousness-action (S-C-A) chain

The Death of Class?

Social and political analysts in the English-speaking world began to toll the knell of class as early as the late 1950s. Nisbet, for example, observed that while the term 'social class' had been useful in historical sociology, in comparative or folk sociology, it was nearly valueless for the clarification of data on wealth, power and social status in the contemporary United States and much of Western society in general (1959: 11). The reason was that in the past classes were more tangible entities that crystallized in the economic, social, cultural and political realms; but in modern industrial societies, national democracy, economic and social pluralism, ethical individualism and an ever-widening educational front had joined to create new patterns of social power and status that made class obsolete (1959: 14-15).

There were numerous attempts to reintroduce class in the 1960s through the 1980s, including some that were influenced by the Chinese revolution and other revolutions. But these attempts represented no more than a minor current and did little to arrest the move away from class in the social sciences. Sceptics of the utility of the class concept certainly had gained the upper hand in the debate starting from the late 1980s. Hindess (1987), for example, challenged class theories by denying the objectivity of class interests that were pursued by diverse actors in various sites of struggle and the unity between social structure, class interests and class action. Classes, he argued, were simply not collective actors or social forces as they had often been made out to be. Pahl (1989) took exception to class theory and class analysis too, concurring with Hindess that the major weakness of class theory lay in its assumption of correspondence between social structure, group consciousness and group action as well as the lack of empirical support for the class model.

Other analysts who questioned the utility of class focused on class as a social reality while denying class roles in social transformation or methodologies of class analysis. One conclusion was that class is an increasingly redundant issue (Holton and Turner 1989: 194). Others argued that the importance of class cleavages and the ability of class to explain social and especially political processes had declined (Clark and Lipset 1991; Clark et al.1993). This is because stratification in the industrialized West had become increasingly pluralistic, multidimensional and shaped by factors located outside the workplace, while the old hierarchies and class divisions based on them are decomposing under the impact of the welfare state, occupational differentiation, rising affluence and consumption, changing political dynamics, market fragmentation, and the rise of institution-based divisions.

The wholesale rejection of class in academia culminated in The Death of Class (Pakulski and Waters 1996). This book asserts that classes are dissolving and most advanced societies are no longer class societies today, in contrast to the early and mature forms of industrial capitalism. It attributes the 'death of class' to three recent developments. First, with the decline of Marxism, the collapse of Soviet communism and the waning appeal of socialist ideologies in the West, the class concept is losing ideological significance and its political centrality. Second, both the right and the left are abandoning their preoccupation with class issues. The former is turning its attention to morality and ethnicity, and the latter to issues of gender, ecology, citizenship and human rights. Third, class divisions are losing their self-evident and pervasive character; class identities are challenged by new associations and new social movements; and class radicalism is no longer attractive to political activists.

Similarly, Chinese analysts have turned away from the class concept en masse, but for quite different reasons. Starting from the 1980s, intellectuals began to bid 'farewell to revolution' – specifically 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, which posits a model of society in which individuals are divided into classes on the basis of their relationship to the means of production (Marx and Engels 1968: 32). In this model, the principal classes do not play complementary roles but occupy dichotomous or diametrically opposed positions in relations of exploitation and domination. Hence, Engels speaks of 'these warring classes of society' (Engels 1934: 37). And in the eyes of orthodox Marxists, class struggle is not a bad thing, for 'No antagonism, no progress.' (Marx 1956: 61)

In the prevailing view in post-Mao China, the Marxist theory of class struggle caused the loss of countless lives and suffering to millions of Chinese, and must be rejected in toto. This does not mean, however, that class has become an outmoded concept or an increasingly redundant issue. Though the CCP announced as early as the 1950s that China had basically become a classless society, it reiterated from time to time, particularly when intra-party conflict intensified, that class struggle would continue for a long time, as the remnants of the old exploiting classes would linger on under socialism. Moreover, the class concept has always been embedded in the constitutions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the PRC as well as China's national flag and national emblems. By definition, the Party is the vanguard of the Chinese proletariat guided by Marxism, Leninism and Mao-Zedong-Thought, and the PRC is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the proletariat and based on the alliance of the workers and peasants. Thus, there can be no doubt about the relevance of class and class struggle throughout the PRC.

If the elimination of the old exploiting classes of landlords and capitalists in the early and mid 1950s meant the deprivation of their means of production, it is plausible to argue that the possession of productive property in the reform era has given rise to new exploiting classes. In fact, there are analysts who point to a class of 'red capitalists' (Dickson, 2004) and 'a cadre-capitalist class' which 'has emerged to monopolise economic capital, political capital, and social/net capital in Chinese society' (So, 2003: 478). Others assert that a new bourgeoisie has already taken shape as a class in itself and that there is now acute class struggle (Deng Liqun 1991; Deng Liqun, cited by Lam 2001).

The CCP, however, denies that such a class exists. As early as the 1990s, Deng Xiaoping stressed 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). But in the absence of any class analysis, Deng's statement is meaningless. In fact, the party routinely emphasizes that today's private entrepreneurs and business owners are not capitalists, explaining that they were originally members of the working class and now work under a political system that opposes exploitation (The People's Daily, 17 February and 25 April 2001).

Yet, social classes, as defined by Marxists, Weberians and others, can be readily identified in China today, and if there is indeed a middle class in China, as is commonly asserted in the English and Chinese language literatures, there must be other classes above, below or beside it, as the word 'middle' connotes relativity or relatedness. The emergence of capitalist classes and well-off middle classes in the reform era has no doubt altered the nature of Chinese society. Their growing prominence in the social science literature and society is also indicative of a new status and social class order that finds no parallel in Maoist China, especially between the socialist transformation of property ownership in the mid 1950s and the beginning of 'reform and opening' in the 1970s. In the Mao era, landlords, rich peasants and capitalists of the past were labelled 'enemies of the people'. In the reform era, millionaires and billionaires are not only able to accumulate massive wealth but they also join the CCP and sit on national and local people's congresses.

By contrast, the proletariat was said to be the motor 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, large sections of the working class have joined the new poor and the underclass since losing their 'iron rice bowl' and becoming detached from the CCP's historical mission. The size of this social group 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: 7). 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.

The plight of the new poor may or may not be related to natural inequalities of personal endowments, but they are justified in holding the CCP responsible for maintaining the social contract and demanding that it live up to its own claims as articulated throughout the revolutionary era. After all, it was the Party which set in motion and presided over a reform that has taken away the job security and guaranteed social welfare of the industrial working class and paved the way for the rise of propertied classes. The CCP's dilemma was exemplified when, in rising to defend 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 2004)

One may not agree with the lawyer, but there can be no doubt that class remains a salient issue, that the victims of reform have become an underclass, a burden to the government, and a source of potential instability and unrest.[2] Their best prospect is to move out of poverty and get rich — a route available, at best, to a small minority of workers. Unless they do so, their status in society remains low, in contrast to the new masters of the country and the new historical subject in the 'socialist market economy',

namely those who own, finance or even monopolize the enterprises that produce and market goods and services.

In the eyes of these victims, socialism and the leadership of the proletariat have become meaningless, except as a reminder of the CCP's ideological apostasy or as grounds for challenging the Party. From the Party's perspective, it matters little whether the proletariat loses its status as the most progressive force in history; all the better that it no longer constitutes the mainstream – and future – of society. For the Party's new mission of wealth creation and the marketisation of the economy requires efficient creators of wealth and consumers with ample purchasing power rather than a revolutionary working class. The mission therefore entails a fundamental shift from a primary concern with the working class and other exploited classes to the principal creators of wealth, whatever their class.

It nevertheless remains important for the CCP to show that it has not betrayed its class base or abandoned its class-based ideology, which defines the identity of the CCP and constitutes its raison d'être. In this regard, the Party has been plagued by certain deep contradictions in its dissynchronized value structure and the value-environment nexus. The former is exemplified by ideological inconsistencies and the latter by the ideology's failure to legitimize the Party's pragmatic measures while 'crossing the river groping for stones' in 'reform and opening'. If one agrees with Chalmers Johnson that values and the requirement of environmental adaptation determine a social structure and produce conflicts within it (1966: 35), the contradictions may well be seen as sources of tension and structural determinants of Chinese society, or constraints under which social structure and social relations are to be conceived, described and explained.

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 through a sleight of hand. Hence, socialism is no longer characterized by public ownership and a commitment to class struggle (or the primacy of the industrial working class) 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 then become acceptable, and the new clarion call is 'to get rich is glorious' as advanced three decades ago by Deng Xiaoping. In this milieu, the CCP has thrown open its doors to private entrepreneurs and businesspeople and, indeed, prioritized their interests (Jiang 2001).

Ideological revision of this kind 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). Jiang Zemin's theory of 'three represents' drew even more fire from leftists, who accused him of weakening the Party's class base and changing the color of the Party (Lam, 2001; Dickson, 2004: 152-153). In this ideological contest, class is not only relevant but has become a focal point of contention.

In contrast to Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao have steered away from major ideological debates, focusing instead on practical problems, such as education, health care and social welfare. Nevertheless, they clearly seek to create a different kind of society from that which emerged in the previous revolutionary decades. Their well-known model is a 'harmonious society' as well as a 'xiaokang society' ('a prosperous 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. This new social blueprint has drawn much attention to the middle reaches of society and encourages analytical frameworks and statistical analyses which produce a larger middle section.

From Class Analysis to Stratum Analysis

Class and conflictual class relations, as well as analytical methodologies that capture these relations, have little place in the Party-state's utopia of 'harmonious society' simply because these will undercut images of harmony or add to the challenge of building a 'harmonious society'. That is one reason why most Chinese social scientists and commentators refrain from delving into social conflict. In addition, they have carried on the 'farewell to revolution' – consciously or unconsciously – and translated it into specific ways of reconceptualizing social structure and analysing social classes which break with Marxist approaches, so that it is no longer possible to conceive of society as comprising warring classes and class struggle as the motor of history. Together, the calls for 'harmonious society' and 'farewell to revolution' have made conflictual class schemes undesirable.

Yet, despite animated debate about class and common rejection of Marxist class theory and approaches to class analysis, few Chinese analysts go so far as to explicitly challenge officially endorsed class schemes. Instead, many play with various terms when naming social groups, particularly 'class' (jieji), 'stratum' (jieceng) and 'group' (qunti); others replace class analysis with 'stratum analysis'; and still others simply muddle through, using these terms interchangeably or combining them into new expressions, such as 'class/stratum', 'class and stratum', 'class or stratum', 'class (stratum)', 'stratum (class)', 'class group', and 'income stratum group'.

The word 'class', as employed currently by social scientists and media commentators in the PRC, appears almost exclusively in five collocations: 'unpropertied class' (proletariat), 'peasant class', 'middle class', 'propertied class' (bourgeoisie), and 'petit propertied class' (petit bourgeoisie). The first two are rarely found in official communications. In daily conversations, people may refer to themselves as 'proletariat' or 'peasants' in self-mockery, but few would identify themselves socially as such because nowadays these words not only connote low status but have taken on derogatory meaning as well.

Significantly, the peasantry has emerged as a separate class in the recent literature, whereas prior to the reform era it was divided into poor peasants, middle peasants, rich peasants, and so on. These latter categories derived from pre-land reform relationships while the labels were passed to heirs with no relationship to actual land ownership or other categories of the earlier class relations (Selden 1979). With the exception of the last sub-group, subsumed in the 'working people' or 'working class'. The new classification of the peasantry as a separate class is either a misinterpretation of the peasants' position in Mao's class order or a result of recent emphasis on occupation, as opposed to property or labor relationships, as a key classifying index.

By contrast, 'petit bourgeoisie' is not used in serious academic discussions but confined to joking or complimentary remarks about bohemian or yuppie tastes and lifestyles. These three terms are the least controversial, and it is politically safe to say that these classes exist in China. It is a different story with 'bourgeoisie' and 'middle class'. The former cannot be attached to any group with official endorsement, while the latter enjoys wide circulation, including in such official English-language media as Xinhua (The New China News Agency) and the China Daily, but is absent from official communications in Chinese and the writings of establishment intellectuals.

Clearly, then, naming classes remains a sensitive political issue in China. The official label and status of private entrepreneurs and other owners of private property, in particular, must be squared with the definitions of the CCP and PRC in ways conducive to social harmony. It is not politically safe for commentators in the PRC to call these new social groups a bourgeoisie or capitalists, let alone an exploitative class, even if they may fit Marxian definitions of these categories. What most Chinese analysts do with these groups is to 'hide' them in the middle classes, or treat them as if they are part of the latter rather than a separate class.

The concept of middle class is less problematic for the CCP, but it still poses problems. For one thing, no small number of Chinese dictionaries still define 'middle class' as 'middle-ranking bourgeoisie'. For another, Mao equated the 'wavering middle class' with the '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.

If that is an extreme view, it nevertheless underlines a sense of unease amongst Party theorists and establishment intellectuals about the middle class and about dramatically different 'class maps' which fail to square with CCP orthodoxy. Like the emergence of a bourgeoisie, the presence of a middle class will also make the officially endorsed two-class structure (workers and peasants) untenable and raise questions about China's polity. The questions might be irrelevant to the average Chinese or to academics dwelling on the middle class alone without referring to its relationship with any other groupings, but Party theorists must find plausible answers.

For these reasons, Party theorists and establishment intellectuals 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 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. In any case, what matters is that these categories are confined within the proletariat and peasantry and are therefore counted, theoretically, as members of the working class. Consequently, 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 inevitably leads to class warfare.

The problem with that approach is obvious: some new social groups or strata simply do not fit within the working class, unless the definition is expanded to include those who work with capital, which is what is being attempted. To juxtapose this expanded definition against Marxist class categories simply makes clear its differences with the latter. Many businesspeople and entrepreneurs, for instance, not only rank among the richest in the country, but a few even rank high in global perspective, owning substantial property and controlling 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 no easy task to convince the exploiters and exploited that they belong to the same class. Even if exploitation and conflict are explained away, there is really no point in this exercise other than maintaining a semblance of ideological consistency while legitimating the ideological purposes of Party-state officials and capitalists that fly in the face of Marxian class theory and notions of communist revolution.

A safe alternative is to acknowledge that some portions of the population no longer belong to the working class and have aggregated into new strata or groups, 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 prospects, but it goes against the quest for clarity and certainty and therefore holds little appeal to rigorous academics.

Another option, which has predominated in Chinese 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 on the basis of income, occupation, education, consumption, and so on. This approach is described as a sociological 'stratum analysis' as opposed to Maoist class analysis, which is said to be a mere political instrument for identifying the motive force of the Chinese revolution and its enemies. However, there remains a common view among Chinese academics and media commentators that class analysis is indicative of adherence to Marxist and socialist principles while 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 methodologies and ideologies critical of it.

What sets 'strata' and 'classes' apart in this approach is that the former are predominantly gradational rather than relational. That is, a stratum is envisioned as a layer of a large structure, and its relationship with other strata is solely determined by the possession of differential amounts of social, economic and cultural capital, whereas the structural relationship to processes of production and exchange and other causes of differentiation are simply ignored. Thus, strata are divorced from the dynamics and actualities of class relations which are central to Marxist class analysis and class theory. The constructed structure might be one of difference or inequality, but not one of exploitation or domination. In other words, relations of conflict are bypassed in the construction while antagonism is defined out of 'stratum'. Furthermore, as a stratum is devised on the basis of predominantly objective indexes, the issue of class consciousness and action, which is central to Marx's work and that of many class theorists, is circumvented. In this process, the Marxist approach to class analysis is abandoned while the two-class structure is revised; and yet the society that emerges is acceptable to the CCP, as it tends to imply harmony.

The 'Chinese Middle Class': A Problematic Concept and An Elusive Phenomenon

It is perhaps ironical – although perfectly in keeping with general trends in the social sciences all over the world, particularly in Europe and North America – that, amid the farewell to class, interest in the middle class has evolved into a fetish in China. The interest is accompanied and further stimulated by claims that a middle class or middle stratum has actually emerged (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).

However, the way the middle class is identified and demarcated in the Chinese media and academic literature illustrates the

limitations of conventional approaches to class, while the phenomenon of the new 'Chinese middle class' appears extremely elusive. This has much to do with the lack of conceptual clarity and ill-designed criteria for classification and demarcation. Worse still, it is undermined by the failure to demonstrate the actual (rather than theoretical) consequences of class or stratum formations. As a result, the 'Chinese middle class' often appears to be divorced from agency or given subjective attributes derived from a stereotypical middle class. The reality of this class and the utility of the class concept as employed in its identification have thus become questionable. As Giddens observes, 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' (1977: 111 and 134). Or, as Hindess has noted:

> The point of class analysis, then, is to understand the conditions of formation of classes as social realities in a given society, to identity the forms of social structuration that may provide a basis for class formation, and to identify the ties of solidarity and cultural homogeneity that may transform those who occupy a cluster of class situations into a class (1987: 42).

In the Chinese-language literature, the lack of conceptual clarity and ill-designed criteria for classification are most evident in the use of 'class', 'strata' and other similar terms. As noted already, some analysts speak of 'classes'; others, of 'strata'; and still others, of 'groups'. The water is muddied further 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 phrases are possible, most of which are in wide circulation and used in a number of ways for various purposes.

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). As a consequence of the careless use of terminology and the multiplicity of terms for the same, similar or overlapping social groupings, 'middle class' seems to have emerged by default as the standard or generic term for all the above categories, whereas their individual referents and political overtones are often ignored or neglected.

Similarly, the methodology for identification and demarcation is anything but rigorous. One of the most problematic and yet influential ways of identifying the middle class is found in advertising. The advertiser's image of the middle class, as might be expected, is principally 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, golf courses, pubs, and every new trend and every form of fashion, entertainment and luxury are all marked as 'middle class' without any analysis of class characteristics (2005: 63). The advertiser's assumption and message are both simple: The middle class is the most attractive class, and if you want to be regarded as middle class, you must own and do these things. In this case, what pass as middle class markers, constructed and ascribed as they may be, become objectified.

Unlike advertisers, government agencies and academics use a range of indexes for classification. The most essential of these indexes is income. This has much to do with the Chinese word 'zhongchan' (middle-propertied) 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.

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.

By contrast, 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) color 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 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. In contrast to stereotypes of middle classes as highly educated, 89.9 percent of those who were identified as middle class by income 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.

In short, the Chinese middle class identified here is rather mixed, ranging from farmers and blue-collar workers to cadres, administrators and the new rich. This raises many questions. For example, is income/consumption a reliable criterion for class identification, especially when the range is so broad and flexible? Does classification on this basis have much to say about an individual's actual socio-economic position? There is no doubt little in common between a rich businessman driving a Mercedes and

a middle-class blue-collar worker with a cheap motor bike and a color TV and DVD player. Is a self-identified class a class if the identification is inconsistent with the objective socio-economic position of the identifiers? Similarly, does a predominantly objective aggregate as diverse as the CASS scheme constitute a social group or a class? Does this group or class have empirically ascertainable common interests, shared values and collective consciousness? Have the interests, values and consciousness led to collective action? If so, what are the interests, values and actions? And if not, is it a class?

These are both theoretical and empirical questions. Theoretically, class can be defined by reference to economic dimensions of society – relations of production for Marx and life chances in the market for Weber – or to a combination of embodied practices and institutional processes, as in Bourdieu's culturalist approach. Class can also be defined with respect to positions within the technical division of labour or positions within the social division of labour (Abercrombie and Urry 1983: 109; Wright 1979). Another 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 1956: 195; Bendix and Lipset 1967).

Evidently, 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, as is the case with the well-known S-C-A model in class theory and analysis. It is therefore incumbent on them to demonstrate empirically the attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of the middle classes. But few analysts have gone beyond self-identification and small-sample interviews in their investigation of middle class subjectivity, and multiple keyword 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 at best appear to be 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 the large middle class, with stable purchasing power, is indispensable to economic growth (Chen Dongdong 2004; Chen Xiaoya 2002; Li Yinin, cited in Lin Li 2005: 64; Tan Ying 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 and are becoming 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 Jinrong 2004: 81; Zhang et al. 2005: 3, Xiao 2001: 95). Similarly, the CCP now proclaims that the ideal model is an olive-shaped, harmonious and prosperous society, with the majority of the population situated in the middle reaches.

Hundreds of articles in PRC academic publications expound the pivotal importance of the middle classes and the causes of their importance. It is customarily claimed that

- members of the middle class are educated, cultured, and civilized;
- the middle class, being the most secure and politically moderate, serves as a buffer zone and bridge between rich and poor and maintains social stability;
- the size and character of the middle class is 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, and even a selective list of references would be a few pages long. All leads to the inevitable conclusion 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 identified middle classes are the actual bearers of these qualities. That is an empirical question which cannot be answered with general comments about middle classes or through theoretical reasoning, 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 short, the discussion of the subjective dimension to the middle class is largely speculative, and extrinsic values and characteristics are often ascribed to objective social categories or projected onto imaginary groupings. This is clearly not an viable approach to class analysis. It is better described as prescription rather than description, as political advocacy rather than scholarship. Its purpose is not to clarify 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 Political Utility of Class

In sum, the current structure of Chinese society and its constituent classes cannot 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, as has been highlighted, is the aversion to class conflict and class struggle, despite the continuing salience of class, which is translated into deliberate evasion of relations of conflict. A second prominent feature of the intellectual processes is the circumvention of class interests, class consciousness and class action.

The circumvention of class interests, consciousness and action takes away much of the explanatory power of class and renders the concept impotent, as it is the assumed connection between these, or the S-C-A (Structure-Consciousness-Action) model, that binds the theory of classes to the transformation of society. Due to their transformative capacity, classes are envisioned as collective actors in the economic and political fields and historical subjects which are capable of making history. To be sure, the S-C-A model and its variants have come under challenge in the last few decades. There may well be a 'crisis of class politics' as manifested by the decoupling of class situations and class consciousness (Lockwood 1981). It is also true that notions of class interests given in the economic structure of society and consciousness based on class interests are highly questionable (Giddens 1977; Goldthorpe 1984; Clegg et al. 1986; Hindess 1987). It is even possible that classes are not actors at all (Hindess 1986, 1987). Indeed, each and every link of the S-C-A chain is theoretically debatable and must be empirically tested.

However, few PRC analysts question this chain and elide an empirical analysis of that capacity and the trajectories of transformation, and jump to conclusions about these through recourse to theoretical hypotheses and general explanations of social realities of another place and another time. This is not to say that the S-C-A model is not applicable to class analysis in China; rather, for the concept of class to be useful, it must be empirically operationalized, with each link in the S-C-A chain carefully tested before it can be confirmed or falsified.

Yingjie Guo is Senior Lecturer in International Studies, University of Technology Sydney. His most recent book is Middle Classes, Middle Strata, and Intermediate Groups: The Politics of Description and Classification, RoutledgeCurzon, 2008. He wrote this article for The Asia-Pacific Journal.

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[1] It is noteworthy that there was no analysis of class structure of the PRC in the wake of land reform and nationalization of industry. Class analysis meant analysis of the 'old society' while class analysis of the PRC was verboten. In the decades following land reform and the nationalization of industry, campaigns denouncing the landlord and capitalist classes targeted the former landlords and capitalists, long since tamed and deprived of their property.

[2] In the words of Blecher, 'China's workers have lost their world' (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).

[3] The vision of a xiaokang society is one in which most people are moderately well off, and in which economic prosperity is sufficient to assure most people 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 complemented by social equality and environmental protection, goals that may be at odds with actual developmental praxis (Xinhua 10 November 2002).

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