

China's Conservative Middle Class

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By Jonathan Unger

In the literature on democratization, the rise of a large middle class is often seen as a precursor for the development of civil society and a well-functioning democracy. In East Asia, the cases of Taiwan and South Korea have been pointed to as examples. Is a similar future scenario on the cards for China?

Certainly, the urban middle class has grown very rapidly in the years since the massive Tiananmen protests more than a decade and a half ago, when angry university students were joined by throngs of middle-class protesters. In the major cities of China today, the expansion of the middle class is obvious. The major thoroughfares of cities like Chengdu in Sichuan province, where I have lived on and off in recent years, are lined by vast new gated housing projects built to accommodate a burgeoning population of middle-class professionals. Beijing contains 40 new mega-malls, and similar temples to consumerism are springing up in dozens of other cities.

These newly affluent middle-class households possess family incomes of at least 80,000 yuan (\$10,000) per year, according to recent studies by Chinese sociologists. This marks the lowest income at which a household can afford to purchase both an apartment and a small car, the *sine qua non* of middle-class prosperity.

The prosperous shoppers and residents of the gated high-rises are not principally businesspeople or members of the Party elite. They include these groups, to be sure, but most of them are salaried employees, and among these the greatest number are public servants. They are academics and high-school teachers, doctors, engineers, and the white-collar staffs of state-owned enterprises, as well as government administrators of all stripes. Their numbers are large enough that they set the tone and tastes of respectable urban society.

They distinguish themselves from the businesspeople who crowd the same shops and restaurants. They view the latter as parvenus and hold in disdain the uneducated business class's supposed lack of taste. The well-educated salaried middle class perceives its status as superior.

In 2000, the anthropologist William Jankowiak asked hundreds of young adults in one large city to lay out dozens of cards, each bearing the title of an occupation, in descending order from most to least admired. The four most admired occupations turned out to be those of professor, lawyer, doctor and middle-school teacher, listed above the province's party secretary, the mayor, an international businessman, or the director of a joint-venture company. Much lower was the esteem held for a low-level official (who ranks below a barber).

Strategic Generosity

At the time of the Tiananmen protests in 1989, China's urban educated populace had good reason to be angry. Their salaries were low, and sour jokes circulated about private barbers earning more with their razors than hospital surgeons with their scalpels. They were bitter that the sons and daughters of senior Party officials were doing well in private business, which they thought smacked of corruption, and rumors circulated about how these "princelings" were living high off the hog. The urban educated were furious that "political connections" took precedence over their own expertise and loyal service when it came to determining living standards.

But in the years since, as China's economy has continued to expand at a breakneck pace, there has been a deliberate government policy to favor them through their pay slips and perks. Year after year those on government payrolls have been offered higher salaries. During one year in the late 1990s, the pay of all of the academics at China's most prestigious public universities was literally doubled in one go.

Even earlier, in the first half of the 1990s, a huge government-endorsed construction program was initiated to build vast numbers of pleasant new apartment blocks, which were immediately sold off to favored state-sector employees at knock-down prices, sometimes as low as 20% of construction costs. Some of the most recent high-rises are truly fancy, with Japanese-style garden ponds and waterfalls, ornate statuary and health clubs. Thanks to the hefty subsidies to purchase flats, the most fortunate members of the salaried middle class can afford to live in comparative luxury alongside wealthy businesspeople who earn many times more.

They also have enough cash left at their disposal to buy autos, and in the early 2000s the sale of cars began leaping by close to 40% a year. State employees who in the 1980s could not afford a fridge or color TV or even leather shoes and who lived in dreary walk-ups now have gained a material life that they had never imagined possible. They do not want to upset the apple cart. If the government's plan was to co-opt the salaried middle class, it has worked.

China's intellectuals are part of this educated middle class. Their writings today in academic journals and high-brow magazines are imbued with a sense of satisfaction. There are, of course, exceptions, but most intellectuals tend to accept and approve of the status quo and see the straitened circumstances of China's peasants and workers as the necessary price to be paid for China's modernization.

Throughout the 20th century, Chinese intellectuals and university students have been at the forefront of organized unrest. This involvement reaches back to the liberal May Fourth Movement protests of 1919 and the 1920s, to the Communist-aligned student agitations of the 1930s and 1940s, to the Hundred Flowers Movement outcries of 1957 against the Party's deadening style of rule, and more recently the Tiananmen protests of 1989. In view of this history, China's rulers have learned to worry about the potential of the educated as catalysts and organizers. The feeling within China today, valid or not, is that without their participation any surge of major social unrest would be incapable of toppling a government—that it would be leaderless, disorganized and local. But as of

now there is very little chance of mass participation by the urban educated. In fact, if there is another outbreak like Tiananmen, many would prefer to be on the government side of the barricades.

This is true not just of the middle-aged among them, but also of the university students. They are, after all, the incoming generation of the educated middle class, and most of them look forward to their own material futures. In one survey of university students, about half said that money is as important as, or more important than, having ideals or friends. In another survey, 83% of the students at a teachers' training university chose the following value statement above any other: "A modern person must be able to make money."

Middle Class vs. Democracy

The educated middle class is elitist. Many of its members do not want democracy—that is, multiparty elections for the nation's top leaders. Nor did they want this at Tiananmen a decade and a half ago. They did not and do not want China's peasant majority to play a decisive hand in deciding who rules. Most of them hold the rural populace in disdain, and their fear is that the peasants would be swayed by demagogues and vote-buying. They believe that the rural populace is not yet ready to participate in elections. This is ironic, since villagers have been the only ones in China who have been allowed to cast secret ballots to elect their locality's leader.

Many members of the educated middle class are vaguely pro-democratic just so long as democracy can be put off to a future time. This is not only the case today, but also was true at the time of Tiananmen. The then Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang favored a policy called "neo-authoritarianism," under which the Party would act as a benevolent autocracy until such time as the middle class had developed sufficiently to predominate in a democratized polity. Until then, China would remain in a state of tutelage, much as Sun Yat-sen had proposed in the 1920s. This was the program of the Party elite's reform camp, and it drew support from among the urban, educated elite.

At Tiananmen, what many of the university students and their middle-class supporters wanted, instead of multiparty democratic elections, was political relaxation in ways that concerned themselves. They wanted to be able to play a role in organizing their own clubs and associations. They wanted "personal space"—to have the government not interfere in their personal lives. They wanted access to more interesting magazines and films, and the freedom to have public intellectual discussions (just as today, they want their own Web sites and access to Web chatrooms). As patriotic citizens, they wanted their expertise to be listened to in the making of government policy. They also wanted what they considered a more fair distribution of incomes, in which they would be beneficiaries. In all these respects, they are largely getting today what they wanted then.

If anything, many protesters at Tiananmen were more in favor of political liberalization than they are now. At the time, they admired Mikhail Gorbachev and the political reforms he was carrying out. But the collapse and dismemberment of the Soviet Union in the

early 1990s and the corruption and plunging living standards that soon followed under Boris Yeltsin's rule soured China's educated on the idea of Party-led political liberalization along Gorbachev's lines. By the mid-1990s, young Russian women were flowing into China in large numbers to work as prostitutes. Chinese considered this shocking evidence of Russia's penury and humiliation. Many of the urban educated who had demonstrated in 1989 began to feel relieved that China had followed Deng Xiaoping's policy of economic rather than political reform.

Nevertheless, many today still think of themselves as pro-reform, albeit in modest ways. They are apt to shake their heads in dismay at China's environmental problems and express hopes that the government will give greater priority to the issue. Those with expertise are often eager to offer up suggestions on how to enact this or that small, incremental reform. What pass in China for academic papers are often really policy prescriptions on how to improve one or another aspect of China's physical or administrative infrastructure, or relieve traffic congestion, or provide for a more effective education curriculum.

A small number of writers go further. They worry in print about corruption, and about the awful working conditions faced by many millions of migrant workers, and about the plight of farmers. Gutsy journalists, bona fide members of the educated middle class, have written exposés about the seamier side of the Chinese economic miracle; and exposé TV programs similar to 60 Minutes are popular. But these often are loyal expressions of concern that exploitation, corruption and grinding poverty might lead to instability. China's top leaders have publicly expressed similar concerns about corruption and the difficult situation of struggling farmers. Barely any of the exposé journalism hints at displeasure with the national leadership, and this does not just seem to be a question of censorship. Even the exposé journalists appear to live comfortably within the boundaries of China's status quo.

Middle Class and Leadership

The government has consistently pushed patriotism as a means to prop up public support. In encouraging nationalism, though, Beijing has run the risk of seeming too mild in its actual reactions in the international arena, and a portion of the middle class has felt uncomfortable whenever this occurs.

But the grumblings have been fleeting. Few among the middle class actually put great stock in nationalism as an ongoing political concern. They look approvingly on most things foreign and modern, and are eager to sample foreign foods, fashions and fads. The best of the university students eagerly prep for the TOEFL exams so that they can study abroad, and many are quite happy ultimately to settle abroad, with their parents' encouragement.

Most members of the educated middle class find little to be irritated about on a daily basis in regard to the central government. This is quite unlike earlier times. Under Mao in the 1970s, when the government directly controlled almost all economic activity and was

responsible for all services, it naturally took the blame whenever there were shortages or inadequate services. This was a problem all Communist political systems have faced.

But as the central government in China has pulled back from dominating everything directly and has devolved responsibilities to lower levels or to the private sector, it can no longer be blamed by the populace for the various frustrations of daily life. It is now the private employer, or the school head, or a local official who is perceived as blameworthy; the central government is no longer the lightning rod for people's frustrations and anger. This is especially true among the urban middle class, which has little to feel resentful about in any case.

Instead, when the educated middle class sees the national leaders on the evening television news, they are perceived in a generally favorable light. The current leaders fit the image of the type of people the middle class wants to see in charge. President and Party Secretary Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao are university-educated technocrats who rose to the very top through what has increasingly become a Party meritocracy. They look like members of the educated middle class, and share many of its values. This is their leadership.

The Chinese educated middle class has become a bulwark of the current regime. Summarizing a large survey of political attitudes in Beijing, a recent book by the political scientist Chen Jie concludes that, among all urban groups, "those who perceive themselves to belong to the middle class and who are government bureaucrats are more likely to support the incumbent authorities." Don't expect regime change or democratization any time soon. The rise of China's middle class blocks the way.

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