

5. The socioeconomic status, co-optation and political conservatism of the educated middle class: a case study of university teachers

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In the literature on democratization, the rise of a large middle class is often seen as a prerequisite for the development of civil society and a well-functioning democracy (for example, Moore, 1966; Lipset, 1981). In East Asia, the cases of Taiwan and South Korea have often been cited as examples (Chou and Nathan, 1987; Cheng, 1989; Huntington, 1991; Koo, 1991; Shin, 1994). But China is a counter-example. China is ruled by an authoritarian regime that maintains its rule not so much through blatant force but rather through the legitimacy it enjoys. In particular, the influential urban educated middle class in China has little liking for democracy, as will be seen in these pages. It has been co-opted, and serves as a base of support for the current leadership of China. Contrary to the political science hypothesis that the growth of an educated middle class leads to democratization, China's middle class backs the status quo.

A couple of decades ago, it was argued that one of the salient factors undermining the prospects for Chinese democratization was that its educated middle class was relatively small. But it has grown very rapidly since then, spurred by a very rapid expansion of university and post-graduate education and by the priority placed on expertise by the government and by business. In the major cities of China today, the social influence of the educated middle class is pervasive. Their numbers are large enough that they set the tone and tastes of respectable urban society.

A small minority of the well educated, such as independent attorneys and high-tech entrepreneurs, are self-employed. A larger number work for private businesses, be it as lawyers, accountants or IT specialists. But

the great majority of the educated middle class are salaried employees of one or another type of government-funded institution. They are high-school teachers and academics, doctors, engineers and the skilled white-collar staff of state-owned industries, as well as government administrators and specialists of all kinds. A national survey of urban households in 2002 revealed that 91 per cent of university-educated professionals held state-sector jobs, as did 81 per cent of university-educated managers (Wang and Davis, 2010, p. 161). Many of them do not earn salaries comparable to those earned by highly valued experts and executives in the private sector. But much of the public-sector-educated middle class has good incomes. And as public employees, they are what the Chinese refer to as 'within the system', and accordingly they often have access to valuable non-monetary benefits and perquisites that are exclusively distributed to 'within-the-system' employees.

The educated middle class were not previously so materially fortunate. At the time of the Tiananmen protests in 1989, large throngs of middle class protestors joined angry university students at a time when practically all of the middle class was publicly employed. China's educated middle class had good reason to be angry. Salaries were low and sour jokes circulated about private barbers earning more with their razors than public hospital surgeons. 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 rumours circulated about how these 'princelings' were grabbing hold of public property. Members of the educated middle class were furious that when it came to determining living standards, 'political connections' took precedence over their own expertise and loyal service.

But in the decades since, as China's economy has expanded at a breakneck pace, there has been a deliberate government policy to favour members of the educated middle class through their pay slips and fringe benefits. Year after year, those on government payrolls have been offered higher salaries. They no longer have reasons to hold grievances on this score. The educated middle class has enough cash at its disposal to buy cars and, starting in the early 2000s, the sale of cars began to jump at a rate of close to 40 per cent a year. State employees who in the 1980s could not afford a refrigerator or colour TV or even leather shoes (many could only afford cloth shoes) and who lived in dreary tiny flats up six storeys of stairs have now gained a material life that they had never imagined possible. They do not want to upset the political apple cart.¹ If the government's plan was to co-opt the educated middle class, the policy has worked.

This chapter examines one particular occupational group within China's educated middle class – the academics at universities and research institutes. Through in-depth interviews conducted between 2007 and 2009 with current and retired university academics in the cities of Shenyang and Guangzhou, it examines the changes in the circumstances of these intellectual professionals: their current socioeconomic status, their sources of income and material dependence on both 'post-socialist distributions' and market activities, and their perceptions and attitudes towards the status quo and current regime. The interviewees represent, roughly, three generations of intellectual professionals: a senior generation who worked for their university during the socialist planned economy of the Mao era, a middle-aged generation who experienced major changes in their work-units under China's post-Mao economic reforms, and a younger generation who joined the university in more recent years. The interviews focused on each generation's access to resources through the market economy and through the post-socialist 'within-the-system' distribution of benefits, and on how their identities and perceptions of their socioeconomic status have changed through their experiences over time.

THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY CHANGES TOWARDS INTELLECTUALS

Under Mao, the Chinese Communist Party provided leadership positions to persons identified as 'reds' (based on their loyalty to Party goals and a good family class label) (Unger, 1982; Walder, 1986; Andreas, 2009), and needed educated professionals to fill crucial non-leadership positions in industry, public administration and education. Because of their expertise, these educated professionals of the 1950s were entitled to benefits provided by their workplaces, such as larger and higher-quality housing. However, the professionals' political loyalty to the regime and their class status were suspect (Kraus, 1981). They were targeted for 're-education' under Mao, and with the swing toward more radical policies starting in the latter half of the 1960s in the Cultural Revolution, up to Mao's death in 1976, the privileges of the professionals, including academics, were greatly reduced or eliminated. In particular, the wages and non-monetary benefits of the younger generation of professionals became similar to those of ordinary workers. Nor did the professionals wish to differentiate themselves by dressing differently or leading a privileged lifestyle. To do so would have opened them to charges of possessing 'bourgeois' inclinations. It was a period of deliberate social and economic levelling.

Practically all urban residents belonged to a work-unit (*danwei*), and for most people, including the educated professionals, a job in a *danwei* was all-encompassing (Lü and Perry, 1997; Bray, 2005). Jobs were almost always held in the same *danwei* for life; there was effectively no labour market. The *danwei* not only provided the sole locus of a person's career, it also provided employees with accommodation (ergo, they and their families lived and socialized with their workmates), as well as healthcare, access to strictly rationed consumer goods, and entertainment (even movie tickets were distributed through the *danwei*).

In this system, what counted in terms of access to material goods or to better-than-average housing depended principally upon whether or not you belonged to an elite work-unit. Influential work-units had the connections and funding to construct more and better housing for their members and to secure privileged access to rationed goods. Since little was accessible through the open market, what counted for 'within-the-system' employees (and almost every urban resident fitted somewhere in this 'within-the-system' hierarchy of work-units) was this structure of 'socialist distribution'. In a period when people played down their educational credentials and professional status, they often drew their status within society from the particular status of the work-unit to which they belonged. A guard, driver or clerk in a prestigious work-unit had a more enviable status than did a university-educated employee in a work-unit that was poorly situated in this hierarchy. Even today, when most resources are accessible through the open market, the legacy of this 'socialist distribution' remains, and a prestigious work-unit still has an impact on its employees' social status.

Since Mao's death and the rise of Deng, the priorities of the Party-state's agenda have shifted from those of revolutionary transformation and a socialist planned economy to modernization. Expertise began to be praised as the most important force for the country's modernization. The new national Party leadership reintroduced strict examinations for admission to elite secondary schools and for all universities (Unger, 1982; Zang, 2001), and educational credentials gradually became prerequisites for a wide range of managerial and administrative posts. The same emphasis appeared in Communist Party recruitment after 1980, when the Party began to make special efforts to admit well-educated people into its ranks. Initially, to justify this policy change, the Party leadership declared intellectuals to be members of the working class as 'mental labourers'.

As has been noted, however, their continued low living standard in the 1980s resulted in frustration and anger, especially when poorly educated private businesspeople and children of cadres became considerably better off than doctors, highly skilled administrators and university professors.

Accordingly, to redress the disparity in incomes, a few years after the suppression of the social and political unrest at Tiananmen in 1989, the government took a series of important steps to elevate the status as well as the living standards of the highly educated. The great expansion in the ranks of educated government officials further blurred the distinction between 'reds' and 'experts' (that is, between political loyalty and expertise), and intellectuals have come to be regarded as peers of the political elites rather than a threat. The intellectuals' contributions to the policy-making process gradually became more welcome, and many have been given opportunities to work for policy-making institutes and think-tanks, to publish in official newspapers and journals, and to provide consultations for policy-makers (Zheng, 2006, p. 250). As a consequence, the upward social mobility of the well educated has been accompanied by their attainment of political credentials. Nationwide, by the end of 2010, about 37 per cent of Party members had university degrees, far more than in previous decades (Wang, 2011).

MATERIAL DEPENDENCE

At government offices and public institutions such as universities, schools and hospitals, the basic salary scale is set by the government, and salaries depend mainly on position and seniority. In the 1980s, a low salary was the main and normally the only source of income for academics. But starting in the 1990s, universities were allowed to adopt a bonus system to assuage the material grievances of academics and to end decades of a relatively egalitarian but low system of salaries for university employees. As found elsewhere in China, while base salaries remained largely regulated by the government, the distribution of bonuses led to significant differentials in wages between employees engaged in the same jobs and also generated income inequality among employees of different work-units (Wu, X., 2002; Xie and Wu, 2008).

In 2007–09, at the time of our interviews with academics, their basic monthly salary stood at only around 2000–4000 RMB depending on their position, and retirees normally received 90 per cent of their basic salary as a pension. But none of the interviewees could calculate their basic salary when asked. Their fixed basic salary contributed only a portion of their actual salary. What made a significant difference was the bonus salary. The universities have absolute autonomy in designing the bonus scheme, including various activities to generate bonuses as well as the amount and methods of income distribution. With the additional bonus

salary, the interviewees' monthly salary at the Shenyang universities amounted to about 4000 RMB on average and 5000 RMB in Guangzhou.

In addition, in recent years a meritocratic trend has appeared in the public sector as a result of a rising demand for skilled professionals. Today, outstanding young employees of universities, such as award-winners, project leaders and those with overseas degrees and research experience, are allocated resources that were once only available to senior faculty members. For example, University H awards from its own budget 10 000 RMB for each publication in a top-ranked journal. Also, individual academics who manage to organize a competitive research team and obtain outside funding for it receive 36 000 RMB a year as a reward from the university. Academics recognized as Distinguished Professors also receive annual rewards ranging between 30 000 and 80 000 RMB.

Academics' Income from Market Activities

Since the 1990s, China's turn toward the open market has led to a 'commercialization of education'. In addition to funding allocated by the government, most universities have boosted their finances by expanding enrolments and by charging relatively high tuition fees. In addition to their formal tertiary education programmes, many universities have also adopted a strategy of setting up profit-making educational subsidiaries. Universities today allow their colleges and departments to operate non-degree professional training programmes and classes, tapping into a growing market demand. The income from these programmes and classes is partly paid to the university and partly kept within the college, while the rest is distributed as bonuses among college staff. As a result, colleges offering courses in high demand, such as business management and professional skills training, are much better off than those that do not have such classes to offer. Interviewees suggested that bonuses offered by the better-off colleges can be 20 times higher than those of 'poor' colleges at the same university. In this scenario, university employees' salaries no longer depend on a fixed salary scale and a bonus system per se, but also on the profitability of the market activities of their section of the university.

Another source of income derives from the individuals' personal engagement in market activities. Apart from their work inside the university, many academics moonlight as consultants and participate in well-paid research projects for government offices or enterprises. This extra income is associated with the value that the market attaches to the individual academics and their particular discipline. However, the status

of the university as a leader in the academic field also gives individuals an edge in the consultancy and research market. Government offices as well as enterprises normally prefer to pay more to hire researchers from highly ranked universities to carry out research projects. Thus, the status of academics' 'within-the-system' work-unit facilitates their competitiveness and success in the 'outside-the-system' labour market. The extra income from 'outside the system' can constitute 50 to 70 per cent of their annual income. For those whose college fails to distribute decent incomes, this extra income becomes crucial to their economic well-being.

Compared with intellectual professionals in the 1980s, who were angry with income inequality generated by market activities, the younger generation today appreciates the market opportunities. Mr F, a young university lecturer, owns two flats in newly developed, high-end gated communities in Guangzhou. Mr F's 3000 RMB monthly basic salary was of little help in buying the expensive apartments, but since 2003, when he joined the university, Mr F also has been working as a part-time real-estate planner and consultant in a well-paid moonlight job. Mr F summarized the relationship between his two jobs:

A work-unit cannot give you everything you want any more, and so you need to rely on the market. A work-unit offers me a platform from which I can board the market. With my salary, I can't make ends meet, so I have to do other things to support my family.

Mr F in fact does more than make ends meet; by combining two sources of income and benefits, he does very well.

The aspiration to attain a high living standard is not confined to salaried academics like Mr F, but also applies to today's 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 making money is as important as, or more important than, having ideals or friends. In another survey, 83 per cent of the students at a teacher training university chose 'A modern person must be able to make money' as the most commonly selected value statement (Rosen, 2004b).

Resources from 'Post-socialist Distribution'

Despite the enormous changes that have occurred in post-Mao China, for a publicly employed educated middle class person, privileged access to 'within-the-system' resources often remains as important or more important to their living standard as their monetary income. Housing remains a

prime example, despite the termination in the early 2000s of public housing distribution. As Beibei Tang discusses in Chapter 3 of this volume, favoured public-sector employees continue to enjoy privileged access to housing resources. In the period of Mao's rule, under a system of 'socialist distribution', accommodation and other desired resources were distributed by work-units based on criteria such as length of service that gave relatively equal access to both white-collar and blue-collar *danwei* members. By contrast, in the system of 'post-socialist distribution', access today is weighted heavily in favour of the more valued members of the work-unit – high-ranking administrators and favoured professionals.

Access to superior housing is by far the most important of the distributable resources and, compared to other public-sector employers, universities hold a unique advantage – exclusive use and management rights over the land they occupy. Under the socialist planned economy, universities obtained land-use rights through administrative channels according to central capital investment plans. Since the 1980s, many universities have converted this into de facto ownership rights in the new land leasehold market, becoming powerful 'socialist land masters' (Hsing, 2009, p. 34). During the housing reform of the late 1990s and early 2000s, universities often developed their own high-standard residential compounds on campus. They then sold the apartments to employees at discounted prices, and continue today to provide highly subsidized management services.

For employees of resource-rich universities, the ostensible termination of public housing distribution in the early 2000s did not lead to the loss of privileged access to housing resources. Ways are quietly found to maintain the practice, and these rely on close relations with the local government. In 2011, China's two most elite universities – Peking University and Tsinghua University, which are located close to each other – announced that each university will provide about 5000 'self-built' apartments to their employees at discounted prices. These 'self-built' apartments will be constructed on land allocated by the local government to the two universities for their 'employee housing' projects. The apartments will be sold to their employees at one-third or one-half of the market price – which is expected to save the employees of each university about 6 billion RMB in total (Lan, 2011; Yang, 2011). As part of the agreement with the university, the employees who purchase these flats are not allowed to sell the apartments in the market, but only to other employees at the university. Thanks to the hefty subsidies to enable them to purchase the apartments, fortunate members of the salaried public-sector middle class such as these university academics can afford

to live in accommodation of a similar quality and style to that of businesspeople who earn several times more. As in other prestigious gated communities found in Chinese cities today (Low, 2001, 2003; Li and Niu, 2003; Tomba, 2004; Wu, 2005), the university residential communities enjoy a protected environment away from chaotic city living and enjoy high-quality services that contribute to a 'high-status' lifestyle.

Like housing, health care in urban China for private-sector workers has often been transformed from a public good into a user-pays system. But universities, like other elite public-sector employers, still provide generous health schemes – together with the services of an on-campus clinic. If members of the university staff visit the clinic, they pay only 10 per cent of the medical bill. If they go to a hospital, the university will cover 80 per cent of the medical cost. In contrast to other occupational groups (especially private business owners and workers), who worry about the prospect of expensive medical bills, interviewees at the two universities expressed satisfaction with the social security benefits provided to them as 'within-the-system' employees. In this privileged 'post-socialist distribution' scheme, retired professors and high-ranking university officials enjoy even better public health care that requires them to pay only 5 per cent of clinic fees and 10 per cent of in-hospital treatment costs.

While they recognize the advantages of public-sector employment, younger employees who have recently joined the non-prestige universities in Shenyang and Guangzhou do not enjoy access to heavily subsidized flat purchases and therefore face a much more challenging housing situation than the older generations. Most universities now only provide rented apartments to new staff members (within-the-system employees only) for the first two to three years after they join the university. The rent is highly subsidized by the universities, and the tenants pay only a symbolic fee. The dwellings are normally one-bedroom apartments (usually 30 m²) for singles and two-bedroom apartments (usually 50 m²) for families. Sometimes single employees have to share an apartment if the university faces a housing shortage that year. The lease is usually not renewable, and the tenants will need to move out to make room for newly recruited employees. In some cases, if the tenants want to stay, they are required to pay rent at the market price, which is now very high in China.

After the termination of subsidized sales of public housing at the end of the 1990s, the universities in our Guangzhou and Shenyang case studies, like other public-sector work-units, started to contribute to a Housing Provident Fund (HPF)² for their employees. The university contribution normally amounts to about 500 RMB per person per month based on the employee's salary scale. Given that the amount of this HPF contribution is fairly small in relation to the current market price for a

flat, the better-off universities in Guangzhou also offer up to 3000 RMB in rental subsidies per year to those who have joined the work-unit since the early 2000s, and thus do not own a flat through the previous highly subsidized purchase scheme.

CENTRALIZATION OF ADMINISTRATIVE POWER AT UNIVERSITIES

With increasing financial resources available, the government education offices have augmented their power to intervene in the operations of universities. In recent years, the appointments of university presidents have been decided by the educational supervisory government departments, and there are frequent exchanges between the positions of university presidents and officials of education departments (Xinhua, 2010). In addition to providing the leadership personnel, the Central Government offices also control the distributions of resources to universities. In some cases, the positive outcome of a research funding application largely depends on close relations between the academics and the officials in charge (Wang, 2010).

University presidents and the other administrative leaders who have been appointed to run universities control access to the scarce, rationed rewards such as housing, non-wage benefits and even promotions. They also increasingly control functions that university academic departments used to manage, including academic programme design, enrolment plans, research funding, teaching plans, and so on. A recent academic survey showed that nearly 63 per cent of respondents believed the academic committees in Chinese universities have no say in the decision-making about academic resource distributions (Xinhua, 2010). Facilitated by the marketization of education and by what is known in Chinese as the universities' increasing 'administrativization', a new powerful interest group of education managers has emerged.

The shift of power toward higher-level administrators inside universities has resulted in increasing competition for administrative positions. Because of administrative control over the access to research funding, administrative leadership often leads to a more successful academic career. A middle-aged professor recently promoted to a senior administrative position at his university expressed surprise at the large number of invitations and nominations he quickly received from highly ranked academic journals and prestigious academic committees inviting him to become a member of editorial and advisory boards, based on his administrative title rather than his academic achievements. The

importance of administrative power has attracted more members of the younger generation to endeavour to gain administrative credentials, and in doing so they curry favour with the university administrations and embrace the political status quo.

THE SECURITY AND PRESTIGE OF PUBLIC-SECTOR POSTS

As a direct result of the emerging market economy in the latter half of the 1980s and the early 1990s, a considerable number of skilled employees at state owned enterprises and institutions moved into private-sector employment, attracted by higher economic rewards in the open market (Davis, 1992, 2000; Zhou et al., 1997; Lu, 2004). However, private businesses have faced a more challenging competitive situation at the later stages of the reform period. With the rise in wages in the public sector, the gap in economic rewards between the private and public sectors started to close. Moreover, regardless of the housing difficulties faced by some of the younger generation, as public-sector employees they enjoy welfare benefits not accessible to private-sector employees, while the self-employed have to arrange for their own welfare. As a result, the greater job stability, welfare benefits and rising salaries make public-sector jobs more appealing than in the early stages of the reform period.

Although most public-sector employers, including the universities, have jettisoned the system of life tenure and have obliged employees to enter into non-tenured contract employment, public-sector work-units are still considered more reliable providers of job security. Some of the younger interviewees started their careers in a private enterprise, but then switched to a university because of uncertainty about their future at the private enterprise. Mr M, a young university lecturer, shared his rationale for leaving a well-paid job in a big private enterprise for the lecturer position:

Although a private enterprise can offer a higher salary and bonuses, it's the kind of place where you trade away your youth. The work there is too demanding for someone to remain too long. Once you reach a certain age and your contribution diminishes, they'll kick you out. I would have made more money if I had stayed in the firm. But when I turn 40 or 50, what can I do then? There's no security there. Or a firm can go bankrupt so easily, and you can lose your job any day. Do you know how hard it is to find a job these days? Stability is the top priority, followed by a good salary.

A 2011 poll of university graduates shows that most of their votes go to publicly owned enterprises for the top 50 'best employers' (Jiang, 2011).

Job stability has also resulted in a higher level of credit and a higher status for public-sector professionals. For instance, when urban residents apply for a mortgage through a bank, they are normally required to provide evidence of employment by way of a letter from their employer. Due to the lack of a reliable income tax reporting system and efficient credit assessment tools, the banks lay more trust in the employer than in an individual's actual or declared income. Stable, profitable and well-resourced work-units, such as universities and government offices, provide their employees with credentials as trustworthy borrowers. Some banks even approve mortgages to public servants and university staff with nil down payment because they trust their work-units will guarantee them a stable and decent income over the long term. One university staff member emphasized how his identity as a '*danwei* person' even helped him in social relationships:

No matter what we do today, we need a letter stamped by the *danwei*, otherwise things won't go very smoothly. So for example, when I introduce myself to other people, people trust me more when I say: 'I work at University X' than if I say: 'I am a researcher'. They trust us because they trust our *danwei*.

The privileges offered by membership in resource-rich work-units such as high-ranking universities tend to increase the individual members' sense of being a '*danwei person*'. This *danwei* identity is strongly associated with the *danwei* moral economy and the idea of 'taking care of one's employees' (Chan and Unger, 2009). Through their role in the distribution of rewards, university employers help academics to maximize their 'within-the-system' privileges and provide institutional back up for their market activities. For Ms X, a middle-aged university lecturer, the *danwei* culture is a very important and treasured part of public employment:

If one day, our university becomes private, our *danwei* culture will be gone. The state wants elite professionals, so the state allocates a large budget to our university. So our university doesn't need to be too careful about profits, like private enterprises do. It doesn't mind giving us some welfare. The culture of the *danwei* will only last as long as public ownership lasts. In China's state-sector economy, at least two types of *danwei* will survive: government agencies and big monopolistic state owned enterprises. In China, we are still *danwei*-owned individuals. If my *danwei* is good, my life is good.

In short, the growing importance for professionals of being with a ‘good’ employer is that the status of their work-unit, rather than just their professional occupations per se, leads to a better material life. This in turn forms a material base for this group’s acceptance, and even support, of the status quo and the current regime.

Overall, the academics we interviewed considered monopolistic state owned enterprises and government offices to be even better off work-units than their own. These state owned enterprises were seen as more desirable because they offered both high salaries and generous welfare to their employees through substantial state investments and state-assisted monopolization of their market. One interviewee emphasized the importance of these enterprises’ monopolistic nature:

They don’t seem to have any pressure from market competition, because even if they don’t perform well, the state will help them. A friend of mine works there. He even gets a shopping voucher worth a few thousand RMB from his *danwei* every month. But other enterprises are quite different. They have to fight to survive in the market.

Not surprisingly, monopolistic state owned enterprises have gained in popularity among university students. For example, by 2011, China Mobile had been voted at the very top of the list of ‘best employers’ by final year university students for three consecutive years (Jiang, 2011).

Most public service work-units such as universities offer three- to five-year contracts to their employees, though in the majority of cases the contracts are automatically renewed. But government offices offer life-time employment, which makes them envied for providing the most stable employment. Although the government’s policy is that teachers’ welfare should be in line with that of public servants, the reality reveals significant differences in salary and other benefits. When comparing his financial situation with that of his public servant friend, one lecturer observed:

Last year, both government offices and universities raised salaries. My salary was raised by 500 RMB. But my public servant friend got a raise of 3000 RMB. And they also get a contribution of 2000 or 3000 RMB to their personal Housing Provident Fund, while we only get 400 RMB. That’s why everyone today wants to become a public servant. Their *danwei* offers both more stability and better material benefits.

Thus, high prestige, rising salaries, stability and all sorts of material benefits have given government office jobs the reputation of a ‘golden rice bowl’, and have attracted more and more well-educated young

people. This has raised the bar, in terms of higher education qualifications, for recruitment to such jobs 'within the system'. A postgraduate degree is now required for an increasing variety of positions, along with political credentials (Party membership), relevant working experience and high performance in specially designed exams. In 2009, despite the requirements being set increasingly higher and an upper age limit of 35 for applications, 1.46 million applicants registered for the exam for national public service positions, with an acceptance rate of 1:93 (Yang, 2009).

While well-educated younger professionals aspire to public-sector posts, do they also look up to private businesspeople? Some Chinese-language publications lump professionals and private entrepreneurs together as China's admired 'new social strata' (for example, Chen, G.J., 2004, pp. 96–7; Lu et al., 2009, p. 201). However, well-educated professionals do not deem themselves to be of a social status similar to the bulk of private businesspeople. Apart from the wealth gap, a discourse of 'quality' (*suzhi*) differentiates the two groups. The salaried professionals tend to feel superior to many of the businesspeople who crowd the same shops and restaurants that they do. They view the latter, if they are not well educated, as *parvenus*, and hold in disdain their supposed lack of taste. The educated middle class perceives itself as being of a superior status.

The urban populace of China agrees. Even though China's bookstores are filled with books on how to do well in business, surveys show that the most highly admired occupations are those of the salaried educated middle class. In 2000, the anthropologist William Jankowiak (2004) 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 secondary-school teacher, which were listed above the province's Party Secretary, the mayor, an international businessperson or the director of a joint-venture company and far, far higher than a low-level official (who ranks below a barber).³ A 2005 survey showed that professionals and high officials were considered as the two most 'desirable occupation' categories, especially among the well-educated groups (Tang, 2009). If the middle class professionals feel they deserve a high status, they are not alone in believing this. The rest of the population admires them and aspires to be like them. The views of the educated middle class influence the views of Chinese society as a whole and, in line with this, their political attitudes carry weight society-wide.

THE POLITICAL DISPOSITION OF CHINA'S INTELLECTUALS

The evidence from this examination of university staff indicates the dependence of China's intellectual professionals on the current regime, the formation of their identity as being 'within the system', the rise in their social status and the gains they have made in their material living standards. As has also been observed, well-educated government administrators have done even better. Together, these findings help explain why the educated middle class largely supports, rather than challenges, the current regime. In contrast to the late 1980s, when the older generation of intellectual professionals, including academic staff, joined in protests calling for liberalizing reforms, the educated elites in China today have reweighed the costs and benefits to themselves. Their material dependence on the post-socialist distribution system through their membership of public institutions has increased the personal cost of challenging the current regime. Their dependency relations in their public-sector employment and their identification with highly educated public servants as a whole have decreased their incentives to dispute the current system, and their greatly enhanced living standards give them a stake in the status quo. As a result, the educated middle class today aligns itself with and reinforces the Party-state.

Throughout the twentieth century, Chinese governments have generally been wary about the potential for political discord posed by intellectuals and university students, who in the past have been at the forefront of organized unrest. This political opposition by intellectuals and students 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 past, 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 any surge of major social unrest would be incapable of toppling a government – that it would be leaderless, disorganized and local – without their participation. But today there is very little chance of mass participation by the urban educated in social unrest. They have been co-opted by the system. In fact, now that their material livelihoods and status are secure, if there is another outbreak like the Tiananmen protests of 1989 many of them would prefer to be on the other side of the barricades – on the government's side. This is the distinct impression that the authors of this chapter have gained

from conversations and interviews during the past decade with members of the educated middle class, including but not confined to academics.⁴

Our discussions over the past decade with Chinese academics and with other members of the educated middle class have led us to believe that many of them literally do not want democracy – that is, multi-party elections for the nation’s top leaders. This impression is confirmed by a survey of three major cities that showed that a mere 25 per cent of middle class respondents disagreed with the statement, ‘Competition among several parties in the election of government leaders should not be allowed’ (Chen, 2010, p. 345). This is not a newly formed opinion. Two decades ago, many of the students and older members of the educated middle class who participated in the Tiananmen protests held this view. They did not and do not want China’s rural majority to play a decisive hand in deciding who rules. Many of them hold the rural population in disdain, believe farmers would be swayed by demagogues and vote-buying, and feel they are not yet ready to participate in elections. This is ironic, since villagers have been the only people in China who have been allowed to cast secret ballots to elect their local leader.

Many members of the educated middle class are now, and were at the time of the 1989 Tiananmen protests, vaguely pro-democratic just so long as democracy can be put off to a future time. In the late 1980s the then Communist Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang favoured 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 (Sautman, 1992). Until then, China would remain in a state of tutelage, much as Sun Yatsen proposed in the 1920s. This was the programme of the Party elite’s reform camp, and it drew support from among the urban educated.

During the Tiananmen protests of 1989, what the university students and their middle class supporters such as academics wanted, instead of multi-party 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’ – that is, 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 websites and access to web chat rooms). As patriotic citizens, academics and other intellectual professionals wanted their expertise to be listened to in the making of government policy. They also wanted what they considered a more just distribution of incomes, in which they would be beneficiaries. In all these respects, they are largely getting today what they wanted then.

If anything, at the time of the 1989 Tiananmen protests many of them were more in favour of political liberalization than they are now. At that time, they admired 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 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, in what many Chinese considered shocking evidence of Russia's penury and humiliation. Many of the urban educated who had demonstrated against the government in 1989 began to feel relieved in the 1990s that China had followed Deng Xiaoping's policy of economic rather than political reform.

Their writings today in academic journals and high-brow magazines are often imbued with a sense of satisfaction. There are, of course, exceptions, but many of the educated middle class seem to consider the low living standards and lack of security of China's farmers and workers as the necessary price to be paid for China's globalization and modernization. They perceive the current distribution of salaries and living standards as rational and justifiable and consider that they themselves deserve their current status.

At the time of the 1989 Tiananmen protests, much of the educated middle class was, of course, in favour of the right to protest. But now that they have obtained what they want, their mindset has also changed in this respect. In a survey of three major Chinese cities, only 23 per cent of the middle class respondents disagreed with the statement, 'In general, demonstrations should not be allowed because they frequently become disorderly and disruptive' (Chen, 2010, p. 342).

Nevertheless, many among the educated middle class still think of themselves as progressive and 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. Many of them were shocked in 2011 when railway officials sought to cover up the cause of a fatal collision between high-speed trains (such train tickets are expensive, and so passengers are all middle class and above) and many tens of thousands expressed themselves on the web in support of greater government transparency and accountability. Those with specialized expertise are often eager to offer suggestions on how to enact this or that 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 to

relieve traffic congestion, or to provide for a more effective education curriculum.

A small number of writers go further. They worry in print about corruption, 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 television programmes exposing corruption and cheating are popular. But these are loyal expressions of concern; the authors sincerely worried 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 this investigative journalism hints at displeasure with the national leadership, and this does not just seem to be a question of censorship. Even most of the relatively small group of investigative journalists and critical academics appear to live comfortably within the boundaries of China's status quo.

There is one issue over which a part of the middle class, including some academics, at times feels at odds with government policy, and that is when national pride is at stake. They harbour concerns even though the government itself has consistently pushed patriotism as a means to prop up the populace's overall political support. Chinese leaders tend to play this card less fervently or blatantly than American presidents often have, but at times when Chinese pride is injured the government has reacted angrily for domestic audiences. It did so in 1999 when the Chinese embassy in Belgrade was bombed by American planes (Gries, 2001; Hillman, 2004); it did so twice when Japan rewrote textbooks to picture Japan's military behaviour in China during World War II in a softer light; and it did so in 2008 when the Olympic torch (which in Chinese was called the 'sacred flame', its sacredness identified with China and Chinese national pride) was attacked on its travels round the world by pro-Tibetan demonstrators (Nyiri et al., 2010). By encouraging nationalism at home at such moments, though, Beijing has run the risk of seeming too mild in its diplomatic reactions in the international arena, and a portion of the middle class feels uncomfortable whenever this occurs.

But the grumbling at such moments has been fleeting. Few among the educated middle class actually seem to put great importance in nationalism as a personal ongoing political concern. China's educated middle class is open-minded regarding foreign influences, both in their professional work and more generally. 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 (a disproportionate number of whom come from educated middle class families) eagerly prepare for the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exams so that they can study abroad at a postgraduate level, and many are quite happy ultimately to settle abroad, with their parents' encouragement.

Whatever their qualms over this or that government statement or policy, most members of the educated middle class find little to be irritated about on a daily or ongoing basis in regard to the Central Government. This is quite unlike earlier times. Under Mao in the 1970s, when the government had direct control over 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. Instead, it is now the private employer, or the school head, or a *local* official who is perceived as blameworthy, and the Central Government is no longer so much the lightning rod for people's frustrations and anger.⁵ This is especially true among the educated urban middle class, which has little to feel resentful about in any case.

Instead, when the educated middle class see the national leaders on the evening television news, they generally perceive the leaders in a favourable light. The current leaders fit the image of the type of people the middle class want to see in charge. As of 2011, the President and Party Secretary, Hu Jintao, the Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and their designated successors were all 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. When people from the urban educated middle class bother to think fleetingly about politics they do not, by and large, favour some imagined alternative political system. This is, to a large extent, *their* leadership.

Their favourable view of the status quo and the Chinese leadership is not new-found. It was also evident a decade ago in the early part of the 2000s. For instance, summarizing a large survey of political attitudes in Beijing, a 2004 book by the political scientist Jie Chen 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' (Chen, J., 2004, p. 152).

The Chinese educated middle class has, as a whole, become a bulwark of the current regime. As a consequence, regime change or democratization should not be expected any time soon. The rise of China's educated middle class blocks the way.

NOTES

1. On the attitudes of China's urban population towards their government see Chen, J. (2004) and Whyte (2010).
2. The Housing Provident Fund (HPF) is an employment-based, nationwide, compulsory savings plan for the purchase of private housing. Under this system every worker in state work-units is required to set up an account in the local HPF management centre. Employers and employees are required to contribute the same amount to the employees' HPF account. Almost all universities in China, as public-sector work-units, are required to contribute to the HPF. On top of the HPF contribution, individual universities can offer other subsidies from their own funding sources. The subsidies can be used for either savings or rental payments, according to employees' own preferences. Details of HPF are discussed in Wang and Murie (1996, p. 985) and Zhang (2000, p. 343).
3. A similar more recent survey showed the mayor at the top of the prestige ladder, but he was followed closely by the engineer, scientist and university teacher.
4. One of the co-authors has engaged in such discussions with Chinese intellectual professionals going back into the 1980s.
5. This shift of attitudes among China's farmers is discussed in Unger (2002, pp. 214–15).