
**China's Emerging Middle Class:
What Political Impact?**

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Key Points

- China's middle-class population is, in the main, highly connected to the Communist Party, and represents one of the categories of the population that has so far benefited the most from the current politico-economic context.
- Therefore, contrary to a widespread hypothesis, China's middle class is not the population group most inclined to change or question the current political order. Instead, a large part of this population appears rather conservative, in favor of the prevalence of the current political order.
- If part of the middle-class population is concerned about the limitations of the current political order, many appear reluctant to support changes that may alter their socioeconomic status and overall standard of living.
- In addition, among the older generation of the middle class, the trauma of the Cultural Revolution and the related fear of "chaos", led to a form of aversion to political change that might lead to "chaos" again, or to any form of large-scale division within the national population.
- However, the middle class is increasingly concerned with a set of specific domestic issues, related to the degradation of the environment and property-law disputes, among others issues directly affecting their interests and living standards.
- This increasing political participation has been facilitated by the development of the Internet, and in particular of social networks, which are the Chinese middle class's favorite medium of communication.
- Broadly speaking, the political position of China's middle class highly depends on its degree of connection with the Party/the state. At the moment, the tight connection between the two accounts for relative support of the one-party system by the middle class.
- However, the fast pace of development of new technologies of information and communication (NTIC) in China provides urban middle-class households with new means of expression through which they increasingly voice their concern about specific issues directly affecting them (environment, property law, etc.).

- Recently, the Chinese middle class also appears reluctant to accept some of the ongoing socioeconomic reform under the Xi Jinping leadership, such as the flexibilization of the hukou system, and also to feel unfairly targeted in the anti-corruption campaign.
- In the future, the progressive emergence of a new generation of middle-class professionals – highly international, working in the private sector, and less dependent on the Chinese Communist Party for career progression – may lead to more detached views of the current political order.
- Still, at the present time, it would be unrealistic to consider the middle class as a main driving force toward democratization in China.

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Introduction

“A growing middle class inevitably leads to democracy”, this widespread hypothesis is partly based on Barrington Moore’s *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (1966) and his famous assumption: “no bourgeoisie, no democracy”. But is it really the case in contemporary China? This research paper will address this question based on formal and informal interviews and discussions conducted with Chinese households and various members of this population group from different generations and cities over the years 2013–2015, in addition to articles on related topics in the Chinese and non-Chinese press and academic literature.

It follows a first research paper on the Chinese middle class, titled “The Distinctive Features of China’s Middle Classes”,¹ which identified, beyond income classification, major specificities of this population group in China, in comparison with other middle classes: it is a relatively new population group, still strongly related to the Chinese Communist Party, and highly heterogeneous in its practices and behaviors (strong geographical as well as generation gaps).

This first research paper also confirmed that the Chinese middle classes² are progressively emerging and represent an increasing share of the total national population. Depending on the definition of “middle class” chosen and the methodology used for counting it, this population group is estimated to represent between 10% and 25% of the national population; in any case, no more than 30% according to the most favorable estimates.³ The Chinese middle class still constitutes a minority of the national population; the migrant

1 Ekman, A. “The Distinctive Features of China’s Middle Classes”, *Asie.Visions* N° 69, Center for Asian Studies, Ifri, June 2014.

2 The term “middle classes”, in plural form, was preferred in the first research paper to underline the heterogeneity of this population group, formed by several diverse subpopulation groups, given the development gaps within the Chinese territory as well as the strong generation gaps within the population. See the first research paper, “The Distinctive Features of China’s Middle Classes”, for a more detailed explanation of such diversity. The singular form “middle class” is used in this second paper, although it still designates a diverse population group.

3 See the first research paper, part I, for an overview of the various estimates and definitions of the middle class in China. The sociologist David Goodman considers that the intermediate middle classes constitute about 12% of the total population. Goodman, D., “Locating China’s Middle Classes: Social Intermediaries and the Party-state”, *Journal of Contemporary China* (forthcoming), 2015.

population or the overall population considered as poor (below the official poverty line) remains more numerous to date. However, the middle class is likely to become a majority of the population in the coming decades if China's economy continues to develop at a fast pace.⁴

Will this demographic change lead to democratic transformation? This research paper argues that, contrary to what is often believed, most of the Chinese middle class appears to be politically conservative, and may not challenge the current political order as much as is expected, for several reasons; first of all because of its strong connection to the Communist Party of China and the civil service in broader terms. Nonetheless, Chinese middle households are increasingly voicing their concern about a set of issues directly affecting them, such as pollution, either in the street or online. They also appear to be reluctant to accept some aspects of the ongoing socioeconomic reform under the Xi Jinping leadership, such as the flexibilization of the hukou system, or may feel unfairly targeted under the anti-corruption campaign (see part III). In conclusion, this research paper provides an overall assessment of the political impact of the emergence of China's middle class, by taking into account the evolution of the profiles and expectations of this population group, as well as the new media landscape and the latest decisions and reactions in the early Xi era. It aims not only at understanding if China's middle class is hoping (or not) to change the current political system, but also if it would be able to do so in the present context.

4 The Chinese middle class is likely to continue to grow during the coming decades, although it is unclear at what rate, given the current relative slowdown of the economy and the strong barriers to consumption and labor mobility (households saving in anticipation of hardship in the context of limited social welfare, migrant workers still attached to rural China, etc.). The China Institute for Reform and Development, a government think tank based in Hainan, estimated in 2012 that the middle class will reach 600 million persons by 2020 (about 50% of the population). A McKinsey forecast published in 2013 suggests that, by 2022, more than 75% of China's urban consumers will earn 60,000 to 229,000 RMB (\$9,000 to \$34,000) a year (Barton, Dominic; Chen, Yougang & Jin, Amy, "Mapping China's Middle Class", *McKinsey Quarterly*, June 2013]. Other studies judge the middle class to be much smaller, depending on the definition chosen and methods used. However, independently of the method used and the exact figure reckoned, all the studies forecast a significant increase in the middle-class population in the coming years, totaling at least more than 350 million people by 2020.

China's middle class: traditional supporter of the current political order

Chinese middle class's strong connection to the Communist Party and the state

Party connection

As underlined in the first study⁵ as well as in other works related to this topic,⁶ a key feature of the Chinese middle class is its high degree of connection with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This point needs to be taken into account to a large extent when assessing the political impact of the emergence of the Chinese middle class.

The middle class in China certainly did not emerge against or outside the Party, but with and within the Party. Is the middle class already part of the current political and economic system, or is it, and is it perceived, as a separate group? The answer is clear if one observes Chinese society and engages in discussion with middle-class people: it is not a separate group, and certainly not perceived as such, but rather perceived as a fully integrated population group.

The high degree of connection between entrepreneurs and the CCP is explainable by the fact that many entrepreneurial initiatives emerged from within the Party ranks, with cadres making the most of their advantageous positions in the early and mid-stages of the era of reform and opening-up. Politically well-connected people had comparative advantage when “jumping into the sea” (*xiahai*) when it started to be possible in the 1980s and most of all during the 1990s; such political connection remains very useful today when running a business of any size, given the strong role of the state and the Party

⁵ Ekman, A., “The Distinctive Features of China’s Middle Classes”, *Asie.Visions* N° 69, Center for Asian Studies, Ifri, June 2014, pp. 22-25.

⁶ See for instance: Fewsmith, Joseph, “The Political Implications of China’s Growing Middle Class”, *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 21, summer 2007. He mentioned (p. 6) that, “Given the great presence of the party/state in Chinese society and the corresponding weakness of the legal framework, China’s middle class has necessarily grown up in the shadow of – and, indeed, inside – the party/state.”

in the economy, and the strong role their representatives have in access to both information and markets.⁷

David Goodman insists in his 2008-2013 research work that the new-rich categories of the Chinese population are unlike the 19th century European bourgeoisie in the extent to which they have emerged from and retain close relationships with the current political system. In particular, he emphasized the close relations between the new entrepreneurs and the state/CCP, recalling that these entrepreneurs are well integrated within the political establishment.⁸ For instance, according to Goodman, repeated surveys have demonstrated that “about one in five private [entrepreneurs] previously held an official position of leadership in either the government or the Party.”⁹

In addition, a trend today is that “successful” individuals of all sectors – not just entrepreneurs but also students, academics, doctors, etc.; i.e. middle-class individuals – are mainly joining the Party¹⁰ to advance their career and break a (political) glass ceiling. Also, since Party membership application is not straightforward and constitutes an opportunity, joining the Party is often seen as a sign of success in itself. The Party is welcoming of members of the private sector under the inclusive membership policy it has been implementing since the Jiang Zemin period (1993-2003), with the final aim of ensuring the loyalty of all segments¹¹ of an increasingly diverse society.¹²

In general terms, the well-off part of the Chinese population is often connected in one way or another to the governing Communist Party. People in this section of the population are often members of the Party.¹³ They probably account for more than half of total Party

⁷ Goodman's fieldwork in Shanxi province in the 1990s showed that both private entrepreneurs and managers of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) maintained good relations with Party organizations, needed for the acquisition of their economic assets and resources. Goodman, “The New Middle Class”, in Goldman, Merle & MacFarquhar, Rodetick (Eds.), *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, Harvard University Press, 1999.

⁸ Goodman, D, *The New Rich in China: Future Rulers, Present Lives*, Routledge, 2008.

⁹ Goodman, D., “Why China's Middle Class Supports the Communist Party”, *Huffington Post*, 22 October 2013.

¹⁰ This is part of what Goodman sees as “a growing imperative for successful business people to join the party”. Goodman, D., *The New Rich in China: Future Rulers, Present Lives*, Routledge, 2008.

¹¹ The CCP is welcoming to entrepreneurs as much as to farmers, students, ethnic minorities, male or female, etc. Its membership policy has become fully inclusive, putting completely to the side its traditional class-struggle approach.

¹² Point first underlined in the first study, p. 23.

¹³ Civil servants are not necessarily members of the CCP, but it is reckoned that 95% of civil servants in leading positions from division (county) level and above are Party members, according to Brødsgaard, Kjeld Erik and Gang, Chen, “China's Civil Service Reform: An Update”, *EAI Background Brief*, No. 493, December 2009.

membership.¹⁴ According to some non-official estimates, about 40% of entrepreneurs are members of the Party,¹⁵ and many are fully integrated in Party activities. Party cadres themselves often have members of their family involved in business activities that were partly developed based on family networks and personal relationships across the public and private sectors.

A strong link still exists between wealth and political connections in China in the eyes of many members of the middle and upper-middle classes, who therefore consider that it is important to look after these connections. Independently of occupation, Party membership is often sought for practical advantages, as it may facilitate career advancement for employees of public and semi-public institutions, and provides access to a network of relationships to entrepreneurs.

State and civil service connection

In addition to the linkage with the Communist Party, the middle class is also highly connected to the civil service. If “middle class” is defined beyond income classification, taking into account a set of advantages and overall living standards, we can consider that officials and middle/high-level civil servants in general terms constitute the core of China’s middle class.¹⁶

Current and former civil servants represent a large share of the managerial classes or the commonly called “white collar” population in absolute terms. This is particularly true if a broad definition of civil servant is applied, including public central and local administrations, as well as hospitals, schools, police offices, transportation services, social organizations, associations and other institutions affiliated to the Party. This represents a significant population group in size. Public-benefit employees often enjoy a more stable position than those in the private sector, in the context of a highly competitive and fast-changing job market in China.

Although they often earn significantly lower salaries than professionals working in the private sector, they enjoy, as do those in many other national civil services, a more stable career path. The private sector has become increasingly competitive in China over the

¹⁴ This rough estimate is based on a July 2013 official disclosure of CCP membership figures and breakdown by age, occupation, gender. It stated that “out of the total 85 million CCP members, “7.16 million members work in Party and state agencies, and 20.20 million are managerial staff and professional technicians working in enterprises and non-profit organizations”, and that, “in terms of occupation, farmers, herders and fishers totaling 25.35 million is the largest group, while 7.25 million Party members are industrial workers”. See “China’s Communist Party membership exceeds 85 millions”, News of the Communist Party of China/Xinhua, 1 July 2013, <<http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/206972/206974/8305636.html>>.

¹⁵ Goodman, D., “Why China’s Middle Class Supports the Communist Party”, *Huffington Post*, 22 October 2013.

¹⁶ Point first developed in the previous research paper, pp. 21-22.

last decade, with a larger population of highly educated professionals entering the labor market and changing positions frequently as they seek better opportunities. Most of all, current and former civil servants in China enjoy a comparatively advantageous welfare package. They have access to specific medical coverage, to a relatively high pension scheme and, most importantly, to housing benefits.¹⁷ They have access to subsidized apartments and advantageous mortgage schemes, and many civil servants were able to buy their formerly public-owned apartment at a low price, in a context of rapid housing privatization.

Civil servants thus enjoy substantial advantages in the broader context of an underdeveloped welfare system (low unemployment subsidies, pension scheme, medical coverage, etc.). Most middle-class households working in the private sector still cannot rely on state support in case of hardship. As a result, many Chinese middle-class households continuously search for stability by different means (savings, real-estate investments, reliance on the child to improve financial conditions, etc.) in a context of social and economic insecurity. This is particularly true for owners of newly established private enterprises and other kinds of self-employed individuals such as petty proprietors and small shop owners, who represent a significant part of the lower middle class if a definition based mainly on income level is applied.

In general terms, the benefits attached to civil-service positions reduce the feeling of instability among private-sector professionals. A “stability gap” between public and private professionals exists in many countries but it is particularly significant in the case of China, in a context of a limited social safety net.

These two linkages (between the middle class and the CCP, and the civil service in greater scale) tend to go counter to the common belief that a growing middle class in China inevitably leads to increasingly contestation of the one-party system.

Jie Chen, in a book partly based on interviews of residents in three major Chinese cities, Beijing, Chengdu and Xi'an in 2007 and 2008,¹⁸ underlines the middle class's close “ideational and institutional” ties with the state; in his opinion, this explains why – along with the middle-class perception of its socioeconomic well-being – the middle class tends to be more supportive of the current Party and state.

¹⁷ This represents a comparative advantage since purchasing an apartment is the top concern of most Chinese households; it is a purchase that is increasingly difficult given the sharp rise in real-estate prices in most major cities during the last decade, and is still considered compulsory in a society in which all newly married couples are supposed to settle in their own (and preferably new) flat.

¹⁸ Chen, Jie, *A Middle Class without Democracy – Economic Growth and the Prospects for Democratization in China*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

Chinese middle class's aversion to political change

The high cost of political involvement

China's middle class is, along with the upper class, the main beneficiary of the last three decades of economic growth. In a comparative perspective, the current (post-Mao) period generally appears in their eyes as the best period they have personally experienced in China's contemporary history. From a macroeconomic perspective, they see a country that has been generally prosperous and dynamic over the last decades, compared to the Mao era. Most of all, from an individual perspective, they enjoy a much higher standard of living than they used to before the Deng or Jiang periods.

Not only has the middle class been the main beneficiary of the era of reform and opening-up, but it also now has much more to lose than previously. In this context, understandably, it tends to be risk-averse. The cost of social or political involvement would be much higher for middle-class people than for other categories of population who may feel they have "nothing to lose" (peasants, and migrant workers to some extent). In addition, political change could have negative consequences for a middle-class household, and affect its financial situation and the living standards of all generations, as intergenerational solidarity remains relatively high in today's China.¹⁹

In broader terms, middle-class households often fear economic instability: the loss of their current assets and downgrading of their living standards. Once again, this view has to be understood in a comparative historical perspective: never before the last two to three decades did they experience such a comfortable life in material terms. Most of them only very recently started to enjoy the benefits of middle-class living standards, and they would be particularly reluctant to see an economic downfall at this stage. In comparison with the poorest part of the population, the middle class have much more to lose from political change.

Such fear of economic instability continues among the middle class today, in particular among employees of the private sector, due to the competition in the job market and the fear of being made redundant, but also the limited social safety net and the resulting high cost of any potential hardship (unemployment, disease, redundancy,

¹⁹ Jun Li and Hongbo Wang refer to a "conservatizing effect" in their paper "Home Ownership and Political Participation in Urban China", *Chinese Sociological Review*, Volume 44, Issue 4, 2012, pp. 58-81. Their analysis of the 2005 China General Social Survey data reveals that "homeowners are more likely than nonowners to vote in both elections, lending support to a conservatizing effect of private home ownership."

retirement, etc.)²⁰ or essential family-related costs (university tuition fees for a child, financial support for aging parents, medical care for all members of the family, etc.).²¹

The historical legacy

The aversion to political change can also be partly explained by the broader historical context and legacy of the Mao era in particular. The middle class represents a relatively new population group in China. It was only after the launch of Deng Xiaoping's period of reform and opening-up in 1978 that a middle class could take shape. The emergence of a population of white-collar workers in the private sector as well as entrepreneurs was – and still is – progressive, starting on a limited scale in the mid-1980s on the east coast, with the first effects of the economic reforms put in place, and amplifying in the 1990s and 2000s.²² Given this time-frame, the vast majority of Chinese households who may today be seen as having a middle-class status or lifestyle are newcomers, with no more than 30 years of experience of this status (15-20 years in most cases). Only the single-child generation born after the 1980s had the chance of experiencing this status and related lifestyle during their entire life.

All previous generations have experienced a different socioeconomic context – often much poorer, harder, and more controlled²³ – which to some extent continues to weigh on their current practices and perceptions, including on the current political context. For the middle-class generations born in the 1940s and before, the contrast is particularly sharp between their successive life

²⁰ Currently, the vast majority of Chinese households save a significant share of their disposable income in anticipation of future health, education, housing, pension and other necessary expenditures, which are still poorly covered by the developing social security system.

²¹ This saving behavior has to be analyzed by considering that strong intergenerational financial solidarity continues to prevail in China. Indeed, many middle-class households are earning high-enough incomes to support both their primary and secondary needs (leisure activities, tourism abroad, etc.) but continue to consume carefully, not only in anticipation of their own future needs but most of all of the needs of other members of their close and extended family. Indeed, they often save in anticipation of university tuition fees and apartment purchases when the child will reach an age to study and then to marry, as well as in anticipation of the need for full daily medical assistance when their parents and parents-in-law will get sick. Note 1: Higher-education fees have been rising sharply in recent years; university annual tuition fees are often more than 10,000 RMB/year). Note 2: Once in adulthood, only children often face the heavy burden of financially supporting aging parents as well as their own growing child.

²² Point developed on pp. 13-15, in the first research paper: Ekman, A., "The Distinctive Features of China's Middle Classes", *Asie. Visions* N° 69, Center for Asian Studies, Ifri, June 2014.

²³ Those who had the opportunity to join the middle classes or wealthier population group at the beginning of Deng's period of reform originally came from a "proletarian" background (farmers, workers) and in some cases from other professions (teachers, cadres, etc.) who had been "sent down to the countryside" and rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution.

experiences: they experienced the hardship of the Mao era, including the Great Leap Forward and the 1949–1951 famine, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and the transitional era of Deng Xiaoping, starting in 1978 and developing in the 1980s, still in an unstable economic context. For many members of the first generation of China's middle class, who experienced such a lengthy succession of hardships, taking the risk of political involvement often does not seem worthwhile, even if they are not fully satisfied with the current CCP rule and the one-party system. After so many hardships endured during the Mao era – political, social, economic – many members of the middle class now hope to enjoy their new living standards as much as they can, away from any political involvement that may alter it. They hope to provide the best living and education conditions for their child so that s/he does not have to endure what they did themselves. In broader terms, the Chinese middle-class household's priority goals are often related to career advancement and the overall prosperity of the household; desires for political participation or change are often perceived as secondary or expendable if a choice has to be made.²⁴

Fear of “chaos”

China's middle-class fear of “chaos” tends to limit their willingness to risk political change, as this may lead to several forms of instabilities that they want to avoid in any case. In addition to economic instability, they often want to avoid social instability (social tensions within the population), which many experienced during the Cultural Revolution, either as Red Guards or as victims of them. Indeed, many members of the current first generation of the middle class, currently in their 60s or above, directly and personally experienced the Cultural Revolution: it is not uncommon for current senior cadres of the CCP and/or the civil service to have been Red Guards, or, in fewer but still significant members, victims “sent down to the countryside”, and later rehabilitated and back within the Party ranks. Among this generation, the “trauma” of the Cultural Revolution is still omnipresent, and the memories of the “chaos” of this period are often referred to in arguments that the official aim of building a “harmonious society” (“*hexie shehui*”) is a necessary achievement that should be sought and preserved by all means, and is ultimately used to argue that political change is not welcome as it may lead to “chaos” again. This argument is often made before or after a second one, also supported by official communication, and largely developed by a large part of the Chinese population, including its middle class; in essence, this is that, in order to avoid chaos in such a large country, with such a large population, it is necessary to have strong political leadership that is

²⁴ Interviews and informal discussions with Chinese households, in several cities, 2012-2014.

able to maintain “social cohesion” and “national unity”.²⁵ A related sub-statement is often made, to the effect that there is no guarantee that any other political parties, other than the CCP, would be able to do the job. The emphasis on “stability”, and also on “order” and “authority” or “strength”, is common in discussions with Chinese households. The argument that “it is necessary to have a strong state in China given the size of our national territory and population” is a mainstream one. Lately, it is also common to hear a comparison between the state or CCP and the “head of the family”. This paternalistic view of domestic politics is currently promoted by official communication, and partly accepted by the middle class.

For all the reasons listed above – strong connections to the Party, benefits from the current system, fear of chaos – the Chinese middle class tends to support the prevailing political system and the monopoly of the CCP. Several Chinese and Western sociologists have underlined not only the lack of political opposition among the Chinese middle class, but also the strong support for the current political system led by the CCP.²⁶

Limited impact of international travel

Another widespread assumption regarding China's middle class is that its increasing degree of international exposure may contribute to better understanding of different political systems, or at least to an understanding of the variety of current political systems, and ultimately lead to a more distant, comparative look at the domestic political context. In fact, the vast majority of the Chinese middle class have never experienced anything other than CCP rule. Being conscious of the advantages and disadvantages of the political system requires the ability to imagine a different political system without ever being exposed to it in the past. This may be difficult for the first generation of the Chinese middle class (now aged 50 and above) in particular, as access to the foreign media is limited by both censorship and their limited foreign-language skills (most of this generation of the middle class do not speak any foreign language). The opening-up of China and new opportunities to travel abroad over

²⁵ Note 1: It is not uncommon for members of the middle class to adopt the official saying “without the CCP, there is no new China”, meaning that the downfall of the CCP would lead to the downfall of the entire People's Republic of China, and all its perceived achievements since its creation in 1949.

Note 2: “National unity” is part the broader official emphasis on patriotism. For instance, calls for patriotism (“aiguo”) are numerous in the streets of Beijing municipality, as part of an ongoing official communication campaign.

²⁶ See David Goodman or Chen Jie, among others. Chen Jie goes further by arguing that not only is the middle class not supporting democracy overall, but is actually acting in opposition to democratic changes. See Chen, Jie, *A Middle Class without Democracy – Economic Growth and the Prospects for Democratization in China*, Oxford University Press, 2013. Note: This book is partly based on interviews of residents in three major Chinese cities, Beijing, Chengdu and Xi'an, in 2007 and 2008.

the last two decades certainly provide new international exposure for this generation, but not necessarily opportunities for comparing political systems, given the priority aims of their visit (sight-seeing, shopping), the limited length of their visit abroad, their limited foreign-language skills and thus limited interactions with local people.²⁷ Given these limits, any comparisons made between China and the foreign country visited are mostly visual (comparing the size of buildings, of business districts, the overall modernity of the places visited and services used); misperceptions and misunderstandings of the local context are numerous, and any conclusions are often to the advantage of China (in particular for tourists from major developed cities such as Beijing and Shanghai).²⁸ In many cases, these conclusions align with some of the arguments heard in Beijing about the inefficiency of Western-style democracy, the inability to provide economic development in comparison with the “China model”, etc. In many cases as well, sight-seeing trips in democratic countries going through a difficult economic period tend in the eyes of Chinese visitors to confirm the inefficiency of such countries’ political systems. Not only does international exposure not necessarily lead to a questioning of China’s current one-party system, but it seems that it often reinforces some Chinese tourists’ initial criticisms of other political systems.

²⁷ See for instance the short article by Evan Osnos, “The Grand Tour”, *The New Yorker*, 18 April 2011.

²⁸ This is often true, for instance, when Chinese tourists visiting France compare both countries (Observations, 2012-2015).

Is the new generation of the Chinese middle class less supportive of the current political order?

China's middle class: a new source of urban unrest

Urban unrest

While explicit calls for a change of the current political system rarely emerge from the middle class, criticisms arise from time to time on specific issues.

Social unrest is not only originating from under-privileged population groups such as migrant workers (protesting against their work conditions, or their limited access to social welfare in cities, etc.), farmers (protesting against land purchase or eviction, corrupt local cadres, etc.), but also increasingly from the urban middle class. In particular, China's urban middle class has been particularly active in environmental campaigning. The environment is a top concern of the national population today,²⁹ given the issues China is facing in this field, but it appears that the young and mid-age generations of the middle class in urban areas have often been leaders of online and street movements to protest against air quality in general terms or the specific construction of a factory that may generate pollution, for instance. As a result, environmental issues are also a top concern for central and local governments, who are aware of the widespread activism they generate, the high expectations of the population, and the political risks that such concerns give rise to.³⁰ Food safety is also

²⁹ See, for instance, a poll conducted on a population of 1,050 residents in 35 cities by the Public Opinion Research Laboratory of Shanghai Jiaotong University (a government-affiliated institution), which found that "about 60% of Chinese want the government to give priority to environmental protection when boosting economic growth". "Protecting environment top public concerns in poll", by Wang Hongyi, *China Daily*, 16 May 2014: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-05/16/content_17511326.htm>.

³⁰ The *Global Times*, a state-affiliated newspaper, reported in a 2013 article that thousands of people took to the streets to protest against the possible environmental and health risks that could be caused by a planned heavy-metal refinery in Shifang,

a major concern of the population, including the middle class, who try to adapt according to their financial means (for instance, following the 2008 milk scandal,³¹ by purchasing imported milk powder or buying it during business or touristic trips abroad, for relatives and friends in need).

Protection of private property is also a real concern for China's middle-class households, who have invested massively in real estate (it is not uncommon for them to own three or four apartments) and remain worried about a potential real-estate bubble, an urban development plan that could lead to a price decrease, or, in some cases, to a property eviction with a financial compensation below their expectation.

In broader terms, a "rights movement" has emerged in China in recent years, supported by private-sector lawyers addressing cases of abuse of power by local party officials in many cases. Identifying and challenging corrupt officials (usually local officials but also, in a minority of cases, central government officials) is a practice followed by some middle-class individuals as well as peasants, migrant workers and the less well-off. Such cases of abuse of power taken to court include environmental cases (lawyers defending a community affected by an environmental crisis), as well as many property-law disputes (lawyers defending an individual owner against the state and/or property developers).

These cases have often directly targeted local governments, seen as corrupt and as not implementing fairly or efficiently the decisions of the central government. A question that is often asked in this context is: Is middle-class activism on such issues merely a "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) type of movement (only related to cases that specifically affect them or challenge their specific interests), or does it extend to a broader criticism of the political system, or to the defense of a broader set of interests, in solidarity with other population groups (peasants, migrant workers, etc.)? So far, the answers to both questions appear negative in most cases (see below, part III), but perceptions and practices may change, to some extent, with the emergence of a new generation of the middle class in China (see below, part II).

Online discontent

The middle class in China has an indirect influence on the social and political context, because it does not hesitate to raise concerns about

Sichuan Province in July 2012, prompting authorities to scrap the project. In the same month, demonstrators in Qidong, Jiangsu Province, tore the clothes off the local Party chief during a rally against an industrial waste pipeline of the Japan-based Oji Paper Group. "Inefficient public participation in politics", by Zhang Yiwei, *Global Times*, 7 August 2013: <<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/802048.shtml>>.

³¹ The 2008 milk scandal involved milk and infant formula adulterated with melamine; there were an estimated 300,000 victims and six deaths (mainly infants).

and criticisms of specific issues when its own interests might be threatened, and also because it has privileged access to the new technologies of information and communication in order to raise its concerns.

The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), a government-affiliated research and advisory institution, acknowledged in a 2013 report on the country's political development that "Inefficiencies in China's system of political participation are pushing the public to express their demands through irregular petitions or mass incidents".³² But today, the Internet and, in particular, social networks are the most widely used "irregular" means to voice concern or criticism in China, by various population groups, and in particular by the youngest generations of urban residents. China's Internet population totaled around 649 million users by the end of 2014.³³ Most bloggers and commentators active on the Internet are young and middle-aged educated individuals (students, early/mid-career professionals) from urban areas, with a middle-class background.

The Internet landscape, which is changing at a very fast pace, facilitates involvement in public debates and occasional complaints by a population that previously did not necessarily express such personal opinions openly. Venues for participation have increased online: in addition to traditional blogs, forums and online chat (QQ), a diverse range of powerful and popular social networks have emerged since around 2010 (Weibo, WeChat, among others). So far,³⁴ this online expression has been possible even with the prevalence of censorship mechanisms, through the use of virtual private networks (VPNs), alternative words and expressions, and other tools and techniques. The recent development of environmental activism in developed urban areas, for instance, has largely spread through online discussions and mobilization, and would certainly not have been able to emerge at such a fast pace if not based on social networks. In some cases (such as online environmental activism), Internet users managed to influence political leaders (for instance, activist groups requesting the cancellation of the construction of a potentially polluting production plant, or the shutting-down of another affecting residential areas, provoked a response from the local and/or

³² "Inefficient public participation in politics", by Zhang Yiwei, *Global Times*, 7 August 2013: <<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/802048.shtml>>. This article quotes Zhu Lijia, director of Public Administration Studies at the Chinese Academy of Governance: "General opportunities and standard platforms provided for people to get involved in politics are limited, causing them to resort to other ways to vent their voices."

³³ Latest official figures available. Source: report released in February 2015 by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), a government-affiliated agency.

³⁴ As these censorship mechanisms have been reinforced over the last two years and this trend is likely to continue under the leadership of Xi Jinping, it will be interesting to analyze if the above assertion remains true in the coming years.

central governments in several cities).³⁵ In general terms, the middle class – in particular its younger generation – is more active in online debates and discussions than their less well-off counterparts,³⁶ because they have some free time to the side of their work commitments, have good access to social networks through their multiple connected devices,³⁷ and have communication and marketing skills that they may use with more confidence. In addition, they tend to have a wider network of friends and acquaintances online, which also facilitates the propagation of their message. The Internet itself has not led to a middle class reality that is homogenous in its political and social expectations, but it has nonetheless provided this population group with a powerful tool to voice their numerous and specific aspirations.

A new middle-class generation that is less dependent on the Party and the state

Sharp generation gap

As underlined earlier,³⁸ the middle class is a relatively new population group in China, and only the single-child generation born after the 1980s has belonged to it since birth and enjoyed middle-class status and lifestyle during their entire life so far.³⁹ While the middle class remains predominantly new in China, a second and third generation of the Chinese middle class is starting to emerge.

In this context, a sharp generation gap currently exists within the Chinese middle class, between the generation born in the 1980s and their parents. This generation gap is noticeable in terms of overall

³⁵ For instance, cancellation by the local government authorities in the southern Chinese city of Heshan of plans to build the country's largest uranium processing plant in 2013, after hundreds of people had demonstrated against this project. Another example, among many others, is the cancellation by officials in the eastern Chinese city of Ningbo of plans to expand a petrochemical facility in 2012, following intense street protests by local residents.

³⁶ According to the "Discover China's Emerging Middle Class" survey (17,700 respondents in 150 cities) by ZenithOptimedia, a market-research and communication consultancy, "daily use of the Internet among the Chinese middle class is 34% higher than the general public", *Xinhua/China Daily*, 14 November 2013.

³⁷ Use of smartphones, computers, tablets, connected TVs and other devices. The poorest part of the population tend to use a more limited number of devices (1-2 devices, often computer + smartphone, or only the smartphone, which is increasingly used). Among the total 649 million Internet users (end of 2014), 557 million are using handsets to go online, according to the same report released in February 2015 by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), which underlines that the Chinese market, the world's biggest smartphone market, continues its shift to mobile.

³⁸ See also Ekman, A., "The Distinctive Features of China's Middle Classes", *Asie. Visions N° 69*, Center for Asian Studies, Ifri, June 2014.

³⁹ Of course, this does not mean that all the young members of the middle class grew up in a middle-class environment. Many gained access to it through education, upon graduation, and are the first generation of their family to belong to this population group (see sub-section "Professional objectives" below).

way of life: consumption behaviors, the importance given to leisure, and prioritization of personal time over collective time (parents,⁴⁰ colleagues, etc.). The new generation of the Chinese middle class, the post-90s generation, is more connected, more educated, more global, and to some extent more similar in their practices⁴¹ and lifestyles to middle-class individuals in the consolidated middle classes of developed countries.

In analyzing the potential political impact of the emergence of China's middle class as a whole, the differences between generations, in their perceptions of the contemporary history of the country, the Party and the current leadership need to be taken into account.

New historical references and communication context

A major difference of perspectives exists between the young, emerging generation of the middle class and their parents on one point: the fear of “chaos” (described earlier, part. I). The young generation did not personally experience the Cultural Revolution, and do not suffer from the trauma of any other recent historical events seen as “chaotic”. Therefore, they may not fear potential sources of instability as much as their parents, or refer to them as much in order to legitimize the existence of the current “stable” political system.

Moreover, these generations did not grow up during the Mao era, when literature and the arts were exclusively a means of political propaganda. They experienced from an early age a comparatively more diverse, open cultural landscape than the one experienced by their parents at the same age. This provides a new ground for middle-class development, with a more individualized cultural environment, in parallel with the traditional Party-sponsored cultural products and official propaganda.

⁴⁰ The traditional, Confucian-based, three-generations household built upon strong financial and social solidarity links has not disappeared (today, many retired parents remain dependent on their child's financial support, given the small size of their pension) but are slightly evolving toward more individualized patterns (for instance, aging parents staying in their own flat with a nursing auxiliary or put in an elderly-care facility instead of living in their child's flat, particularly in the case of middle-class households, which would be better able to afford care facilities). Another pattern that is emerging, in particular among the migrant population but also among urban middle-class households, is a strong two-generations solidarity between grandparents and grandchild (grandparents looking after the child rather than the parents, who are busy working, often in a location far away from the household).

⁴¹ In terms of consumption practices, for instance, this generation developed an ability to select particular brands according to individual taste, and a preference for distinct brands and “self-expressive” products, rather than the few big famous brands popular among the previous generations. SERI (Samsung Economic Research Institute), “Purchasing Trend of China's Post-90s Generation”, *China Business Intelligence* No. 221, 22 January 2013.

More specifically, in the context of the emergence of social networks and relative diversification of the media landscape in China, the younger generations are more experienced than their parents in reading between the lines of official discourse, in experiencing and comparing different political contexts on the basis on their international trips and exposure. For instance, watching the 7 P.M. National News Program (*xinwen lianbo*) of the state-owned CCTV (China Central Television) is not popular among the young generation, who consider the program as old-fashioned and are aware that it serves as a propaganda tool for the CCP, or at least that a strong political bias shapes the editorial choices of such a program. In many cases, this highly connected generation, who can have access to wider, more open news content via the Internet and the social media, are not watching such official programs broadcast by the traditional media or reading, for instance, the People's Daily – *Renmin Ribao* – in its traditional printed form, or when they do, watch or read such media with a certain degree of distance and critical judgement.

Moreover, Chinese media are today much more numerous than they used to be three decades ago, and some of them are more market-oriented (some provincial TV channels, for instance). The quality of journalists has improved overall, although censorship and self-censorship is still widespread and tends to be reinforced under the current leadership (see *Conclusion below*).

In this context, China's middle class, in particular the younger generation, is less capable of being manipulated. Young viewers have more means and platforms at their disposal for comparative judgement and individual expression than their parents had at the same age (wider access to new technologies, more time to discuss and consider issues not directly related to their material situation, level of education granting them more confidence and ability to express themselves in both written and oral forms). However, this expression does not necessarily challenge the political status quo or push for a new political order in broader terms (see below).

Professional objectives: top concern of the new generation of China's middle class

The younger generation's greater access, advantages and abilities do not seem to lead so far to significant personal involvement in politics in many cases. For many young Chinese professionals and students, politics does not appear as the top priority, which is generally to graduate from a prestigious university and to secure a stable position after graduation, in a highly competitive environment for young graduates. This situation is largely the result of the increase in the number of students since Deng Xiaoping reopened universities following the Cultural Revolution, and most all following the continued promotion of education over the last 15 years (major expansion of universities since 1998). There were ten times more students in 2010

than in 1990 (only about two million students in tertiary education in 1989),⁴² following rapid expansion in admissions to universities, and large investments for the development of existing universities and creation of new departments, technical colleges, and other teaching institutions. In this context, higher-education qualification does not in itself guarantee access to the middle class anymore.

A total of 7.5 million students will graduate in China in the summer of 2015 – 220,000 more than the previous year, which will be a record according to Ministry of Education figures (December 2014). Officially, unemployment among new graduates six months after leaving university is around 15% (which already means about a million new Chinese graduates will be jobless) but, according to some political scientists,⁴³ the real proportion could be double that. The increasing number of Chinese students graduating each year adds pressure to the job market that the government has struggled to regulate so far,⁴⁴ and accentuates graduates' focus on finding a position.

Overall, career development is by far the top priority and focus of the younger generations in China,⁴⁵ in a context of high competition and heavy pressure from different sides (social pressure, and pressure from parents and partners – the female partner most often, etc.). This has an indirect impact on these generations' approach to

⁴² According to *The Economist*: "Students and the Party: rushing to join", 22 February 2014: <<http://www.economist.com/news/china/21596994-party-membership-does-not-necessarily-mean-better-job-prospects-rushing-join>>.

⁴³ Such as Joseph Cheng, professor of political science at the City University of Hong Kong, who believes that the real unemployment rate could be closer to 30%, with some 2.3 million unemployed from the 2014 graduating cohort alone. "What do you do with millions of extra graduates?" *BBC News/Business*, by Yojana Sharma, 1 July 2014: <<http://www.bbc.com/news/business-28062071>>.

Note: In any case, the unemployment rate of graduates is higher than that of non-degree-holder professionals (close to 4% according to various 2014 estimates) as the latter are more willing to take blue-collar jobs.

⁴⁴ In particular, as the Chinese economy is undergoing large-scale restructuring, with an increasing need to provide opportunities for a more qualified, demanding population. The central government launched at the end of 2014 various measures aimed at coping with the burgeoning number of graduates: from a university "time out" scheme to encouraging students to study overseas. See for instance, "China launched 'time out' scheme so students can start their own businesses" by Zhuang Pinghui, *South China Morning Post*, 12 December 2014: <<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1660310/chinese-university-students-can-now-set-aside-studies-do-business-amid>>; "President Xi calls for better work on overseas studies", *Xinhua*, 13 December 2014: <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-12/13/c_133853112.htm>.

It is too early to assess the impact of such measures at this stage. In any case, integration of young graduates in the job market will remain a challenge considering the high increase in young graduates in recent years.

⁴⁵ Noticeable during interviews and informal discussions with members of the generation born during and after the 1980s. Interviews and discussions, in various cities in China, 2013-2015. On the ambitions of the young generation, see also, among other texts: Osnos, Evan, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014.

the current political context, and potential political participation. If Party membership is becoming less crucial for career purposes (see below), Party contestation may still have negative consequences in various ways (reports from the Party section within a company, slowing down the promotion process, more difficult relations with government institutions that are important for an entrepreneur, etc.). Any form of political involvement that is not in line with the CCP may weigh negatively in a CV and therefore may – consciously or unconsciously – be avoided by the young graduate or professional. Therefore, in this highly competitive academic and professional environment for the young graduate, the safest options in order to keep all job opportunities available are either to join the Party (in particular if aiming at a civil-servant position) or to remain apolitical.

CCP continues to attract members of younger generation of middle class

In addition, it is important to bear in mind that the CCP continues to attract members of the young generations. In 2012, “more than a quarter of members [of the Communist Party of China] are 35 years or younger and about 34.09 million have obtained degrees in higher education institutions”, according to official figures.⁴⁶ Party affiliation remains strong among the student population. In 2010, more than 1.2 million students joined the CCP, about 40% of total recruitment, in sharp contrast with the mere 26,000 students who joined in 1990, according to Party statistics.⁴⁷ The high number of applications for CCP membership among upper-year undergraduate students and master students is partly explainable by the fact that they may want to try to access a public-sector position,⁴⁸; these are generally more easily – although not only – accessible to Party members. In broader terms, CCP membership application is motivated much more by rational post-graduation calculus than by faith in the Communist/Maoist ideal.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “China’s Communist Party membership exceeds 85 millions”, News of the Communist Party of China/Xinhua, 1 July 2013: <<http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/206972/206974/8305636.html>>.

⁴⁷ See chart, based on Communist Party statistics: <<http://www.economist.com/news/china/21596994-party-membership-does-not-necessarily-mean-better-job-prospects-rushing-join>> in *The Economist*, “Rushing to Join”, 22 February 2014.

⁴⁸ So far, the demand for government-affiliated jobs remains high among young Chinese graduates as they still offer comparatively more stability and better medical care and pension scheme packages than the private sector, but higher salaries in the private sector, and most of all the reduction of advantages granted to civil servants since the launch of the anti-corruption campaign (see dedicated part, below), may reduce such demand in the long term.

⁴⁹ Still, this does not mean that such faith is completely absent among student Party members. A minority present themselves as deep supporters of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, admirers of Mao and other key previous and current CCP leaders. Observations, Chinese students in Paris, Beijing, Shanghai, 2012-2015. Some of

A new generation more distant from the current political order?

At the same time, in a broader comparative perspective, the vast majority of the younger generation of the Chinese middle class does not need, in order to be “professionally successful” – access to white-collar positions, positions of responsibility and/or authority, well-remunerated, etc. – to be as much connected to the Party and the state as the previous generations. This is a direct result of the progressive development of the private sector in China over the last three decades: today, it is possible to climb the social ladder through the private-sector channel (by entering a multinational company after graduation, for instance), whereas in the 1980s and even 1990s the Party and the state were key to reach the middle class: the core of the then new middle class were state-owned enterprises (SOEs) cadres, government officials, and Party cadres. Successful entrepreneurs and members of the private sector partly owed their success to their previously held position in the Party, SOEs or governmental institutions (see above). Today, this is not so much the case. If Party membership remains extremely useful or even necessary to access a certain number of public-sector jobs, young graduates can equally hope to join the middle class by joining the – probably less stable but often more lucrative – private sector. For instance, it is not compulsory to become a high-level manager or an engineer in a multinational company, or in a rapidly developing Chinese HI-Tech company. Young professionals may also consider creating a private company without having previously held a position in a government institution or SOE.

Party membership, moreover, is not so helpful anymore for getting a job in SOEs,⁵⁰ which is widely coveted by young graduates and professionals. According to a report published in 2014 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), based on a survey of graduates from 12 universities, more than 21% of non-members surveyed got work in SOEs, compared with just under 20% of Party members.⁵¹ As SOEs became more market-oriented and are undergoing a long-term professionalization process, Party affiliation

them also criticize their fellow CCP student members for not believing enough in CPC ideology: “These days, many of us [CCP members] are not ‘pure enough’, we need to bring back purity in our Party, to fight for materialistic membership” – testimony of a 20-year-old Chinese student, member of the CCP, in exchange at Sciences Po, Paris, academic year 2012-2013.

In addition, some students join the CCP based on patriotic motivations, as the Party currently emphasizes the “great renewal of the Chinese nation” and the students hope to contribute to China’s rise in one way or another. Informal discussions, Beijing, 2013-2014.

⁵⁰ This is true for most positions, but not all: the top administrators/managers of large SOEs are often nominated according to political criteria by the central government and are all Party members.

⁵¹ According to *The Economist*, “Students and the Party: rushing to join”, 22 February 2014: <<http://www.economist.com/news/china/21596994-party-membership-does-not-necessarily-mean-better-job-prospects-rushing-join>>.

now appears as a marginal criterion for recruitment when looking for talent, in comparison with academic, language skills and other professional criteria.

In broader terms, it appears that CCP membership in itself does not guarantee young graduates easy access to the job market. For instance, the above-mentioned CASS report found that the employment rate within two months of graduation was 85% for non-members and about 80% for members of the CCP.⁵²

In today's China, education is becoming more instrumental than Party membership in determining income. The shift from elitist to mass education – supported by a large increase in the number of candidates admitted to universities, and huge investment in teaching and research capacities during the last two decades – is progressively leading to the emergence of a new generation of middle class with a new type of cultural and psychological profiles, as well as new technological abilities, that are already supporting the development of large companies and start-ups in the hi-tech sector.

In this context, the new generations of the Chinese middle class have to some extent the option not to be connected to the Party and still occupy privileged positions in the private sector, contrary to the previous generation who often gained access to such positions through their former cadre position in a government-affiliated institution (Party, administration, SOEs, etc.). This is due to the fact that their middle-income position is often based on their level of education and professional experience in the private sector more than on their level of political connection or previous experiences in state or Party-related institutions. More than ever since the creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the level of education is crucial in determining professional path and income. This is true both in the private and public sector, where a professionalization process was launched at a fast pace by Deng Xiaoping, and developed further under the following leaderships. As a result, and in contrast with the Mao era, loyalty to the CCP is far from being the only criterion for accessing a position with the state or the Party. The level of education is today extremely important (most senior civil positions require a university degree, often a graduate degree) and civil-service examinations are now mostly evaluating academic and professional skills. In the private sector, whether in Chinese or foreign companies based in China, the recruitment process is similar in many respects to the one known in other countries: graduate degrees are often required for application to managerial positions, sometimes even more than in other countries given the high number of Chinese

⁵² Quoted by *The Economist*, "Students and the Party: rushing to join", 22 February 2014: <<http://www.economist.com/news/china/21596994-party-membership-does-not-necessarily-mean-better-job-prospects-rushing-join>>, which also noted that "The report did not say how academic performance might have affected these outcomes. In theory, party members are supposed to get at least average grades."

university graduates and the strong competition between them. All in all, middle-class professionals do not necessarily need to be involved in politics in order to have a promising or successful career; they can leave politics to the state without being negatively affected in their professional and daily life.

This disconnection between the young generation of the middle class and the CCP is likely to be amplified by the fact that international education and professional experience abroad⁵³ disconnected them for some time from Party activities. Nonetheless, it does not mean that the disconnection with the Party was total given that Chinese embassies abroad and various Party-affiliated associations dedicated to overseas Chinese students maintain contact with them in various forms (Chinese New Year events, various activities for Chinese students and citizens coming from the same university of the same province, etc.).

In addition, this slow, progressive disconnection between the CCP and the young generation of the middle class does not mean that it automatically generates a pro-democratic stance in this population. The political culture of this generation is developing, and exposure to internationalization is not necessarily leading to pro-democratic opinions among students who experienced a democratic environment during their studies.⁵⁴

However, if an occasional desire for political participation has not converted so far into a desire for political change, the level of social and/or political discontent may increase in light of some recent socioeconomic reforms and measures taken under Xi Jinping, which may be perceived as being against the interests of the middle class (part III).

⁵³ More than 3 million Chinese students to study abroad since 1978 until 2014, according to official figures. Destinations of their studies have been expanded from only a few countries (US, Japan, among other developed countries) to more than 100 countries in 2013. (source: Ministry of Education/Xinhua, December 13, 2014)
The number of returning overseas students and professionals (sea turtles - *haigui*) is significant. It has increased drastically over the past few years, partly due to China's recognition of the need for more skilled workers and favorable policies implemented to reverse the migration. Since China initiated its economic reforms and opened the door to the world in 1978, over 1,905,400 students and scholars have been abroad for various levels of education, and 632,200 of them have become "sea turtles" up to 2010 (Source: Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China, 2011/Wei Sun, "The Productivity of return migrants: the case of China's "Sea Turtles", *IZA Journal of Migration*, 2: 5, 2013")

⁵⁴ Class observations and informal discussions with students from China in an exchange year at Sciences Po, Paris, academic years 2013-2014 and 2014-2015.

China's middle class apprehensive of current reforms?

Middle-class discontent may increase under the current leadership because the growth rate is slowing down and white-collar salaries are not increasing as much as they used to. Also, some of the latest socioeconomic reforms are not directly in middle-class interests (part A, below). Most of all, middle-class living standards may be severely and directly affected by the ongoing anti-corruption campaign (part B).

Socio-economic reforms

Members of the middle class in China, as in other countries, may not align themselves with an anti-poverty social agenda and policies. That is certainly the case regarding the current government's progressive attempt to integrate the migrant population in some urban areas. As the residence permit – *hukou* system – remains a barrier to accessing the social safety net and services offered by cities, several cities and provinces have introduced some flexibility to the *hukou* system in order to reduce inequalities, and the central government reasserted the need to implement further *hukou* reform, starting with small and medium-sized cities, in its 15 November 2013 statement following the third plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the PCC. However, it appears that many middle-class households perceive these measures negatively, as they may imply the mixing of their child with the children of migrant workers, coming from an underprivileged background, or sharing other public services or benefits that so far permanent residents alone have enjoyed.⁵⁵

This negative perception can partly be explained by the fact that the Chinese middle class often shows a strong sense of social hierarchy and social differentiation. Such differentiation has been increasing over the last decades, and today middle-class households can differentiate themselves in many different ways, not only through their consumption behaviors and ownership of goods (luxury cars, clothes, designer bags, iPhone, etc.), but also the various places they frequent (district/gated community of the apartment, type of school,

⁵⁵ Interviews and informal discussions in several Chinese cities, 2013-2015.

hospitals⁵⁶ etc.). They may not welcome measures facilitating social diversity in urban areas.

In some cases, members of the middle class have even been accused of fraudulently taking advantage of some of the latest social reforms dedicated to the poorest part of the population. For instance, the affordable housing units mainly built at the end of the Hu Jintao period and also at the beginning of the Xi Jinping period have partly been misallocated to a significant proportion of middle and upper-middle class households. A nationwide audit of the year 2012's urban affordable housing projects conducted by the National Audit Office (released in August 2013) discovered that 108,400 households that did not qualify for housing subsidies in kind or in cash had accessed 38,900 affordable homes and received rental subsidies in the amount of 153 million RMB, by "providing false information" and capitalizing on loose review procedures.⁵⁷

In broader terms, the middle class may often appear conservative at a time of implementing social or economic reforms. Apart from the *hukou* reform, many other reforms are necessary in order to support the building of a larger Chinese middle class. It is a difficult process as many of these reforms are closely intertwined: land reform, *hukou* system, development of the social security system (which still remains largely underdeveloped in rural areas and for the migrant population), the fiscal and tax system of the provinces, etc. In addition to being perceived negatively by part of the middle and upper-middle classes, many of these reforms may be slowed down by intra-Party, local administration or interest-group reluctance. Powerful interest groups, such as state-owned enterprises, have become a major target of public complaint as they appear to play a significant role in resisting – rather than supporting – several ongoing reforms (such as SOE reforms).

Middle class: secondary target of reforms?

In broader terms, the most urgent challenge for the government is to reduce development gaps and social inequalities within the national territory. Perhaps even more than the previous leadership led by Hu Jintao, the current leadership fears that increasing income inequalities lead to widespread discontent and (already increasing) social conflicts that will be particularly hard to control.⁵⁸ In this

⁵⁶ The Chinese middle class can often access hospitals of higher quality that are not open to poorer population groups (either because they cannot afford it, or because their work unit – *danwei* – does not provide a social security package linked to the particular hospital).

⁵⁷ "China to Transform Affordable Housing System", *Caijing*, 27 August 2013.

⁵⁸ The Hu leadership launched a first set of measures – such as the creation of a universal social security coverage system, and the building of social housing units – to try to bridge the urban-rural gaps and support household consumption. As these measures are largely insufficient to provide a sense of stability or financial security among the poorest part of the population, the Xi administration is continuing the

context, it first and foremost aims its communications toward the poor, who have benefited less from the last three decades of economic reform and opening-up, and who often appears the most critical of the government and the Party (in particular local Party cadres, seen by many as corrupt officials who took financial advantage of land expropriation, among other things).

Indeed, the traditional governmental emphasis on the concept of “xiaokang” or “xiaokang shehui” (*small prosperity* or *moderately prosperous society*)⁵⁹ and the newly promoted official communication “China dream” campaign is above all targeted at the poorest part of the population. It is designed to appeal most to this population group, and to generate among them some hope that they, too, in the foreseeable future, can enjoy in concrete terms the fruits of the economic growth.

Beyond communication, the central government is currently promoting measures in favor of the poorest part of the population. For instance, it has been pressing for a strong increase in the minimum wage, which has been raised by more than 15% each year in the vast majority of provinces since 2010.⁶⁰ In contrast, higher/white-collar wages are increasing at a much lower rate (the per capita disposable income of urbanites grew by just 6.8% in 2013, according to the National Bureau of Statistics).⁶¹

As the government concentrates its policy and communication efforts on reducing poverty, the middle class may feel to some extent “let down” by the government, or feel that the reforms under Xi Jinping are in the interests of the poorer part of the population but not in its own interests. The feeling may be particularly widespread

implementation process, which is itself facing numerous obstacles (costs, misallocation, corruption, lengthy administrative procedures, restrictions for migrants, etc.).

⁵⁹ The official aims and official deadlines for reaching these aims are set as follows: building a “moderately well-off society” by about 2020, around the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China, and a “fully developed nation” about 2050, around the 100th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China. The available official and semi-official communications often attach very concrete outcomes to these aims, such as a car ownership rate above 50% by 2020 or a college education rate exceeding 80% by 2050.

⁶⁰ Among the latest figures available (as of 21 April 2014), a total of nine provinces and cities in China raised minimum monthly wage standards by an average of 13% in 2014, the lowest in recent years. In 2011, about 24 provinces in China raised the wage standards by an average of 22%; in 2012 the growth slowed to 20.2%; and in 2013 the increase was 17%. According to an Economic Information Daily report quoted by Xinhua News Agency/China Finance Corporation, “9 provinces and cities in China raise minimum wage standards by average 13pct”, 23 April 2014: <<http://en.xinhua08.com/a/20140423/1317822.shtml>>.

⁶¹ In addition, the wages of migrant workers, the vast majority of whom are paid more than the minimum wage, have been growing faster for migrants than wages for the wealthier part of the population. In some cases, they are now paid about two times the minimum wage, according to informal estimates of the China head of a multinational company employing migrant workers. Email exchanges, Beijing-Paris, 1st semester 2014.

among the youngest generations of the middle class, who grew up in a privileged environment and do not consider themselves part of the happy minority of “winners” of the era of reform and opening-up (contrary to their parents who generally came to middle-class status in late adulthood, often in their 40s or 50s), but rather as average households among others, concerned about maintaining their living standards.

Middle class: secondary target of new Party recruitment policy?

The CCP continues to emphasize that its membership is representative of all the population groups and interests in a diversifying Chinese society. This includes the middle class. But the CCP's top priority is to avoid and counter some popular criticisms, partly emerging from the New Left and members nostalgic for the Mao era, who claim, essentially, that the Party is not what it used to be, that it is now mainly preserving the interests of the privileged ones, who are overrepresented in the Party membership. In turn, the leadership emphasizes in its communications that the Party is still “serving the people”, and that it is still itself composed of a significant proportion of its traditional membership, the proletariat, in its new shape and diversity of interests (peasants, migrant population, factory workers, etc.).

Since its rapid emergence about two decades ago,⁶² China's middle class has significantly influenced the CCP itself. The Party took into account this population group, as the Chinese population was diversifying and the Party aimed at being representative of the population in its diversity. It became more pragmatic, put class struggle on the side, and changed its communications to be more tolerant towards entrepreneurs and members of the private sector. The proletariat was no longer preferred as the only legitimate CCP membership. But it is likely that China's middle class influence will now decrease compared to the influence of the poorest population groups at present.

In the coming decades, the middle class may progressively move away from the Party, not only because the new generations do not need it as much as before to climb the social ladder and to be successful in economic terms (see above), but also because they may not be the top targeted population for new Party membership. Indeed, the Party recently changed its recruitment policy (the first major revision in 24 years), calling for stricter selection of new members, on professional but also ideological criteria. The official statement on the topic stated (in June 2014) that, “in a bid to improve

⁶² This does not mean that this category of population did not exist in China before that: a small middle class of professionals and managers existed under state socialism too.

the Party's structure, enlisting work should consider different social groups and professions", and that the new recruitment rules also highlighted "the ideological credentials of Party members, providing that grass-roots Party organizations should absorb those who believe in Marxism, communism and socialism with Chinese characteristics, and those who practice socialist core values."⁶³ This change of recruitment policy is part of a wider trend in which the leadership attempts to assert more control over the CCP, and is directly related to the ongoing anti-corruption campaign (see below), and first of all targets potentially corrupt members. But, beyond the official and political aims, it echoes a strategy of reinforcing the representativeness of specific population groups. Regarding professional criteria, although the preferred professions are not mentioned in the available public sources, it is likely that the Party will try to reinforce in priority the proportion of low-income professions (such as migrant workers, who still constitute a significant part of the national population and are often dissatisfied with the current wealth redistribution and their integration within the cities). In that light, the new entry of wealthier members might be more reduced and selective. Already in 2013, the Party was emphasizing that, in 2012, "more than 44 percent of new members [were] frontline workers, such as industrial employees, farmers, herders and migrant staff", according to official count.⁶⁴ This proportion is likely to increase sharply following the disclosure of the new recruitment policy. If ideological criteria become more important in the recruitment process, as is suggested in official communications, it is likely that members of the young generation of the middle class – the urban youth who grew up far away from Marxist and Maoist references – will not dare to join the Party, or will have more difficulty than before in successfully "playing the game" of espousing supposedly ideological beliefs during the recruitment process.

That being said, in contrast with grassroots Party members, senior Party cadres working in major central and local administrations are likely to continue to be recruited among the educated part of the population; most senior cadres now have a university degree (engineering, foreign language, social sciences, etc.). For the limited number of high positions, the Party carefully selects its cadres according to their academic and professional skills. Initial qualifications are key for accessing senior positions, as well as qualifications gained throughout a career; it is common for a young party cadre with high potential to be sent to study abroad to gain additional academic qualifications and international exposure, to

⁶³ Among many documents on the topic, see for instance the following official press release, available in an English version: "CPC requires 'prudent' recruitment of new members", *Xinhua*, 11 June 2014: <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2014-06/11/c_133400165.htm>.

⁶⁴ See "China's Communist Party membership exceeds 85 millions", News of the Communist Party of China/Xinhua, 1 July 2013: <<http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/206972/206974/8305636.html>>.

study in a domestic institution to gain additional professional skills, to be exposed to various types of provincial and central positions to prove their adaptation skills, accumulate diverse professional experience and be tested in various ways before accessing the highest positions.

All in all, there is still space for middle-class individuals within the Party, either as cadre or member. But the attractiveness of the Party may decrease in the eyes of this population group because of the reasons mentioned above but also because of the recent loss of advantages for Party cadres and civil servants in the context of the anti-corruption campaign (see below).

The anti-corruption campaign

Considering that the core of the Chinese middle class still consists of a substantial number of civil servants (see part I), and that the anti-corruption campaign is mainly targeted at these categories of professionals, a question that arises is: What will be the impact of the anti-corruption campaign on the way that professionals affected by it perceive the current political context?

Several impacts of this anti-corruption campaign may already be identified and forecasted. The first one is certainly that the campaign contributes to generating a feeling of instability among Party cadres and civil servants. Fear is currently widespread among senior central and local Party cadres.⁶⁵ In particular, the fear of local cadres and their families (who are part of the upper middle class of most medium and small-sized cities) is extremely strong today.⁶⁶; many fear being under investigation, being sentenced to jail, or losing their current position. In general terms, since Xi Jinping launched the anti-corruption campaign at all levels (against “tigers and flies”, according to an expression often used by senior leaders), all officials are potential targets of such a campaign, which has so far been implemented in a very strict manner and on a large scale. In total, more than 270,000 Party cadres of various ranks and institutions were punished between the launch of the campaign in 2013 and mid-2014, according to the latest official figures.⁶⁷

The second impact of the anti-corruption campaign is the widening gap between the salaries and overall benefits of employees of the private sector and those of the public sector.⁶⁸ Within less than

⁶⁵ Mainly among senior cadres, who could take material advantage of their position in previous years.

⁶⁶ Informal discussions and observations, Shandong province, September 2014.

⁶⁷ This figure is likely to continue to increase in 2015-2016. See also “Public doubts over China’s antigraft drive”, by Andrew Jacobs, *International Herald Tribune*, 16 January 2015.

⁶⁸ The gap in salary is already significant. For instance, a Master’s graduate working in the public sector is likely to earn around 4000-5000 RMB/month, while, with similar education and experience, s/he may earn twice as much in the Chinese office of a multinational company.

six months, cadres of the civil service and the Party were forced to change both their work style and life style. Indeed, the anti-corruption campaign imposed new rules on work-related expenditures and behaviors that had a direct and substantial impact on the lifestyle of the cadre's entire family. For instance, for more than two decades, reimbursement of expenses and exchanges of gifts were common practices. Some of these were not directly related to work, and benefited the cadres, their family and friends (restaurant, hotel stay, purchase of electronics and other pricey goods, etc.). In the eyes of some cadres, these practices were considered acceptable, in part to compensate for the rather low level of their salary, and were often tacitly accepted at all levels within a given institution.

Taking into account these changes, and given that resentment already exists among civil servants⁶⁹ toward comparatively better paid private-sector employees with a similar level of qualification, such resentment is likely to intensify in the short or medium term. The anti-corruption campaign marks the end of many advantages whether tolerated for or granted to the public sector. It also marks stricter control over Party cadres and civil-service employees. Both changes lead in the eyes of some to a sense of arbitrariness, a feeling that the Party is being "unfair" to them, that it is letting down some of its most loyal staff at all levels for reasons not directly related to the quality of their work or their degree of loyalty (political infighting in the name of the anti-corruption campaign in some high-level cases, competition for a professional position in the name as well the campaign at middle/low level, etc.). It is likely, therefore, that the feeling of instability, already widespread among cadres and white-collar employees of the private sector, will also develop among the government and Party cadres in the short term. Many people in China believe that, if the anti-corruption campaign keeps being implemented in such a strict manner in the coming years, which is likely to be the case considering recent official communications, it will become more unstable and risky to be a Party/government/SOE cadre than to hold a private-sector position.⁷⁰

In the long term, the anti-corruption campaign may restore part of the positive image and legitimacy of the Party in the eyes of the general public (in particular among the poorest part of the population who are particularly fed up with corruption scandals and various excesses on the part of civil servants in a context of acute inequalities). The campaign, indeed, appears to be largely welcomed by the "general public" (*laobaixing*) so far. But at the same time it may downgrade the overall image of the Party in the eyes of Party cadres and civil servants. It is likely that Party cadres affected by the

⁶⁹ Interviews with middle-level officials of various ministries and central institutions, Beijing, 2014.

⁷⁰ Interview, Beijing-Paris, 2014-2015.

campaign will become more critical of the political system and Party rule under Xi Jinping.

The effects of the anti-corruption campaign on the middle class are already clear two and a half years after its launch. Many middle-class cadres may not be opposed to the campaign as such, but are disappointed by the way it has been implemented (anonymous reporting and naming by rivals and colleagues, retroactive investigation of the all-mighty Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, etc.) and by the sudden negative impacts on their living standards. Given recent official communications, the campaign is likely to continue to be implemented in a strict manner in the coming years. It may progressively lead to an aggregation of resentment among the population affected by it, which includes a significant part of the middle class (CPC cadres, civil servants at all levels, SOE managers, and other “white collars” working in Party and state-affiliated institutions), which may convert into decreased loyalty to – or even trust of – the CPC and the government overall. Since among this population loyalty to the CPC has traditionally been high, such reduced loyalty alone is unlikely to lead to regime change, but it may make a significant part of the middle class more skeptical about the current political system.

Conclusion

In light of the above arguments, it is unrealistic to see China's middle class as the single most important engine of democratization. The case of China suggests that the linkage between the emergence of a middle class and of democracy is not as straightforward as often suggested. Other case studies – for instance India, where democracy existed before the emergence of its middle class – may also put into question this linkage, and would be worth studying further in the current context. The perception of and attitude to democracy of the middle class vary⁷¹ from one country to another, and may also evolve over time in a given country.

In the case of China, the link between the emergence of the middle class and democratization is not evident so far, as other population groups, including poorer ones (migrant workers, peasants) are in many cases equally if not more influential than the middle class in pushing for reforms. Moreover, irrespective of the population groups to which they belong, individual actors are often more influential (leading bloggers, dissidents, heads of environmental NGOs, academics, etc.) than groups in pushing for political change.⁷²

For the middle-class households to become an important force in democratization, they would first of all have to believe that democracy is a better system than the current one, and this is not necessarily the case given that they have been the main economic beneficiaries of the current system.

⁷¹ Jie Chen argues too that the attitude of the middle classes to democracy varies in developing countries, and that it depends on the group's relationship with the incumbent state as well as its perceived socio-economic wellbeing. In broader terms, he considers that middle-class support for democracy in late-developing countries is "far from inevitable". Chen, Jie, *A Middle Class without Democracy – Economic Growth and the Prospects for Democratization in China*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁷² For instance, while some of the 300 signatories of the Charter 08 – document signed and distributed in December 2008 in China to demand the abolition of CCP rule, free elections, separation of powers, an independent judiciary, a new constitution and freedom of expression – included members of the middle class, it cannot be considered as a "middle-class manifesto". Signatories belonged to diverse groups, including farmers, Tiananmen-period dissidents, former Party officials, Tibetan activists, etc. In broader terms, dissidents and activists come from various population groups in China. Also underlined in *The Economist*, "The other Moore's Law – Special report: The new middle classes in emerging markets", 12 February 2009.

In addition, China's middle class is unlikely to be the main source of political change toward democracy because of its strong connection with the ruling Communist Party as well as with the civil service. Nonetheless, the emergence of a younger generation of the middle class, who are more educated, more international, more connected, and also more critical of a set of socioeconomic reforms that it may perceive as not being in its interests, may progressively – in the long term – lead to a change in the group's attitude toward the current political order. A more distant approach to the Party may also emerge as the new generation of the middle class does not need it as much as their parents did in order to climb the social ladder and become economically successful. In addition, critical judgement of the Party may also emerge if the middle class experiences or perceives stagnation or decrease in their living standards. This perception may easily emerge, since the population group experienced over the last decades an extremely fast improvement of its living standards and the overall enthusiasm logically surrounding it,⁷³ which will be hard to prolong at a similar pace in the coming decades, even if the growth rate remains relatively high. Such negative perception might not translate into political expression or participation, as control of the Internet⁷⁴, of universities and other academic institutions, of the art scene and other places of potential dissidence is currently being reinforced under the Xi Jinping leadership. So, the question today is not only whether the Chinese middle classes want to become more involved in politics, but to what extent they are ready to assume the negative consequences of such an involvement for themselves and their families.

⁷³ This could to some extent be compared with the “trente glorieuses” atmosphere in France.

⁷⁴ Under Xi Jinping, censorship was reinforced after June 2014 as the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen events was approaching. This has often been the case for sensitive dates, during a limited period of time. But the reinforcement has not dissipated since June 2014. On the contrary, it has increased, with many new websites (mostly Google services) and tools (Dropbox, main VPNs, etc.) being censored.

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