

Stabilizing Force or Destabilizing Force?

Sociopolitical attitudes of the China's middle class and its implication on political transition

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Abstract: Rising middle class has brought about a controversy on the sociopolitical function of middle class in the process of transition to political democracy in China. Will Chinese middle class promote a democratic transition or preserve the existing political order? This article, based on a national survey data of 2006, tries to answer this question through examining sociopolitical attitudes of middle class. The author proposes an ideal dichotomy of sociopolitical attitudes of conservatism and liberalism by designing six attitude indexes to examine sociopolitical attitudes of middle class. The final conclusion is that China's middle class as a whole group has a divergent attitude and a mixture of conservatism and liberalism. Such contradictory attitudes imply that Chinese middle class may be inclined to choice the Third Way, a slowly stepwise sociopolitical transition.

Keywords: middle class political attitudes political transformation conservatism liberalism

Since the beginning of this century, a social group with higher income, higher education and higher occupational prestige has been emerging in Chinese cities. The public media refers to this group as the "middle class". Even though people dispute the definition of the middle class, there is no doubt that it exists in China and it is expanding quickly (Li, C. 2010). The middle class is gaining attention from the public, businessmen, and policy-makers alike, as well as from sociologists, economists and political scientists. Sociologists, in particular, have devoted attention to this group, focusing on its sociopolitical functions. Chinese sociologists are debating questions such as: What are the sociopolitical consequences of the emergence of the middle class? Is the middle class a stable or unstable influence with respect to existing authority? Will the middle class promote a democratic transition or preserve the existing political order? Social analysts give two opposite answers to these questions. Some argue that the middle class is a social force that promotes democracy and hence constitutes a destabilizing force for the government. They expect the government will take careful measures to control this group. But others consider the middle class to be a stabilizing force that supports the existing political and social order. Hence, they advise the government to act to enlarge it. This paper adjudicates between these contrasting perspectives by examining public opinion data on the sociopolitical attitudes of the Chinese middle class.

Controversy over the sociopolitical functions of the middle class

Since Chinese researchers began to discuss the possibility of an emerging middle class in the 1980s, there has been a lively controversy over the sociopolitical functions of the middle class. In the 1980s, radical intellectuals were expecting a democratic movement, propelled by the rising middle class, who were perceived as the “most active supporters of democratization” (Han, 1989, pp.27-29, Liu, 1988, pp.62-63). By the 1990s, most sociologists had changed their stance, describing the middle class as a stabilizing force for the political order, supporting the government’s policies of economic reform and thus serving as a driving force of economic development (Li, Q. 2001, 1999, Zhang, J. 1998). However, in recent years, a few sociologists have questioned the view that the middle class is a “stabilizing force,” claiming that the middle class could, in fact, destabilize the political authority (Zhang, Y. 2009).

The middle class as a destabilizing force

Sociopolitical theorists from the West, such as Lipset, Huntington, and Glassman, suggest that there is a correlation between the emergence of the middle class and the development of a political democracy (Lipset, 1963, Huntington, 1991, Glassman, 1995, 1997). Lipset developed a wealth theory of democracy, arguing, “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy” (Lipset, 1963, p.31). Democracy is related to economic development because, in wealthy countries, there is a diamond-shaped system of social stratification in which the majority of the population is situated on the middle stratum of the social hierarchy, the stratum most likely to support a democratic government. Huntington supports Lipset’s argument, suggesting, “the most active supporters of [the third wave of] democratization came from the urban middle class.” (Huntington 1991, p.67) Other theorists cite the East Asian and Southeast Asian countries and regions (South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines and Thailand, etc.), where the rising middle class has brought about democratic movements and a series of sociopolitical turbulences. Many scholars with Western academic background have followed this view to discuss the sociopolitical function of China’s middle class (Chen, Lu, 2006, Johnston, 2004, Goodman, 2008). Some Chinese sociologists, such as Li Lulu and Zhang Yi, take a similar position, arguing that the middle class will become a potent agent in the sociopolitical transition toward democracy and civil society (Li, L. 2008, Zhang, Y. 2009).

The middle class as a stabilizing force

However, the most influential Chinese sociologists argue that the Chinese middle class is a sociopolitical stabilizer because middle class individuals tend to be politically conservative. Li Qian and Zhou Xiaohong suggest the following potential explanations for Chinese middle class conservatism: 1) They benefitted the most from the economic reforms and subsequent rapid economic growth, 2) They depend heavily on the state, which treats them favorably and protects their interests, and thus they have a propensity for state authoritarianism, and 3) They show apolitical attitudes and prefer materialism (Li, Q. 2001, Zhou, 2005). Scholars holding this view insist that middle class in most societies is a stabilizing force for existing regimes because: firstly, middle class as a buffer layer between upper class and underclass may ease the tension between these two classes; secondly, middle class with modest attitudes and conservative ideology will be helpful to prevent breeding of politic radicalism in society; thirdly, middle class as the most active consumer group will be helpful to stimulate economic growth which ensure political stability (Li, Q. 2001, p.18). Some researchers who study the East Asian middle class propose an additional explanation. Because of traditional forms of political culture, the East Asian middle class prefers political conservatism and relies on the state for economic security (Jones, 1998, Jones and Brown,

1994). Members of the Asian middle class thus hold contradictory attitudes about politics. On the one hand, they are inclined to support liberalism and democracy. On the other hand, they desire sociopolitical stability and are subservient to the authoritarian state for economic security (Hsiao, 1999, 2001, 2006). These studies find that East Asia middle class is usually rising in the period of rapid economic growth, in which authoritarian states implement policies to promote economic growth. Middle class benefits a lot from these policies so as to support authoritarian states for economic security and benefits.

Government's query on the sociopolitical function of a rising middle Class

Above controversy is not just involved in academic discussion but also politics. China's authorities have long disliked the term *middle class* for political reasons. The term was almost prohibited from formal publications during 1990s. This was because the term had acquired political connotations when it was referenced by liberal scholars during the 1980s. At the time, middle class mainly denoted private entrepreneurs, a newly emerging social group in the 1980s, which developed quickly in the 1990s. Liberal intellectuals thought the growth of this social group would bring about political changes, such as political democratization. Official theorists in the late 1980s and early 1990s asserted that liberal scholars tried to overthrow the socialist system through creating a middle class. Accordingly, authorities had continued to deem the middle class a threat to the existing political system (He, 1987, p.2, 1988, p.4, 1990, p.1)..

In the late 1990s a few influential sociologists argued that a large middle class was one of the general characteristics of modern societies and could be a stabilizing force, not a destabilizing force, for society (Lu, X. 2002, p.62, Li, Q. 2001, p.19). These sociological arguments have become more prevalent since the late 1990s and seem to have gradually convinced Chinese policymakers that a rising middle class could be a positive element in maintaining political and social stability. These sociologists especially stressed that the growth of the middle class would help to reduce the income gap, which the state considered to be one of Chinese society's most serious problems, one that could even trigger political unrest.

Although political leaders seemed to partly accept this view, they have remained politically distrustful of the middle class. Undoubtedly, the rising middle class will be conducive to economic development. This is especially evidenced in consume market when middle class has been showing increasing spending power. Even during financial crisis in 2009, China's middle class remained its strong sending power. However, the political influence of the middle class remains uncertain for the authority. The political leaders of the government continue to prefer the term *middle-income stratum* to the term *middle class*. In November 2002 Jiang Zemin, then secretary general of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), stated in his report to the Sixteenth National Party Congress that "expanding the middle-level-income group" was one of the policy targets of the government. Some analysts considered this statement to be a signal that the government would make an effort to develop the middle class, or middle stratum. Since then "cultivating" and "expanding" the middle stratum, as an income or consume group but not a social group, have been becoming a goals of social development the Chinese government pursue. However, the government has not yet determined whether it should develop a truly middle class and whether it would be good or bad thing for its political ruling. The current top priority of the Chinese government is to preserve social and political stability. Therefore, it is a critical issue for the government to make clear the political function of a rising middle class.

Research framework and measurement method

How to clarify the sociopolitical function of the middle class? Is the middle class stabilizing force or destabilizing force? Chinese sociologists try to answer this question by examining attitudes of the middle class. They build a link between the sociopolitical function and sociopolitical attitudes of middle class. Middle class is a stabilizing force if its members take conservative attitudes. On the contrary, middle class become a destabilizing force if middle class holds liberal or radical attitudes. Following this logic, a few of researchers tried to examine sociopolitical attitudes of China's middle class so as to judge the function of middle class (Zhang, Y. 2009, Chen and Lu, 2006). However, such researches attained conclusions based on simple measurements of several scattered items of opinion questions but not a systematic measurement of sociopolitical attitudes. That results vague and weak evidences in support of the conclusions. In addition, it remains ambiguous statement on the concepts of conservative or liberal sociopolitical attitudes. It is impossible to reach a convincing conclusion by lack of a clear distinction between conservative and liberal attitudes. This paper tries to construct an ideal dichotomy of conservative and liberal sociopolitical attitudes, measure related attitudes of middle class and other class based on this dichotomy framework, and finally answer the question about the sociopolitical function of middle class.

Features of political conservatism or liberalism

In order to constructing such dichotomy framework, we need to clarify distinct preferences of conservative and liberal sociopolitical attitudes toward certain issues, and then find specific measurement tool to test them.

Conservatism and liberalism as major two political ideologies have had long history and have been deemed as opposite ideologies in the political field of many countries. However, the specific meanings of conservatism and liberalism differ partly in different periods and countries ()¹. Here we choose several major features of conservative and liberal sociopolitical attitudes generally identified by political scientists, especially concerned with the specific situation of China. The most notable distinction between conservatism and liberalism is the attitude toward sociopolitical change or evolution. Conservatism is inclined a skeptical attitude to change and enjoys the present while liberalism prefers social evolution and dissatisfied with the situation. If the change is inevitable, conservatism like gradualism but liberalism favor radicalism. The second difference between conservatism and liberalism is related to the attitudes toward state or authority. Conservatism distrusts democracy and prefers authoritative leadership or strong state while liberalism proclaims the freedom of the individual and advocates political democracy. The third disparity of two ideologies involves social justice or egalitarianism. Conservatism pays more attention to the defense of property than justice and equality while liberalism stresses equality before the right of property (Eccleshall, 1994, Leach, 2002, Nisbet, 1986).

Three criteria for distinguishing conservatism and liberalism

Based on these features of conservative and liberal attitudes mentioned above, we may propose three dimension criteria to classify different attitudes of conservatism and liberalism toward certain issues. These three criteria are all related to the hypotheses of "stabilizing force" and "destabilizing force" that theorists debate upon the sociopolitical function of middle class.

¹ In addition, political conservatism and liberalism is very different from conservatism and liberalism of economics.

First criterion is *Satisfaction* which is to test individuals' feeling toward the current situations. High satisfaction implies less expectation for change (conservatism) but less satisfaction hints more expectation for change (liberalism). Second criterion is *Authoritarianism* which is to examine individuals' attitudes toward the state and government. More favor of the existing government and authoritarian state indicates a desire to keep political stability (conservatism) but less favor of the existing government and authoritarian state denotes a wish to promote political change (liberalism). The third criterion is *Egalitarianism* which is to test individuals' value on social justice. Less egalitarianism signifies a wish to remain the existing institution and social order (conservatism) and more egalitarianism represents a willing to adjust the institution and social order (liberalism).

Table 1 Ideal dichotomy of sociopolitical attitude of conservatism and liberalism

Criteria	Conservatism	Liberalism	Index of measurement
<i>Satisfaction</i> : basic feeling toward the current situation	Feeling Satisfying and disliking change	Feeling dissatisfying and hoping some change	① satisfaction of individual living (life-satisfaction index) ② satisfaction degree of social situation (social-satisfaction index)
<i>Authoritarianism</i> : basic attitudes toward the state and government	High confidence in government; preference for authoritarian state	Low confidence in government; preference for political democracy	③ confidence in government (government-confidence index) ④ acceptance of state authoritarianism (authoritativeness index)
<i>Egalitarianism</i> : basic value on social justice	High acceptance of inequality; concealing interest conflict between groups	Low acceptance of inequality; sympathy for disadvantaged groups and low class	⑤ toleration of social inequality (inequality-perception index) ⑥ perception of social conflict (conflict-consciousness index)

Six indexes for measurement of criteria

In order to test these three criteria through attitude measurement of public opinion survey, six multi-item indexes are designed to represent the criteria, two indexes for each criterion. *Satisfaction* is represented re by life-satisfaction index and social-satisfaction index; *Authoritarianism* is represented by government-confidence index and authoritativeness index; and *Egalitarianism* is represented by inequality-perception index and conflict-consciousness index. The values of indexes are calculated by the scores of two or more questions the respondents answer in the survey. The scores of the questions are calculated based on Likert scale score. Table 2 lists theses questions and the scores of answers. The measuring items (questions) of each index are selected through Cronbach's Alpha and fact analysis.

Table 2 Measurement of indexes

Index	Question	Score
Life-satisfaction	1 Comparison with five years ago, your current living condition is: 2 You think your living condition after five years will be:	2) much better; 1) better; 0) no change ; -1) worse ; -2) much worse
Social-satisfaction	3 How do you think about the current situation of social stability in our country? 4 How do you feel about the current situation of our society in general?	2) very stable 1) stable 0) I don't know -1) unstable -2) very unstable 2) very harmonious 1) harmonious 0) I don't know -1) disharmonious -2) very disharmonious

Government-confidence	<p>5 Do you trust below governmental organizations or affairs?</p> <p>A. Central government</p> <p>B. Local government</p> <p>C. Government media</p> <p>D. Statistics released by the government</p> <p>E. Petition institutions</p> <p>F. Judge and policemen</p>	<p>2)strongly trust 1)trust 0)I am not sure -1)distrust -2) strongly distrust</p>
Authoritativeness	<p>6 Do you agree with statements below:</p> <p>A. Democracy means the government rule.</p> <p>B. Government is responsible for managing important affairs of our country, so people should not care about these affairs.</p> <p>C. People should comply with the government, just like subordinates should comply with their superiors..</p> <p>D. The government and party have capabilities to manage our country.</p> <p>E. People should move out of their houses if the government wants to build public constructions in the location of their houses.</p> <p>F. People pay tax and the government may decide how to spend it without taking into account of people's viewpoint.</p>	<p>2)Strongly agree 1) agree 0) I am not sure -1)don't agree -2) strongly don't agree</p>
Inequality-perception	<p>7 Do you think it is fair or unfair in the below aspects of our society?</p> <p>A. Wealth and income distribution</p> <p>B. Public finance and tax policies</p> <p>C. Opportunities of job and employment</p> <p>D. Opportunities of individual development</p> <p>E. College entrance examination system</p> <p>F. Promotion of the government's officials</p> <p>G. Public health care</p> <p>H. Compulsory education</p> <p>I. Political right</p> <p>J. Judicatory and administrative system</p> <p>K. Welfare in different regions and industries</p> <p>L. Welfare in urban and rural areas</p> <p>M. Social security</p> <p>N. General situation of social fairness</p>	<p>-2) very fair -1) fair 0) I am not sure 1) unfair 2) very unfair</p>
Conflict-consciousness	<p>8 Do you think there is interest conflict among social groups in our society?</p> <p>9 Do you think it is possible the interest conflicts among social groups will become intensifying?</p>	<p>1) no conflict 2) I don't know 3) a little conflicts 4) many conflicts 5) very much conflicts</p> <p>1)definitely impossible 2)impossible 3)I don't know 4)maybe possible 5)definitely possible</p>

Class classification and the definition of “middle class”

Before analyzing the responses to the questions above, it is necessary to define the middle class. While I recognize that there exist many classification schemes, the various ways of classifying the middle class is not the focus of this paper. Rather, in this paper I employ the classification developed by the East Asian Middle Class (EAMC) project (Hsiao, 1999, 2001,

2006). The EAMC project is directed by researchers from Asian countries such as South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, who are conducting comparative research on the Asian middle class. The EAMC proposes the following classification system, based on John Goldthorpe's class scheme (Goldthorpe, 1987).

Table 3 Goldthorpe and EAMC's class scheme

Goldthorpe's class scheme	EAMC project's scheme
I Higher-grade professionals II Lower-grade professionals	1) Capitalists (employers who hire 20 or more employees) 2) New middle class
IVa Small employers with employees IVb Small employers without employees	3) Old middle class
IIIa Routine non-manual employees IIIb Personal service workers	4) Marginal middle class
V Technicians and supervisors VIa Skilled workers VIIa Semi-/non-skilled workers	5) Working class
IVc Farmers VIIb Agricultural workers	6) Farmers/farm laborers

Among the 6 classes in the EAMC scheme, three are middle class (new middle class, old middle class and marginal middle class). New middle class is constituted by professionals, managers and government's officials. New middle class is usually deemed as a key part of middle class. Old middle class is composed of small employers, small owners and self-employed people. Marginal middle class includes low white-collar workers or routine workers. Sometimes marginal middle class is considered as a marginal group between middle class and working class. That implies the definition of middle class is plural, namely middle classes, not middle class. The further presupposition proposed by the EAMC project is that there is internally intra-class diversity among middle classes in attitudes. Different groups of middle class have different sociopolitical attitudes. Capitalist class is generally believed as upper class above middle class while Working class and farmers are lower class or underclass beneath middle class.

A small revision to the above scheme is required when using the EAMC classification system to define the Chinese middle class. There is a capitalist class in this classification, which is not part of the middle class according to the EAMC scheme. However, at present, the capitalist class, defined by Western literature, has not existed in China. It is widely recognized that there is a private entrepreneur class in the country. A few of them are owners of large-sized enterprises which are considered as a part of upper class. These large owners usually have close links with the state or the governmental officials. But most of private entrepreneurs are owners of small or medium-sized enterprises which are regarded by the public as a key part of the Chinese middle class. That is partly because the private entrepreneur class is new class whose rise changed the original class structure. As a new element in social structure, private entrepreneurs are supposed to become a social force to promote social progress just like new middle class should do. Another reason is that Chinese private entrepreneurs differ in social-political status from their counterparts in the Western societies in which they enjoy privileged status. In China, by contrast, private entrepreneur class is not the most dominant or advantaged social group. Even though they possess

a large amount of economic capital, there is a limit to their social and political influence. The most dominant and advantaged group in China is comprised of high-ranking government officials and CEOs of state-owned enterprises. They have great power and control over many social-economic resources that capitalists do not. Because of this idiosyncrasy, private entrepreneurs are defined as a part of the middle class in China. The group is named as “entrepreneur class” in revised classification, replacing “capitalist class” in EAMC scheme.

An advantage of this class classification is to not only examine the difference of sociopolitical attitudes between middle class and working class but also may investigate the difference of subgroups of middle class. Such framework regarding heterogeneous composition of middle class is helpful to apprehend the true situation of China’s middle class and clarify its sociopolitical attitudes. Many Chinese sociologists discover the different groups of middle class have different economic conditions, living standards and sociopolitical attitudes. Some sociologists prefer middle classes to middle class. They argue that distinguishing different groups among middle classes is as important as distinguishing middle class from working class or middle class from upper class. As for the four subgroups of middle class in above classification, disparities in socioeconomic and political status are easy to be acknowledged by empirical observation. That inevitably results differences in sociopolitical attitudes and related functions.

New middle class is generally considered as the key part of middle class which dominates the mainstream of whole middle class because the members of the new middle class occupy important positions in social, political and economic fields. They have some institutionalized paths to influence policy makers and elite groups. Entrepreneur class, named as private entrepreneurs in China, is an active actor in economic fields and might be a politically active actor in the future. This group has been increasing in its influence on the policies of local governments. But their influence has been restrained in the process of policy making of the central government since top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party have kept suspicious of their political loyalty. The other two groups, old middle class and marginal middle class, have the socioeconomic status apparently lower than that of new middle class and entrepreneur class. Sometimes sociologists deem them as marginal groups between the working class and typical middle class. However, some members of these two groups probably join in the queue of new middle class and entrepreneur class in the future. Old middle class is usually omitted out of middle class in the most western societies because of small proportion but absolutely can not be ignored in China in which old middle class holds a large proportion in China’s middle class, especially in small cities and towns. Marginal middle class, the major part of this group is considered as a younger generation of middle class with higher education, more democratic consciousness and more capacities of political participation, has been becoming more and more active in the domain of the public media, mass culture and especially internet community. They are the most actively participants in the recent social movements. Younger members of marginal middle class are believed to have much more political liberalism than other members of middle class. Some analysts imply that the mainstream of relative politically conservative consciousness among China’s middle class would be changed when these young people enter into new middle class. Based on these discussions, we may expect differences in sociopolitical attitudes not only between middle class and working class but also inside middle class. Because this research is based on a national sample survey data which did not include sample cases of elite group, below analysis can not examine the difference between middle class and elite group or upper class.

Data, variables and methods

Data

The data used for this research is national sample survey data on social stability collected in 2006 by the Institute of Sociology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The sample size is 7061. Because most members of the Chinese middle class reside in cities, only urban areas are included in this analysis, reducing the sample size to 2894.

Methods and variables

6 OLS linear regression models are used for examining the sociopolitical attitudes of members of the middle classes. One model is run for each attitude index. The indexes are the dependent variables, and the five classes—the entrepreneur class, the new middle class, the old middle class, the marginal middle class and the working class—are the independent variables. Control variables include sex, age and education. Table 4 contains the descriptive statistics of each of the variables in the regression analysis.

Table 4 Descriptive statistics of variables (N=2894)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard error
Age	18	69	39.8	13.0
Schooling years	0	20	9.7	4.1
Scores of SSL index	-4	4	.7786	1.6146
Scores of SSC index	-4	4	1.1399	1.6596
Scores of DCG index	-12	12	3.7487	4.0239
Scores of PDSA index	-12	12	.1703	4.0923
Scores of ASI index	-28	28	-.2880	8.8481
Scores of PCI index	2	10	6.2458	1.8043
	Ratio (%)			
Sex (male)	45.1			
Entrepreneur class	0.3			
New middle class	19.0			
Old middle class	19.8			
Marginal middle class	25.2			
Working class	35.7			

Results and interpretation

Table 5 shows average scores of five classes in 6 indexes which indicate roughly the differences of classes in attitudes and feelings of life-satisfaction, social-satisfaction government-confidence, authoritativeness, inequality-perception and conflict-consciousness. Table 6 lists the results of regression models which further examine the differences among classes by controlling gender, age and education.

Life-satisfaction

Average scores and regression coefficients display similar result. There are significant differences of life-satisfaction among classes. Higher status of class in social hierarchy, higher score in life-satisfaction. Entrepreneur class and new middle class have two highest score of

life-satisfaction and following by old middle class and marginal middle class. Working class has the lowest score. Since the number of entrepreneurs' cases in survey data is too little, the coefficient for entrepreneur class is not significant in the regression model. Other three coefficients of middle classes all are significant. That means there is difference in the satisfaction degree of individual living between working class and three middle classes (new middle class, old middle class and marginal middle class). In addition, these coefficients are positive figures and the coefficient of the new middle class is the largest one. That means three middle classes have higher satisfaction degree of individual living than working class. New middle class has highest satisfaction degree of individual living among middle classes. Sex coefficient and education coefficient indicate that there are no gender difference and no difference among different educated groups in satisfaction degree of individual living. However, age coefficient is significant and negative. That means there is difference among different age group. Older people have low satisfaction degree of individual living than younger persons.

Table 5 Average scores of five classes in 6 indexes

Class	Life-satisfaction index	Social-satisfaction index	Government -confidence index	Authoritativeness index	Inequality-perception index	Conflict-consciousness index
Entrepreneur class	1.2708	1.7208	4.4877	0.5825	-6.0967	5.8448
New middle class	1.4845	1.2581	3.5607	-1.5608	-0.2890	6.7455
Old middle class	1.0383	1.2957	3.7236	0.7055	-1.5397	6.0649
Marginal middle class	1.0218	1.0647	3.6022	-.8535	-0.0533	6.6232
Working class	0.7479	1.0830	3.7317	.5009	-0.3740	6.2349
Total	1.0160	1.1555	3.6668	.2662	-0.5225	6.3953

Table 6 Unstandardized OLS Coefficients for the Linear Regression of Attitude indexes on Classes

Dependent variable \ Independent variable	Life-Satisfaction index	Social-satisfaction index	Government -confidence index	Authoritative -ness index	Inequality-perception index	Conflict-consciousness index
Class (reference group: working class)						
Entrepreneur class	.542 (.768)	.706 (.812)	1.031 (1.966)	1.543 (1.903)	-6.339(4.329)	-.844 (.857)
New middle class	.787** (.105)	.231* (.111)	.072 (.268)	-.806** (.260)	-.415 (.591)	.104 (.117)
Old middle class	.424** (.095)	.188 (.100)	-.020 (.243)	.222 (.235)	-1.378** (.534)	-.054 (.106)
Marginal middle class	.326** (.089)	.002 (.094)	.039 (.228)	-.577** (.221)	-.033 (.502)	.211* (.099)
Sex (male)	-.002 (.059)	.007 (.063)	-.106 (.152)	.004 (.147)	-.401 (.335)	.109 (.066)
Age	-.017** (.002)	.000 (.003)	.017** (.006)	.031** (.006)	.006 (.014)	.001 (.003)
Schooling years	.008 (.009)	-.015 (.009)	-.039 (.022)	-.222** (.021)	.062 (.030)	.098** (.010)
Constant	1.179** (.153)	1.231** (.161)	3.475** (.390)	1.226** (.378)	-.730 (.860)	5.170** (.170)
Adjusted R ²	.056	.001	.004	.098	.002	.058
N	2894	2894	2894	2894	2894	2894

Note: Standard error shown in parentheses. **:P≤0. 01; *:P≤0. 05

Social-satisfaction

Average scores and regression coefficients of social satisfaction also show differences among classes and more advantageous classes have higher values in social satisfaction than less advantageous classes. However, it does mean that all middle classes have higher social satisfaction than working class. Entrepreneur class has the highest score, and new middle class and old middle class have significant higher scores than working class but marginal middle class has the score slight lower than that of working class. All coefficients of social satisfaction in table 6 are not significant except the coefficient of new middle class which is a positive figure. That means new middle class has significant higher satisfaction of social situation than other middle classes and working class. The coefficients of entrepreneur class and old middle class are bigger positive figures but not significant. Marginal middle class have same level in social satisfaction as working class. There are no gender difference, no age difference and no educational difference.

Government-confidence

Average scores of government-confidence of classes seem to be very similar except entrepreneur class. The score of entrepreneur class is much higher than ones of other classes. All coefficients of government-confidence in table 6 are not significant except age. That means no class difference in government-confidence by controlling gender, age and education. The coefficient of entrepreneur class is larger than others but not significant because of few cases. It is probably that entrepreneur class has higher confidence in government than other classes. At the same time, there are no gender difference and no educational difference in government-confidence. But old people have higher confidence than young people.

Authoritativeness

Average scores and regression coefficients of authoritativeness display a salient division inside middle classes. The scores of new middle class are much higher than other groups of middle classes and working class. The coefficients in table 6 indicate that there are significant and large differences among classes, age groups and educational groups. New middle class and marginal middle class have negative coefficients which mean that new middle class and marginal middle class are less likely to support an authoritarian state than working class, old middle class and entrepreneur class. In other words, new middle class and marginal middle class have more democratic consciousness. In addition, higher educated group has more democratic consciousness and less state authoritarianism than lower educated group. Older people have more state authoritarianism than young persons.

Inequality-perception

Average scores and regression coefficients of inequality perception manifest again a salient division inside middle classes. The scores of entrepreneur class and old middle class are much bigger negative figures than ones of new middle class and marginal middle class. Two latter middle class have scores approaching to working class. All coefficients of inequality-perception in table 6 are not significant except the coefficient of old middle class. The coefficient of old middle class is negative figure and quite large figure. That means old middle class has much lower inequality-perception than other classes. In addition, entrepreneur's coefficient, even though it is not significant because of few cases, is very large negative figure. That seems to imply that middle classes with economic capital (such as entrepreneur class and old middle class) have higher

tolerance of social inequality or lower expectation of social justness. There are no differences of gender, age and education groups in inequality perception.

Conflict-consciousness

Average scores of conflict consciousness do not display large differences among classes although new middle class and marginal middle class have slight higher scores than working class and working class have slight higher scores than entrepreneur class and old middle class. Among coefficients of conflict-consciousness in table 6, only two coefficients for marginal middle class and education are significant. That means marginal middle class has more conflict consciousness than other classes. And higher educated group has more conflict consciousness than lower educated group.

Summary and conclusion

Summary of results

The middle classes show significantly higher level of satisfaction with their standard of living than the working class. New middle class shows the highest level of satisfaction, with 71.8% indicating that their standard of living to improve in the past five years, and 68.6% indicating that they expect their standard of lives to improve in the next five years. These findings suggest that members of middle classes, especially new middle class, will likely hold conservative attitudes and be resistant to sociopolitical change, as they do not want their standard of living to be negatively affected.

The new middle class has a higher degree of satisfaction with the social circumstances in China than the working class and the old and marginal middle classes. 80.1% of the new middle class responded that the social circumstances in China are “stable”. 76.6% of the new middle class indicated that the social situation is “harmonious”. Stability, in this context, refers to social order, whereas harmony refers to the relationships between people or social groups. These findings imply that the new middle class is the most likely to want to maintain the existing social order and to object to changes that might bring about any social turbulence. The further implication is that the new middle class may have a more conservative attitude in this respect.

There is no significant difference between classes in the degree of confidence they have in the government. All classes view the government in a relatively positive light, but there are some differences evident in terms of particular issues. For example, all classes show a high degree of confidence in the Central government, but express a lower degree of confidence in official statistics. 94.1% of the new middle class, 94.8% of the old middle class, 95.4% of the marginal middle class, 94.2% of the working class and 89.9% of the entrepreneur class indicate that they somewhat believe or very much believe in the Central government. These findings suggest that the middle classes have a high degree of confidence in the government and thus are likely to want to preserve the existing political order.

The new middle class and the marginal middle class view state authoritarianism less favorably than the working class and the old middle class. The new middle class is the least likely to support an authoritarian state. However, while they prefer a less authoritarian (i.e. more democratic) government, results of analyses discussed above suggest that they do not want change that will bring about sociopolitical turbulence.

The entrepreneur and old middle classes are much more accepting of social inequality than the new and marginal middle classes and the working class. These findings suggest that there is diversity between the middle classes on their attitudes about social inequality. More specifically, the middle classes with economic capital are less concerned with social equality than the middle class with cultural capital, implying that the entrepreneur and old middle classes are more likely to have conservative attitudes, while the new middle class is more likely to have liberal attitudes.

The marginal middle class perceives there to be significantly more conflict of interest in Chinese society than other classes, namely the entrepreneur and old middle classes. Echoing the findings on social inequality, these results suggest that the middle classes with economic capital are more likely to hold conservative views, while the marginal middle class (the lower strata of the middle class) is more likely to hold liberal views and be more sympathetic towards disadvantaged groups and lower classes.

Final conclusion

There are striking differences in sociopolitical attitudes between classes, particularly between the new middle class and the working class. However, we cannot conclude that the middle class is simply more conservative or liberal than the working class. In some respects, such as in perceptions of social circumstances in Chinese society, the middle class is more conservative than the working class. In other respects, such as preferences regarding state authoritarianism, the middle class is more liberal than their working class counterparts.

More importantly, there are differences between the middle classes themselves in sociopolitical attitudes. The new middle class—the middle class with high cultural capital—holds a contradictory sociopolitical attitude. On one hand, they view state authoritarianism unfavorably, preferring a more democratic state; on the other hand, they display the highest levels of satisfaction with their current living standards and thus want to avoid sociopolitical change. The entrepreneur class and the old middle class—the middle class with high economic capital—hold relatively conservative political views. They are more likely to support state authoritarianism and are more accepting of social inequality. The marginal middle class—the lower strata of the middle class—holds the most liberal views. They are the least accepting of social inequality and state authoritarianism, and are the most sympathetic to the lower class.

Regression analyses suggest that age and education have partial effects on sociopolitical attitudes as well. Education is significantly positively correlated with liberalism, especially with having a preference for a more democratic government. As the middle class becomes more educated, liberal democratic attitudes may become more common in the future. It is worth noting that younger people also prefer a less authoritarian state and have lower confidence in the government, further implying that liberalism and support for democracy may be on the rise among the middle class as more young people enter it in the future.

Within the Chinese middle class, there is a diverse set of sociopolitical attitudes, ranging from conservative to liberal. Members of the middle class are largely satisfied with the current sociopolitical situation and have a high degree of confidence in the government. However, a portion of the middle class also has high expectations for political democracy and social justice. Such contradictory attitudes imply that the Chinese middle class may be inclined to choose the Third Road, a gradual sociopolitical transition. In that case, the Chinese middle class is presently serving as a sociopolitical stabilizer. However, there is a possibility that it may become a destabilizing force on the sociopolitical order in years to come.

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