Obstacles to Political Democratization for the Chinese Middle Class

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Introduction

Following three decades of swift economic growth (from 1978 to the present day), China has undergone a profound social transformation which has brought higher levels of income, education, and professional employment to a new group of Chinese people: the Chinese middle class. The emergence and rapid expansion of China's middle class caught the attention of contemporary China scholars, who have sought to study and understand the sociopolitical role this new group occupies. Since then, numerous debates have been sparked on what potential consequences this new middle class may have on China's current authoritarian political regime. At its core, these discussions are conducted around two opposing arguments: one which argues that the Chinese middle class *can* be a significant destabilizing agent for political democratization in China; while the other argues that the middle class *cannot* facilitate political democratization, as it is a politically stabilizing group in support of the current political order (Li, 2013, p. 12; Ying, 2010, p. 50).

These debates have been driven by wide-held expectations and assumptions projected by the media, analysts, and intellectuals alike, that the Chinese middle class would follow the same political trajectories of the middle class in other parts of the world. In particular, these assumptions draw upon earlier observations of the Western middle classes in 19th century Europe (Chen & Goodman, 2013, p. 5), and more recently the "third wave of democratization" in the Global South, as theorized by scholars like Samuel Huntington and Ronald Glassman (Rocca, 2017, p. 13 cited Glassman, 1997; Huntington, 1991). While the role of the middle class in these examples have been

questioned (Rocca, 2013, p. 112-114; Chen & Lu, 2011, p. 711 cited Bell, 1998 & Jones, 1998), scholars who are optimistic of the Chinese middle class as a democratizing force refer to the growing number of middle-class protests and online expressions of grievances as promising signs of the middle class' willingness to act towards political change (Weber, 2011; Li, 2010). However, many contemporary China scholars seem hesitant to draw these conclusions prematurely, suggesting that China's middle class may be more reluctant to upset the political status quo than expected.

This literature review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current scholarly debates surrounding the Chinese middle class, and whether it can become a force for democratization. In doing so, this review hopes to provide more clarity on a key academic puzzle regarding Chinese middle-class democratization, as posited by Andrew Nathan (2016): How can China's middle class support democratic values and sporadically demand democratizing change, yet still largely remain politically inactive and supportive of China's authoritarian regime? Furthermore, my review of the literature aims to provide some answers as to why the Chinese middle class acts this way, and what obstacles may currently exist to limit middle class actions towards democratization. This literature review is structured into four main parts. The first section of the paper introduces the two key axes of the debate on the democratizing role of the middle class, as well as further elaboration on the academic 'puzzle' within the study of China's middle class democratization. The following two sections will grapple with two broader categorizations of the obstacles for Chinese middle class democratization (including two sub-categories within each) – the 'cultural' and the

'structural' obstacles to political democratization. The final section will conclude with some further reflections on the future of Chinese middle class democratization.

"The Puzzle of the Chinese Middle Class": Unilinear and Contingent Theories of Democratization

Scholars seeking to understand the Chinese middle class have had to grapple between two distinct schools of thought regarding the sociopolitical role of the middle class: the 'unilinear' and the 'contingent' theories of political democratization (Chen & Lu, 2011, p. 706; Nathan, 2016, p. 7). The unilinear theory emerges from the broader assumptions of Tocquevillian modernization theory, and sees a unilinear relationship between economic modernization and political democratization (Chen & Lu, 2011, p. 706). Key proponents of the 'unilinear' theory – scholars like Lipset, Glassman, and Huntington – argue that economic modernization's increased levels of income, education, and social mobility inevitably creates a middle class with robust democratic leanings and attitudes (Chen & Lu, 2011, p. 706 cited Glassman 1997; Nathan 2016, cited Lipset 1959; Li 2013, p. 13 cited Lipset 1960). From new material interests and changing cultural values, stemming from higher levels of education and occupation, unilinear theorists see these attributes of the middle class as driving the "main thrust of the democratization movement" (Chen & Lu, 2011, p. 706 cited Hattori et. al 2013; Nathan 2016, p. 7).

Not exclusive to Western academic discourse, Chinese scholars have also made unilinear arguments for the democratizing role of China's middle class. Picking up the threads from early radical Chinese scholarship in the 1980's, more recent studies on

political attitudes and behavior boldly claim that China's middle class could potentially move on to destabilize the current political order (Li 2013, p. 13 cited Liu 1988 & Zhang 2009). Chinese scholars – like Li Peilin, Zhang Yi, Yuan Yue and Li Lulu – paint a picture of a more cynical, critical, and demanding middle class (Li 2010, p. 73-39 cited Yi 2008, Yue 2008, Lulu 2008). Notably, these scholars argue that China's middle class has shown an increased willingness to publicly protest and express their grievances, directly aiming these grievances at the Chinese central government (ibid.). Scholars like Yi have also suggested that a continued rise of government-caused dissatisfaction could herald a significant political 'destabilization' – such as the middle class demanding direct competitive elections (ibid.).

Despite these recent shifts, the majority of academic literature on China's middle class and democratization has since the 1990's belonged under a second school of thought: the 'contingent' theory of political democratization (Li 2013, p. 13; Ying 2016, p. 50). Contrary to the former, the contingent approach questions the implied teleological inevitability of political modernization in the unilinear argument. Instead, contingent theory argues that the transition towards democratization is contingent upon the existence of various sociopolitical and socioeconomic conditions (Chen & Lu, 2011, p. 706; Nathan 2016, p. 7). These conditions differ by country and are context-specific,[1] and may vary from the country's political culture and norms to the structural relationships between the socioeconomic classes and the state (ibid.). Much of the scholarship on the Chinese middle class and democratization has focused on identifying these socioeconomic and political factors. Scholars within this school of thought largely suggest that China's middle class is a 'stabilizing' force and is ultimately unlikely to lead

a democratization of the current authoritarian political order (Chen & Lu, 2011; Weber, 2011; Nathan, 2016; Chen & Goodman, 2013; Ying, 2016; Tsang, 2014; Rocca, 2017).

It is with these opposing schools of thought in mind that Andrew Nathan (2016) posits "the puzzle of the Chinese middle class". On the one hand, there is 'unilinear' evidence that the new Chinese middle class supports democratic ideals, and that it has acted in multiple instances to promote democratic changes (Chen & Lu, 2011; Weber, 2011; Li, 2010; Nathan, 2016). On the other hand, numerous academics are skeptical to these signs of democratization, as academic studies and surveys still observe high levels of approval for the current political regime, and low desires to act towards challenging it (Nathan, 2016; Ying, 2016; Chen & Lu, 2011). Many scholars of the Chinese middle class have sought to tackle this central puzzle: What factors could explain the paradox of the Chinese middle class, in having pro-democratic *beliefs*, but simultaneously exhibiting passive political *behavior* (Ying, 2016; Nathan, 2016)?

By uncovering the socioeconomic and political conditions which limit the Chinese middle class from taking democracy-oriented political action, the body of academic literature under the 'contingent' theory has identified many of the key obstacles to middle-class democratization in China. In the following review of the literature, I have further categorized these arguments into two broader categories: the 'cultural' and the 'structural' obstacles to democratization. In structuring the reading of the literature around these categories, I aim to more clearly distinguish and isolate the central issues and commonalities between the texts.

Understanding the Cultural Obstacles to Middle Class Democratization

The study of sociocultural factors in the literature on Chinese middle class democratization has led scholars to address some important defining questions: how does the Chinese middle class understand 'democracy' and 'democratization'? Interrelated with this: how does the Chinese middle class perceive its role in society? To answer these questions, the academic literature has explored the political culture of the Chinese middle class – the political norms, attitudes, and values that have shaped the Chinese middle class's actions, conceptualizations of democratic principles, and perceptions of itself as 'the middle class'.

Chinese Political Culture and 'Democratization'

Many empirical studies and surveys on Chinese middle class attitudes towards democratic principles have primarily focused on identifying the middle class's opinions on 'Western' conceptions of democratic norms, such as individual political liberties and popular democratic participation (Chen & Lu, 2011, p. 707; Ying, 2016, p. 57). These studies have illustrated what some pro-democratization scholars – like Li Lulu – argue is a gradual transition of Chinese attitudes towards Western transnational political values (Li 2010, p. 76 cited Lulu 2008). However, more critical China scholars have stressed the importance of studying the 'Chinese' cultural conceptions of democratic norms, as potential obstacles to democratization (Chen & Lu, 2011; Nathan, 2016; Weber, 2011; Ying, 2012). This section of the academic literature would argue that Chinese political culture, as a product of historical events and Confucian traditional values, conceptualizes democracy and democratic principles differently to its Western

counterparts (ibid.). In Chinese political culture's conceptions of social order and democracy, maintaining collective interests and harmonizing individuals with the social order is prioritized over pursuing principles of individual rights and liberties (Chen & Lu, 2011, p. 708 cited Nathan 1997; Weber 2011, p. 30 cited Brooks 1997; Nathan, 2016, p. 16). To scholars studying China's cultural obstacles to democratization, the Confucian political values of interdependence and vertical obligations to the state under a social hierarchy may factor into the more gradual development of individual rights consciousness in China (Weber 2011, p. 30 cited Wakemann 1993; Ying. 2016, p. 75).

Aside from Confucian influences on political culture, scholars like Timothy Brook suggest that the Chinese state has actively partaken in shaping China's political culture, to the point where any conception of democracy and public action has been appropriated or delegitimized by Chinese state ideology (Weber, 2001, p. 30 cited Brook 1997). This would in part explain Miao Ying's (2016) more nuanced take on political culture and the Chinese middle-class 'puzzle'. She describes a Chinese middle class that is aware and supportive of Western democratizing values, but is also deeply realistic of the difficulties of achieving reform without state support. This, she argues, has created a pragmatic political culture which largely supports and expects political change to be government-led (Ying 2016). Consequently, Ying draws a conclusion which is neither overtly optimistic or skeptical of the Chinese middle class as a democratizing force: instead, Yi sees the Chinese middle class as 'passive observers', who see China's current political culture "as it is" and attempt to maneuver politically within it (Ibid.). Ying's theory both reconciles Nathan's 'puzzle' – of democratic attitudes with concurrent support for Chinese state authoritarianism – and serves as a nuanced example of how

political culture may affect the *political imagination* of what is possible for China's middle-class and democratization.

Broadly speaking, the academic literature on Chinese conceptions of political culture and 'democracy' can be divided among the main axes of unilinear and contingent theory. On one side, 'unilinear' scholars see signs of Chinese cultural convergence with Western conceptions of 'democracy' (Li, 2010). On the other side, more critical scholarship under the 'contingent' approach has uncovered a series of context-specific 'patrimonial' (Weber, 2011) and 'paternalistic' (Ying, 2016, p. 73) cultural conceptions of Chinese social order, social obligations, and expectations of the state. Notably, scholars like Weber (2011) and Brook (1997) argue that these political cultures are important 'ideological blinds', which serve to limit the ability of China's middle class to recognize, imagine, and pursue emerging political opportunities (Weber, 2011, cited Brook 1997). This insight is important to keep in mind, with regards to the following section on Chinese political culture and their conceptions of the middle class.

Chinese Political Culture and 'The Middle Class'

In recent scholarship, theories on the political culture of China's middle class paint a negative picture in terms of their potential to realize and facilitate regime-altering democratization (Nathan, 2016; Ying, 2016; Tsang, 2014; Rocca, 2017). This pessimistic conclusion is drawn from two major obstacles identified by the academic literature. First, is the struggle of China's middle class to establish and perceive itself as a 'class-conscious' entity – one that is capable of mobilizing social capital through its members' shared interests and experiences (Tsang, 2014; Rocca, 2017; Nathan, 2016;

Weber, 2011). Second, there is a reluctance from the Chinese middle class to take upon itself the role of initiating political action towards democratization (Tsang, 2014; Rocca, 2016; Nathan, 2016; Ying, 2016).

The literature on the challenges of Chinese middle class formation broadly describes a "politically anesthetized" middle class (Nathan, 2016, p.14), which so far has failed to incorporate political involvement as a key element of its class identity (Nathan, 2016; Ying, 2016; Tsang, 2014; Rocca 2017). Eileen Tsang's (2014) studies on the Chinese middle class, particularly on class formation and political development, serves as a comprehensive review of the sociocultural factors that may affect the formation of China's middle class. Her final verdict on China's middle class formation is strict: she claims that the middle class has failed to form a political culture, has a weak degree of class awareness, and shows little evidence of class-based socialization – all important elements to constructing a middle-class consciousness of shared experiences (Tsang, 2014, p. 156; Rocca 2017). Tsang most pertinently illustrates the lack of middle-class identity formation by finding that a majority of her study's interviewees failed to even recognize themselves as middle class (Tsang, 2014, p. 153).

Most of the scholars critical of the Chinese middle class' political culture have also reached a similar conclusion: the Chinese middle class *do not* perceive themselves as vanguards of democracy or political change (Tsang, 2014; Chen & Lu, 2011; Nathan, 2016; Ying, 2016; Rocca, 2017). Furthermore, Ying's (2016) study on middle class attitudes to sociopolitical affairs found that many middle class respondents distanced themselves from people who take political action – who they characterized as rash, emotional, and easily manipulated – and generally identified themselves as 'stabilizers'

in Chinese society (Ying, 2016, p. 68-74). Jean-Louis Rocca (2017) has similarly characterized the Chinese middle class as a comparatively stabilizing force in society.

Two important questions have so far remained unanswered: *why* did middle class formation and political culture fail to emerge in China, and *how* does the Chinese middle class currently conceptualize its middle class identity? Notably, a subset of the academic literature converges around one sociocultural argument to answer both questions: a political and class-conscious middle class identity failed to materialize, in part because of an atomizing political culture which set material and economic indicators as the main characteristics of Chinese middle class identity (Tsang, 2014; Nathan, 2016; Rocca, 2016). Tsang (2016) explicitly indicts the Chinese middle class' hyper-consumption oriented culture for leaving no space to develop a middle class identity as a political group, and further traces this culture's origins to consumption as a 'life-style indicator' for the newly emerged middle class, which distinguishes its status from the rest of the population. Making similar arguments, Nathan (2016) characterizes the 'anesthetized' middle class as a result of a culture which produced a class identity where politics were under-prioritized in favor of career advancement and 'middle class consumption'. He further suggests that the relative newness of the Chinese middle class means they are still in the midst of forging a class identity, and may currently be doing so through emulating Western consumption habits.

Ultimately, Rocca (2017), in spirit with Tsang (2016) and Nathan (2016), argue that the emergence of China's middle-class consumer culture was part of a process to construct a 'civilized' cultural narrative of the new middle-class, which linked Chinese conceptions of *quality* ("*suzhi*") with consumption and improved lifestyles. Similar

arguments of a 'civilizing' narrative have also been used by Luigi Tomba (Nathan 2016, p. 12 cited Tomba) to describe the role of middle class neighborhood committees. One could speculate whether this 'civilized' cultural narrative of the middle class could explain their restraint and reluctance to take political action – especially in consideration of how Ying's (2016) middle class respondents found political actors 'emotional' and 'manipulated'. Rocca himself suggests that this cultural 'civility' narrative may explain the middle class's broad acceptance of "the rules of the game", in their preference for finding ways to maintain their prosperity and rights without changing the political regime (Rocca, 2017, p. 201).

Understanding the Structural Obstacles to Middle Class Democratization

Institutionalized State Dependence as an Obstacle for Middle Class Democratization

The broader category of *structural* obstacles to democratization addresses a particularly compelling area in which the academic literature converges – in the argument that the socioeconomic position of the middle class as the class *in the middle*, and its subsequent structural relationships with the other classes and the party-state, may itself be an obstacle to middle-class democratization (Chen & Lu, 2011; Ying, 2016; Nathan, 2016; Rocca, 2017).The broad categorization of 'structural' also applies to the institutional and dependent relationships which the middle-class has with the Chinese state. This state-constructed dependence has important effects on the prospects for Chinese middle class democratization and bears a review.

An often remarked institutional obstacle for middle class democratization in China has been the lack of legitimate avenues for middle-class associational life (Nathan, 2016, p. 11; Tsang, 2014, p. 154-156). Nathan (2016) reflects on the heavy hand of the Chinese state in their various strategies of coopting, suppressing, and delegitimizing new avenues of associational life in China – raising examples of the Chinese government crowding the public field with its many top-down mass organizations (Nathan, 2016, p. 11-12). Interestingly, both Nathan (2016) and Rocca (2013) see the most active middle class associational life occurring in homeowners' associations to contest construction and real-estate management companies. However, both scholars draw different conclusions on their potential for facilitating middle-class led democratization – whilst Nathan (2016) remains skeptical of the ability for homeowner's activism to scale at a class level against the political regime, Rocca (2013) emphasizes the importance of the long-term incremental political change that these micro-associations bring forth.

Another oft-cited institutional obstacle for the Chinese middle class arises from the middle class' clear and deep-rooted dependence on the Chinese party-state (Goodman & Chen, 2013; Chen & Lu, 2011; Nathan, 2016). This section of the academic literature broadly argues that the Chinese party state has been instrumental, in creating, employing, and materially supporting the majority of China's current middle class (Ibid.). Goodman & Chen (2013) uses this relationship to suggest a key difference between 19th Century Western entrepreneurial middle class democratization and the potential for Chinese entrepreneurial middle class democratization in the future. In contrast to the current Chinese middle class, 19th Century European entrepreneurs were

largely excluded from political power and participation, which propelled their organization and action towards democratization – this is significantly different from the case of China's new middle-class entrepreneurs, who rarely emerged outside of the state (Goodman & Chen, 2013, p. 5). Tomba's (Nathan 2016, p. 10 cited Tomba) studies on the active role of the Chinese government in creating a propertied and government-employed managerial middle class remain some of the clearest examples of Chinese middle class dependence on the Chinese party state. With these issues in mind, it should come as no surprise that recent academic scholarship on democratic attitudes find that entrepreneurs and the managerial middle class are likely to personally value individual political liberties, but are even more likely to favor Chinese state-party authoritarianism (Li, 2013; Chen & Lu, 2011).

Socioeconomic and Structural Relations as an Obstacle for Middle-Class Democratization

One particularly novel argument made in recent academic literature has been the suggestion that the *position* of the Chinese middle class in the 'middle', and its impact on the middle class's socioeconomic relations with China's upper, lower, and ruling classes, in itself is an obstacle for middle-class democratization (Chen & Lu, 2011; Ying, 2016; Nathan, 2016; Rocca, 2017). This argument within the literature explores the uncertainties, anxieties, and alienations of the Chinese middle class.

To start, studies on middle class attitudes towards democratic principles and sociopolitical affairs converge on an important finding: that the middle class judges democratization by evaluating its potential to upset the middle class' current wealth

privilege and beneficiary position in 'the middle' (Chen & Lu, 2011; Ying, 2016). This partially explains the middle class 'puzzle' – in their support of individual liberties, but unwillingness to 'reshuffle' the current social order (Ibid.). Nathan's (2016) observations further put this issue into perspective, as he points towards the Chinese middle class being comparatively *small* in size, in comparison to the mass group of lower class citizens. Both Nathan (2016) and Rocca (2017) argue that this social structure inherently serves as an obstacle for the middle class to be interested in democratization. Any political modernization in China, like the introduction of a representative democratic system of popular participation, would inherently benefit the majority lower class (Nathan, 2016; Rocca, 2017, p.211). As part of this argument, Rocca (2017) also argues that the 'civil' cultural narrative of the middle class inherently makes them skeptical of the lower class 'mob'. The structural and cultural obstacles to civilization converge at this point, and further supports one of our opening arguments: that the middle class *cannot* facilitate democratization and is a stabilizing group in support of China's current political order (Li, 2013, p. 12; Ying, 2010, p. 50).

Discussion: The 'Anxious' Middle Class and the Pursuit of Gradual Political Change

Nathan's (2016) reflections – on the turbulent history of the Chinese middle class since the crises of inflation and corruption culminated in the 1989 Tiananmen protests – paints a picture of an *anxious* political group: a middle class stuck between a secretive upper and ruling class and an overwhelming majority of lower-class, where the social ladder and positioning of any member of the middle class could shift quickly and

unpredictably. It is in a political system like this that the Chinese middle class' seemingly paradoxical and puzzling views on democratic belief and authoritarian support may reasonably coexist. Rocca (2016) finds that in these structural conditions, the long-term struggle over laws and regulations become the best way for the middle class to guarantee fair competition with the upper and ruling class (Rocca, 2016, p.206) without upsetting and risking the current political order. This insight further puts into perspective the importance and effectiveness of gradual political change for the middle class – examples ranging from legal changes pushed forth by homeowners' associations (Rocca, 2013), to localized middle-class NIMBY protests (Weber 2011) to informal private sector maneuvers influencing larger institutional reforms (Tsai 2007). These incremental, gradual, and context-specific fixes may be easily missed by analysts expecting large-scale, regime-changing democratic action (Rocca, 2013, p. 133; Weber, 2011, p. 31), but the cumulative impacts of these actions contribute to the long-term political change ultimately sought and preferred by the Chinese middle class (ibid.).

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