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**Does the Middle Class Call for Government Accountability? The Progressive Era American Middle Class versus the New Chinese Middle Class**

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The middle class is widely considered a potent agent of the sociopolitical transition toward democracy and the basis for a democratic government's continued existence (Chen, 2005).<sup>1</sup> The idea that middle class individuals think and act democratically is based mainly on analyses of Western societies,<sup>2</sup> including those of the American Progressive Movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in which the middle class made up a large portion of the citizens who rose up to organize against corrupt bureaucrats and politically-organized business and labor (Price, 1975). Although the view has been challenged,<sup>3</sup> the general consensus is that the Progressive Movement was middle class in mentality and that the rise of the middle class led to demands for more accountable government (Hofstadter, 1955; Mowry, 1951; Blair, 1967). China, however, seems to present an example in which middle class formation is not leading to more accountable government. In the thirty years since China's "opening and reform" of 1978, corruption has increased (Kwong, 1997) and many of the political reforms that have been instituted, such as greater press freedom and election of cadres, have been repealed (Lo, 1993).<sup>4</sup> Although there have been other factors which have blocked increased Chinese government accountability, such as the internal struggle between reformists and conservatives within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), this puzzle may be explained to some extent by differences between the new Chinese middle class and the middle class that organized the American Progressive Movement, namely the dissimilarities between the two nations' traditional culture of relationships, the history and background of the members of the middle class, and motivations of the middle class.

## TRADITIONAL CULTURE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Democratic institutions in America make it more likely that the people will demand accountable government while Confucian and Communist history and culture have encouraged the Chinese people not to call for government accountability. This section will contrast the two countries' cultures of how people interact with each other and with their government and argue that because of their traditional institutions, history, and culture, the Chinese people in general are less likely than Americans to call for government accountability.

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1 Chen cites Lipset 1959; Dahl 1971; Rueschemeyer and Stephenses 1992; Fukuyama 1993; Huntington 1991; Glassman 1995 and 1997 as examples.

2 Chen cites Eulau 1956a and 1956b; Nie, Powell, and Prewitt 1969; Milbrath 1977; Walsh, Jennings, and Stoker 2004; Lipset 1959 and 1981; Glassman 1995 and 1997 as examples.

3 Price cites examples of Michael P. Rogin and John T. Shover, *Political Change in California: Critical Elections and Social Movements 1890-1966* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 35-61, who contend that the Progressive Movement was only middle class until 1910, when working class voters and new immigrants joined the movement, and Roger E. Wyman, "Middle Class Voters and Progressive Reform: The Conflict of Class and Culture," *American Political Science Review*, 68 (June 1974), 488-504, who claim that Wisconsin Progressive support tended to come from the poor, rural portions of the state and that nationwide Progressive Movement support was constantly shifting to new voting coalitions.

4 China had passed measures calling for greater press freedom and election of cadres in 1987-88, but these were repealed after the Tiananmen Incident of 1989.

The traditional relationships between the people and their government in the United States contrast starkly with those in China, as Americans have always had the right to organize, question their government, and demand accountability from their leaders. The United States was founded on the concept that “all men are created equal” and “they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights” of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Declaration of Independence, 1776). Throughout their history, the American people have exercised their right to hold their government accountable by maintaining a free press, encouraging public debate on both substantive issues and on the effectiveness of government, and ultimately voting out candidates they think do not represent their interests. For example, during the Progressive Era, the American people, led by the middle class and spurred by muckraking journalists' revelations of corruption, organized to form civil organizations whose goals were to bring people together to call for the expansion of their rights to hold government accountable (Mowry, 1949). At that time, they were successful in passing such reforms as the recall, referendum, initiative, and secret ballot, which further increased Americans' ability to hold their government accountable (Chambers, 1980).

Chinese state and society is heavily influenced by Confucianism, which as an ideology is ademocratic. Confucianism opposes despotism, defends people's rights and interests, advocates active participation in politics, places a premium on civic virtue, and has strong egalitarian tendencies in socioeconomic terms (Hu, 2000). Importantly, it differs from Western democratic ideals in that it does not provide for popular sovereignty or individual liberty. Confucianism accepts and beautifies hierarchy; in a Confucian society, young obey old, women obey men, and “those who labor with their minds govern others; those who labor with their strength are governed by others” (Mencius). Confucius argued that “under a virtuous rule the orders of the government will be effective even though they are not followed by law and punishment; and that under a corrupt rule the people will not obey the orders of the government even though they are liable to severe punishment,” obviating the need for the rule of law (Hu, 2000). Without the rule of law in a hierarchical society, Confucianism provides no effective mechanism to hold government accountable.

When Confucianism was adopted by the Chinese state, its ideals were used to support a more than two-millennia-long dynastic system which was “authoritarian at best and despotic and worst” (Hu, 2000). Confucianism contributed to authoritarian rule by placing more emphasis on the loyalty of the ruled toward the ruler, creating a conservative mentality, and suppressing other schools or thought. Although Confucius also called for benevolence on the part of rulers, the Chinese state emphasized the notion of the necessary obedience of subjects toward their rulers, which was further reinforced by the strength of family values and of subservience to elders. There was little pluralism under Confucianism, which emphasized conformity and hierarchy, and “while the intellectual stagnation which followed the apotheosis of Confucianism constituted one of the biggest tragedies in Chinese history, it certainly helped preserve authoritarian rule in

China” (Hu, 2000). Politically-minded civil society organizations did not have a place in Confucian China, where there were only the ruler and the ruled. The latter were not in a moral, Confucian position to hold their leaders accountable; rather, it was the rulers' responsibility to be benevolent. This is reflected in the attitudes of China's new middle class. David Jones Martin's (1998) argues that “the selective cultivation of traditional high cultural values of passivity and group conformity” go against “individualism, rule of law, and critical public debate.” In China today, “political change reflects a conservative, managerial strategy to amplify political control by forging a new relationship with an arriviste middle class” which also desires the certainty that this relationship provides (Martin, 1998).

In recent times, the Communist Party's crackdowns on those who call for political reform have warned the Chinese people not to call for government accountability. When the CCP first came to power, land reform was passed, stripping landlords of their land rights and empowering the peasants by forming village organizations (Spence, 2001). Peasants were encouraged to denounce their landlords and many did so. During the Hundred Flowers Movement,<sup>5</sup> intellectuals were encouraged to voice their opinions regarding the Party and give advice on how to make the CCP stronger. When intellectuals responded with sharp attacks which shook the foundation of the Party, Chairman Mao quickly reversed his policy and began suppressing and denouncing them in Anti-Rightist Campaigns. During the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, which was the CCP's attack on the “Four Olds” (old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas), student Red Guards persecuted professors, party members, state bureaucrats, and others, and between 750,000 and 3 million people were killed (MacFarquhar, 2006). Conformity with the Party line was paramount, and those who spoke out against the Party were summarily punished (Esherick, 2006). In 1989, the Chinese government's violent repression of students calling for democracy and bureaucratic reform in Tiananmen Square further exemplified the CCP's attitude toward those who demand increased accountability. Living in an environment where political dissidence has been punished severely serves as a warning to every Chinese person with the desire to call for its government to be more accountable.

## **HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF THE MIDDLE CLASS**

The middle class in America has a much longer and richer history than its counterpart in China, where the middle class were persecuted for much of Communist China's history. This section will introduce the histories of the middle classes in the two countries and argue that while the middle class-driven American Progressives coalesced around ideas of certain values in order to call for government accountability, the new Chinese middle class has no such cohesion and is therefore less apt to call for government accountability outside of the economic sector.

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<sup>5</sup> The Hundred Flowers Movement is called such because of Mao's declaration at the beginning of it, calling on all intellectuals to contribute: “May a hundred flowers blossom, may a hundred schools of thought contend” (Mao Zedong, 1956).

Whereas in the United States being middle class has historically been something to aspire to, in early Communist China the middle class was condemned. In America, the middle class holds “a sense of values... [and] a belief in 'law and order'” and “is comprised of individuals who made money... by earning it” (Bhalla, 2007). Middle class values tend to emphasize independence, innovation, and merit (Gilbert, 1998). In addition, the American middle class has historically been very influential, as they encompass the majority of voters, teachers, and journalists, and most societal trends in the US originate within the middle classes (Ehrenreich, 1989). During the Progressive Movement, the middle class members who spurred political reform came from a wide range of occupational backgrounds and coalesced around the ideas of a “moral calculus, spirit of benevolence, faith in men, and reverence for democracy” (Mowry, 1949). In specifically defining the California Progressives, historian George Mowry describes them as:

members of an old group in America. Whether businessmen, successful farmers, professional people, or politicians, they had engaged in extremely individualistic pursuits and had since the decline of the colonial aristocracy supplied most of the nation's intellectual, moral, and political leadership. Still confident that they possessed most of society's virtues, the California progressives were acutely aware in 1905 that many of society's standards and badges of merit were going elsewhere. Although finely educated, they were all but excluded from politics unless they accepted either corporate or labor domination, a thing they were exceedingly loath to do. Their church, their personal morality, and their concept of law, they felt, were demeaned by the crude power struggle between capital and labor (Mowry, 1949).

The middle class during the Progressive Movement, while they did not all share the same background, came together under the common goal of holding corrupt bureaucrats accountable for their actions and attempting to separate politics from big business and big labor.

In early Communist China, by contrast, being middle class meant being “bourgeois” and therefore was considered a negative in society. Although Mao Zedong was not a strict Marxist-Leninist, he took many of his ideas from Communist thinkers such as Karl Marx, who said that “by 'individual' you mean no other person than the bourgeois, than the middle-class owner of property. This person must, indeed, be swept out of the way, and made impossible” (Bhalla, 2007). To be bourgeois and middle class in early Communist China was to be persecuted, in campaigns such as the Five-Anti Campaign of 1952 which was a “direct and bitter denunciation of the bourgeoisie as a class” (Lo, 1993).

The negative outlook that Communist China has historically had toward its middle class means that there has been little developed traditional middle class identity and few distinct “middle class values” and therefore little reason to hold the government accountable in defense of these

values. While Chairman Mao was in power, the middle class was condemned and persecuted and a mentality of shame surrounded the few belonging to this class (Esherick, 2006). During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards broke up any middle class families that remained after the Anti-Rightist Campaigns. Because of this, the Chinese middle class largely did not exist until after Deng Xiaoping came into power in 1978. At that time, Chairman Deng relaxed some of the CCP's Maoist ideology and introduced sweeping economic reforms, privatizing many state-owned enterprises, introducing a competitive pricing system, and allowing international trade and investment (Spence, 2001). The Chinese middle has grown tremendously since that time, going “from a near zero level of middle class to around 15 to 20 percent” in 1992 (Bhalla, 2007). The middle class now incorporates between 15% and 60% of the population, depending on whose definition one chooses to use (Chen, 2005 and Easterly, 2001, see next paragraph for discussion), and this large group has diverse interests. Because of this, the new Chinese middle class does not coalesce either around traditional values and ideals or a particular category of social interest and action (Robinson and Goodman, 1996), and since they do not have common interests to defend, the new Chinese middle class is not inclined to call for government accountability and greater political liberties. Indeed, “while most members of China's middle class favor individual rights, they continue to shun political liberties—such as freedom to demonstrate or to form organizations—and are not enthusiastic about participating in government affairs or interested in democratic institutions such as fully competitive elections” (Chen, 2009).

The values that the new Chinese middle class does share are not Progressive middle class values of a reverence for democracy; rather, they are centered around the retention of their newfound material well-being, much of which they attribute to the economic reform policies of the CCP in the past thirty years. The new Chinese middle class can be defined in multiple ways: some use a subjective approach where people define themselves by their own self-perceptions,<sup>6</sup> others use an quantitative objective approach where people are defined as middle class by either an income cut-off or certain percentages of the median income,<sup>7</sup> and still others use qualitative objective approach by using typically middle class occupations to define the middle class, and there are pros and cons to each method (Chen, 2005). The one most often used by academics studying the Chinese middle class is the occupations approach, and those occupations which are considered to be part of the middle class are white collar professionals, private entrepreneurs, and managerial personnel (Chen, 2005). Many of these positions did not exist before China's opening and reform of 1978 and the economic reforms which followed. Because of this, many of the middle class attribute their current and future fortunes to favorable policies put in place by the CCP, leading them to prefer the political status quo rather than call for more government accountability (Dickson, 2008).

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6 For example, Lipset in his 1968 work uses this method.

7 Joyce Yanyun Man, for example, uses either the 75-125% of median income or the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> middle 10% as a measure.

## MOTIVATIONS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

The middle class in the American Progressive Movement wanted a return to the old way of life of moral democracy while the Chinese middle class are chasing a new lifestyle in which material wealth plays a central role. This section will argue that the main goal of the new Chinese middle class is money, for which it needs social stability, both which are conducive to the current Chinese government continuing to have unchecked power, its own main goal. Because the motivations of the middle class and the CCP go hand-in-hand, both parties have incentives to preserve the political status quo while attempting to deepen their connections.

In the American Progressive Movement, the goals of the middle class were to provide equality of opportunity for all and to return to a way of life free from massive bureaucratic corruption and politically-organized business and labor. The Progressives were against the alcohol trafficking, prostitution, gambling, and other social vices they attributed to the industrialization of America (Hays, 1957). Progressives also sought to stave off big politically-organized labor and business; indeed,

what troubled these independent progressives about both organized capital and labor was not alone a matter of economics but included questions of high politics, as well as group prestige, group morality, and group power. Involved also was the rising threat to an old American way of life which they represented and which they enthusiastically considered good (Mowry, 1949).

In pursuing this “old American way of life,” the Progressives sought a capitalist commonwealth “where none were for a class and all were for the state. Where the rich man helped the poor and the poor man loved the great” (Mowry, 1949 quoting the Fresno *Republican*). In essence, the middle class Progressive wanted to take away the unfair advantages they perceived big business and labor tied to corrupt politicians as having and give more to the rest of Americans.

In contrast to the Progressives' seemingly moral and socialist motivations, the middle class in (nominally) Communist China is moving toward an ever more capitalist pursuit of individual material wealth, which the regime has encouraged because this pursuit distracts from other discontents the Chinese may have and further increases the regime's legitimacy. The economic plight of many Chinese in recent history is a strong motivating factor for its thirst for material wealth, as “the economic deprivation under central planning and the failure of the Great Leap, the lawlessness of the Cultural Revolution” has driven a “‘getting rich is glorious’ attitude after market reform and during a period of rapid increase in real income” (Chow, 2005). Furthermore, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China's urban educated classes have been at the forefront of



organized unrest,<sup>8</sup> and the government is actively pursuing policies that would decrease incentives for the middle class to rise up against it. Many argue that after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident in which the regime cracked down on students calling for democracy, the CCP has consciously stressed the importance of material gain in order to placate the Chinese people and reestablish their own legitimacy (Lo, 1993). Bruce Dickson and Jie Chen (2002) argue that,

the more the capitalists are satisfied with the government's policy performance and their material and social lives, the more they are likely to support the status quo. This is the wager the CCP is making: improved governance and living standards are designed to enhance popular support and as a result dampen demands for more fundamental political reform. (2008)

The CCP has been largely successful, as half of university students in one survey said that money is as important as, or more important than, having ideals (Unger, 2006). Finally, the CCP has encouraged a reversal of the Mao-era disdain and hostile treatment of the “bourgeois” middle class, as well as relaxed its communist ideal of egalitarianism. In the 1980s it put forth such slogans as “Don't be afraid to be rich” and “Let a few get rich first, then the rest will follow suit” (Goodman, 1996). In July 2001 the Party further conferred Communist legitimacy on the “capitalist” class when President Jiang Zemin's announced his Three Represents<sup>9</sup> ideology (later enshrined in the Party constitution), which led to an increased in the number of CCP membership by private businessmen and entrepreneurs (An Chen, 2002). With their efforts supported by the state, their pockets lined and their stomachs full, it is in the middle class' interest to preserve the political status quo by not demanding government accountability.

The new Chinese middle class' shared goal is to maintain and increase their newfound material wealth, in which the continued power of the current Chinese government plays a convenient role. The Chinese middle class' shared values include an appreciation for their middle class lifestyle, a belief in the market at home and economic globalization abroad, support for the protection of private property rights, public policy which emphasizes education, and social stability (Cheng Li, 2009). These values lend themselves to holding the government accountable mainly on issues which affect them economically. In both response to middle class pressure and in an effort to shore up its own legitimacy, in the last decade the CCP has instituted significant banking sector and education reforms, increased salaries of government employees, and passed laws that encourage private businesses (Spence, 2001). Having “benefited from the market reform, China's middle classes have vested interests in its continuation” and so the Chinese middle class has a “personal stake in preventing regime change” (An Chen, 2002). Furthermore, many of the businessmen and private entrepreneurs which make up much of the current middle class have

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8 The May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement of the 1919, the Hundred Flowers Movement of 1957, and the Tiananmen protests of 1989 were led by students, intellectuals or other educated populations.

9 The official statement of the ideology stipulates that the Communist Party of China should be representative to advanced social productive forces, advanced culture, and the interests of the overwhelming majority.

gotten there through “crony communism,” in which Party members and former state-owned enterprise managers during the 1980s and 1990s took the lead in getting rich to show other people in society that it was possible to get rich and still not get into political trouble (Dickson, 2008). They benefited from CCP membership in that they had easier access to capital, more knowledge about markets, and a better understanding of technology. Other capitalists have gotten co-opted into the party after they became successful because of Jiang's Three Represents ideology. “Crony communism” encourages a relationship of mutual dependence between the state and these businessmen. Finally, businessmen often “require labor-repressive state power to maximize business profits” (An Chen, 2002). On this front, the CCP has clearly chosen business over labor. It has defended the profits of business interests at home and abroad and encouraged exports by keeping its exchange rate artificially low and suppressing prices of inputs like land and energy, and allowing state-owned enterprises to reinvest all of their profits by not requiring them to pay dividends (The Economist, 2009). Meanwhile, the Chinese social safety net does not adequately protect the working class, whose savings rates are extremely high as a form of self insurance. All of the ways in which the CCP is playing a role in increasing the material wealth of the members of the Chinese middle class’ leads them to want to maintain the continued power of the current Chinese government and further decreases their incentive to call for true government accountability in any form that might threaten the regime.

The middle class' secondary goal is social stability, and while some of its members profess interest in the idea of government accountability, they has no incentive to call for any significant CCP reform which might upset the delicately-balanced current system. The Party's slogan is “social stability is above all” and the middle class is a strong endorser of this (An Chen, 2002). The Party is quick to remind the middle class that any political instability or unpredictability will hurt their business interests, and its threat to crack down on those who would cause such instability is quite clear (Dickson, 2008). In An Chen's 2002 study, he finds that:

quite a few middle-class members showed a strong interest in such ideas as political pluralism and multiparty systems. This interest could be logically interpreted as a preference for civil society. But these people hardly displayed enthusiasm for promoting such a civil society with their own efforts. Nor did they desire to make themselves the building blocks of civil society by resisting the regime's attempt to maintain control. The middle classes may not resort to state power for getting rich, but they could not afford to offend the regime, which maintains formidable sanctions against them.

The middle class is also wary of the lower class, and its members are aware that if China's 800 million peasants were allowed to vote in multi-party, nationwide elections, the results might not be conducive to them maintaining their level of wealth and influence on government policy (Unger, 2006). In order to maintain the continued growth of their material wealth, the middle

class requires the social stability that the current regime provides, which decreases its incentive to demand government accountability.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

The rise of the middle class has widely been considered the basis for increased government accountability, and the middle class movements which demanded reforms such as the recall, referendum and secret ballot during the American Progressive Movement are a prime example of this. The rise of the middle class in China, however, has not led to more accountable government. This paper has argued that this can be explained by the dissimilarities between the Chinese middle class and the middle class that organized the American Progressive Movement. The Chinese traditional culture of relationships is such that Chinese civilizations have always lived in societies in which hierarchical relationships were valued and had a recent history in which political dissidence has been consistently and violently repressed. The middle class in China was vilified and persecuted under Chairman Mao and there is no cohesive set of middle class ideals which would lend the middle class to call for increased government accountability. The main motivation of the China is to maintain and increase its material wealth, which CCP reforms and partnerships have been instrumental in providing.

Despite these pessimistic conclusions, the middle class in China may yet hold their government accountable at some future point in time. If China's economic growth rates slow down significantly, the legitimacy of the regime may be challenged and the middle class' connection toward protecting the regime will not be as strong, as the CCP will no longer be providing it with material wealth. It is not realistic to expect this to happen in the near future, given China's current economic growth trends. One very encouraging fact is that the Chinese middle class is growing rapidly. According to Edward Muller, economic development would favor democratization if it could alter the “pyramid-shaped social stratification system” to a “diamond shape, in which the majority of the population is middle class and relatively well-off” (An Chen, 2002). This may yet prove to be the case.

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