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The Middle Class in Neoliberal China

Governing risk, life-building, and themed spaces

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Introduction

The risk economy of the middle class

During my fieldwork in Chengdu in 2007, an unemployed resident from the city's poor working-class community advised me:

> If you want to understand changes and transformation in China, you cannot just look here [the poor neighborhood], you should go to the central areas of the city to experience the lives of mainstream society. In the process of social transformation, some people's lives become better and some become worse. People here are in the latter situation. But overall, China gets better and society becomes more peaceful.

I said: "Many have given lots of attention to mainstream society. Shouldn't scholars look at the poor's struggles for making a living and their insecurities in their daily lives?" Without hesitation, he responded:

> It is no use to consider the problems of marginalized people. China's future is represented by mainstream society. If you look at the United States, there have been so many problems such as racism, crimes, and rising income gaps between the rich and the poor. However, the United States is so stable.

This conversation, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 6, points to three major themes in this study of the middle class in contemporary China. The first is the importance of the changing relationship between two groups of people, as my informant indicates, between the "mainstreamers" (*zhuliu renshi*) or the people of "mainstream society" (*zhuliu shehui*) and the people of the "disadvantaged group" (*ruoshi qunti*), that is, between the benefactors of neoliberal development since the late 1970s and those who have been repositioned from being "the masters of the state" to becoming vulnerable and despairing. To consider the historical formation of this class relationship, this book examines how the production, consumption, and accumulation of wealth and risk during China's neoliberalization in the past three decades led to social differentiation. This is one critical issue in my investigation of how the anticipation of a "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*) by the Chinese government hinges on the middle class, which I analyze as a dispositive, a strategic and technical configuration of elements and forces, practices and discourses, power and knowledge.

Second, as my informant argues, the built environment itself must be taken seriously. This study recognizes the differentiation between the two kinds of built environments that are mentioned above, that is, a wearing out and deteriorating working-class community and a vibrant, fast-growing and ever-transforming city center. More importantly, the book explores problems of border, migration, orientation (such as direction, turn, path, intersection), and speed by situating class within the mundane practice of daily life, including but not limited to housing, employment, consumption, and leisure. To understand how the production of space underlies class formation, the book examines the production and consumption of themed spaces – built environments that are meaningfully produced through imagineering, a technology of story-telling that is often associated with Disney's theme parks – and uses of media (for example, analog and digital photo and video cameras) within themed spaces.

The third theme of the book, inseparable from the above two (neoliberal transformation and spatial production), is the ways in which the middle class becomes recognized as a norm of citizenship in the practice of everyday life. The conversation above is one example of recognizing the middle-class norm. My respondent clearly acknowledges the middle-class norm despite being an unemployed disenfranchised figure who is already marked by mainstream media as not fitting into the middle-class norm. This situation shows that middle-class subject formation in the practice of everyday life is relational, and thus, does not apply exclusively to those who are already marked as "middle classes" in various statistical, media, and marketing representations. For the purpose of my study, such questions as who may qualify as a middle class and how many Chinese are middle classes are secondary. Instead, this work focuses on how the middle-class norm is developed and recognized across society and how society, in turn, is being transformed as a result.

Building on my previous book on China's neoliberalization since the late 1970s,[1] this book concerns the rise of the Chinese middle class as a matter of risk society. The historical transformation of the People's Republic of China from a socialist country to a neoliberal state, which corresponded with the fundamental changes of the state's political representation of its people during the historical events of the Chinese government's resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong (1978–1997), leads to the development of Chinese society into a risk society. The rise of the middle-class question in China is related to many profound changes of the state and society in this process. How do we understand the history, politics, and social realities of the Chinese middle class? Currently, the studies of the middle class in human and social sciences are dominated by three intellectual and analytical frameworks, each of which is based on one of the following perspectives: the Marxian idea of class relation, the Weberian concepts of social status and life chance, and the Habermasian idea of public sphere. These frameworks have also influenced the scholarship on the Chinese middle class. The Marxian and the Weberian models tend to be antagonist due to the fact that the former focuses on class-based contradictions that may undermine the economic-political system (e.g., capitalism) while the

latter emphasizes an individual's practices in overcoming life obstacles that may or may not be structural or system-wide. Habermas offers a third approach, but is unable to address the incompatibility between the first two. In this book, I propose a theory of class from the Foucauldian perspective of the dispositive (*dispositif* in French or *dispositivo* in Italian). This approach helps us to move across the lines marked by the three dominant models through addressing the middle class as a multilinear ensemble. As suggested by the conversation in the beginning of this chapter, the dispositive of the middle class is assembled around several lines of distribution: of power, wealth, and risk through a neoliberal economy; of the sensible through media and communication; and of values and norms through individualization. Before discussing these lines in detail, I would like to briefly review the three dominant theoretical models in social and human sciences, as well as their influences in Chinese studies.

Studies of the middle class in social and human sciences

The English term, "middle class," may designate a group or a collection of closely related groups. The terms commonly used to characterize the middle class include "the bourgeoisie," "petty bourgeoisie," "the middle class," "the middle classes," "the middle stratum," and "the middle strata." Their meanings and related issues and problems in social and human sciences are diverse, but generally, derive from three major intellectual traditions: Marxian, Weberian, and Habermasian.[2]

In the Marxian intellectual tradition, the middle class refers to the "bourgeoisie," a term from the old French word "*burgeis*" (an inhabitant of a market town), which originally derived from the Latin "*burgus*" (fortress or castle), a gated built environment. Marxian scholars focus on the bourgeoisie's varied degrees of proximities to the "means of production," and consequently, their manifestations in social, economic, and political relations. The bourgeoisie as a group or a collection of subgroups does not exist in isolation; it is part of a broad socioeconomic spectrum of class formation. Compared with the "aristocrats" (landowners and/or those who inherit property and wealth), the bourgeoisie's power comes from ownership of the means of production, and employment. Thus, for Marxian scholars, it is imperative for any study of the bourgeoisie to consider, if not to include, its relation to other classes. In the transition from feudal to capitalist society, the bourgeoisie is the leading social group; it represents change, progress, and even revolution. In industrial capitalism, the bourgeoisie becomes conservative and maintains an ideology of the capitalist social order. While they control the means of production and the ideological apparatuses of the capitalist state, the proletariat are waged workers who have no other means of livelihood; they can only sell their labor power to property owners. The antagonism between the two classes takes the form of ongoing class struggle in the capitalist society. Thus, the bourgeoisie as a class is a *relational* category, always defined against and in tension with its dialectical others.[3]

Compared with the Marxian notion of the middle class as the bourgeoisie who permanently engages in class struggle with the working class, the Weberian intellectual tradition refers to the middle class as "intermediate" strata, a group of people "who have all sorts of property, or of marketable abilities through training, who are in a position to draw their support from these sources."[4] Thus, the Weberian notion of the middle class means both an economic position (in relation to "the production and acquisition of goods" in the market) and a social status (in relation to honor, prestige, and religion), which may be formed through "their *consumption* of goods as represented by special 'styles of life'."[5] Furthermore, C. Wright Mills argues that "occupation" becomes the major criterion for defining the rising new middle classes in the twentieth century, rather than "property," which characterizes the old bourgeoisie. His term "white collar," which he used to refer to the rising "American middle classes,"[6] has become widely accepted around the world as a substitute for the term "the middle class." The use of this new term reflects an enlarged gap between the Weberian and the Marxian perspectives. In the United States and in China, as I will discuss below, a term like "white collar" offers a strategic choice for referencing to the middle class without explicitly mentioning the word "class." This understanding of the middle class has the tendency to ignore social or political antagonism between classes. Instead, it regards antagonism as a problem of continual struggle in overcoming bureaucratic restrictions.

Whereas Karl Marx focuses on class antagonism and struggle, Max Weber is primarily concerned with capitalist bureaucracy and social organization. He addresses such issues as morality, religion, and rationality to search for an ideal form of capitalism. For this reason, he pays attention to the conduct of professionals, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals. The "ideal type of man" in modern capitalism, he argues, possesses a type of personality uniquely suitable for "capitalist conduct."[7] This is the puritan individual featured in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber's figure of the middle class is always hungry for freedom, whether becoming independent of bureaucracy, self-managing the life-building process, or becoming capable of calculating life chances. The Weberian figure of the ideal middle class is the intellectual hero in the contemporary liberal and neoliberal theories. For Gary Becker, for example, the hero's "exceptional" quality is always based on the accumulation of human capital, through knowledge (educational investment in particular)[8] rather than through other means such as bravery, charisma, grace, and magic. Consequently, this exceptional quality may become normative when human capital (on the basis of synthesizing knowledge, wisdom, logos, rhetoric, and/or communication) is rationally used in connection with power (juridical, administrative, but more importantly, economic). If Weber's hero, a rare species in modern capitalism, cannot escape from his religious and cultural backgrounds, Becker's hero is the rational "economic man" (*homo economicus*) who is capable of transgressing the rules and laws of bureaucratic capitalism.[9] No longer a typical exemplary bourgeois, this new hero is an average individual who follows common sense in conducting his or her life.

Growing out of the Marxian and Weberian intellectual traditions, the Habermasian scholars focus on the theorization of "public sphere" and its expressive forms. Jürgen Habermas defines the "bourgeois public sphere" as "the sphere of private people come together as a public."[10] This public sphere mediates between the realms of commodity exchange, social labor (the market), and "public authority" (the state and the ruling class) through the vehicle of "public opinion." Thus, Habermas' notion of public sphere becomes tied to the idea of "participatory democracy," the way in which public opinion becomes political action. Like Marx, Habermas considers the public sphere *bourgeois* because of its historical ties to property ownership. However, he adds education – and the way in which education may create public opinion though communicative action – as another "characteristic attribute" of this public sphere.[11] This view moves his position closer to Weber than to Marx. His theory of the public sphere has inspired many scholars to argue for encompassing those previously excluded by the bourgeois public: for example, women, ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities.[12]

Although the above three theoretical models are based on the understanding of historical and cultural experiences of a few countries, especially Western European countries (France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom) and the United States, they have dominated the studies of the middle class in social and human sciences. Beyond the Western context, they have all affected the scholarship on the middle class in China. For the purpose of comparison, I first briefly discuss three examples of anthropological studies of the middle class (in South Asia, the Caribbean, and the United States) as a way to understand how these theoretical models travel and how they are used to interpret situated practices and experiences across the globe.

In South Asian studies, Mark Liechty's study of middle-class cultural practice in Kathmandu, Nepal, is one of the few such book-length ethnographic studies. His study aims at uniting "a Weberian sensitivity to the powerful role of culture in social life with a Marxian commitment to locate different forms of cultural practice in the context of unequal distribution of power and resources in society."[13] In doing so, he regards the middle class in Nepal as "a domain of *internally competing* cultural strategies, systems of prestige ('status'), and forms of 'capital' that are not, strictly speaking, economic," and argues that the internal dynamic is part of "a middle-class project to construct itself in *opposition* to its class others, above and below."[14] Although he follows Marx to recognize class antagonism, he actually relies on Weber to break away from Marx in his treatment of the middle-class cultural practice in Nepal. Theoretically, for Liechty, Weber moves beyond Marx in two ways. For one, according to Weber, "the middle class relates to the economic processes not primarily as sellers of labor (workers) or owners of capital (the capitalist elite) but as *consumers* of goods in the market place."[15] Compared with the workers who earn "wages" and capitalists who earn "dividends," members of the middle class earn "salaries." Liechty argues that "salaries" suggests "a certain *moral* distance from 'mere' laboring and 'mere' wealth."[16] This insight comes from Weber's discussion of the moral/moralizing tendency of middle-class discourse. This middle-class identity is

based on "accomplishments" and "refinements," which are "moral discourses that ... [the middle class] pursues largely through its privileged access to goods and services (from education to fashions) in the 'free' market."[17] In addition to the relation of the middle class to the economic process, Weber also understands the way in which status competition performs within the middle class as people seek to gain distinction. In this regard, such practices as education, fashion and media consumption may affect the internal dynamic of the middle-class formation. Moreover, in the cultural context of Nepal, Weber's ideas about morality and status seem to be a useful tool to the understanding of the relationship between two moral forces, the local and religious (and thus classless) force of "caste," and the global and market force of "class." Liechty argues that in the practice of everyday life, "the moral (and economic) logic of caste" becomes subordinated to "the economic (and moral) logic of class."[18] In this process, however, the social valence of caste does not vanish. Such issues as honor and prestige, important to the traditional caste system, maintain their importance. Weber's distinction between economic position and social status in his discussion of life chances of the middle class becomes useful in the understanding of this middle-class formation in Nepal. In sum, Liechty's study illustrates an important connection between the understanding of a cultural practice and the selection of an appropriate theoretical model. More explicitly, Marx is less relevant than Weber in the analysis of the South Asian caste system and its transformation.

Compared with South Asia where the caste system (and its changes in relation to British colonialism and the market economy) is a dominant theme in English language scholarship, the Caribbean is preoccupied with a global political economy of colonialism.[19] Consequently, the Marxian theories of political economy and class (its structure, formation, and consciousness) dominate the landscape of academic studies of the region. Studies of the middle class occupy a relatively marginal place in the Caribbean studies. As Carla Freeman's survey of ethnographic studies observes, "the middle class remains a relatively underexplored and ambivalent domain," and "the avoidance and uneasiness toward the middle class subject reflects the dominance of certain analytical traditions and gatekeeping concepts in the field."[20] "[E]ven in ethnographic works that do address middle class subjects," Freeman argues,

> there lurks a skepticism, an unsympathetic suspicion of cultural inauthenticity and economic/political corruption, among these groups who are seen as colonial or neocolonial mimics eagerly aspiring to climb the class/status hierarchy by exploiting the more ethnographically worthy lower and working classes.[21]

In light of this regional scholarly tradition, Freeman's study of Barbadian middle-class entrepreneurs' marriage practices explores the intersection of two issues: middle-class "respectability" (a set of values and mores hierarchically encoded by the legacy of British colonialism) and practical "reputation"

(adaptive, creative, and entrepreneurial responses, rooted in African culture, to colonial domination).[22] Freeman's work suggests that attention to the middle-class question in the Caribbean entails not only treating the middle class as a problem of negotiating values and mores encoded by British colonialism in creative practices derived from African culture and contemporary neoliberal economy but also finding an alternative to the dominant Marxian analysis.

While demonstrating class formation in South Asia and the Caribbean, the above two Weberian studies suggest an incompatibility between middle-class cultural practices (for example, caste system and ethnic entrepreneurialism) and class antagonism. The incompatibility is apparent in American studies. In her study of American capitalism as a cultural system, Sherry Ortner claims to discover "the absence of any strong cultural category of 'class' in American discourse."[23] "Class is central to American social life," she argues, "but it is rarely spoken in its own right. Rather, it is represented through other categories of social difference: gender, ethnicity, race, and so forth."[24] In the "absence" of class as a dominant analytical category, scholars focus on intersections and linkages between gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and race as a common way to explore problems of inequality. This displacement of class occurs for complicated reasons. One has to do the explicit and implicit influence of the Weberian perspective on class as a social status group. As I mentioned earlier, popular terms such as "white collar" and "blue collar" provide a way of discussing classes without explicitly mentioning the word "class." Moreover, the Weberian attention to the entrepreneurial aspect of (American) capitalism encourages an understanding of the middle class as a creative practice that is not class-bound. When class does become a public topic or problem, it is usually tied to crisis. Especially in recent decades, scholars have systematically documented "growing" crises of the American middle class, including the privatization of public spaces in cities,[25] fears and anxieties of the invasion of aliens (ethnic immigrants, especially so-called "illegal" immigrants), rising numbers of gated communities in suburbs,[26] and a declining public sphere and its associated attributes (such as civil society, community, freedom, democracy, citizenship), as well as downward mobility.[27] Meanwhile, stories of the declining and troubled middle-class individuals and their families – such as diminishing incomes, house foreclosures, mounting credit card and other personal debts, and lack of health insurance – have regularly become headlines in news media, including the *New York Times*, CNN, *The Wall Street Journal*, and Fox News. Thus, the media discourse of the American middle class manifests a Habermasian bourgeois public sphere through shaping public opinions about issues relevant to the problematic majority group (that is, the "whites").

Through surveying studies of the middle class in the social and human sciences, I have learned that each theoretical model offers a distinctive perspective on the middle class. From the Marxian perspective, the middle class is a relational category of social difference, whether it differentiates from other classes, or within itself. For Weber, formation of the middle class and its power come from multiple sources, not only property ownership, occupation, and education

but also religion, honor, and respectability. The ideal Weberian middle-class individual is an entrepreneur who systematically applies economic rationalism to his or her life-building process. With respect to the Habermasian perspective, middle-class individuals behave collectively to establish communities and public spaces, and to participate in capitalist democratic processes. In a human science like anthropology, scholars pay attention to the local manifestations of the middle class. Yet, the development of the middle class around the globe, whether as one group or a collection of subgroups, neither repeats the history of Western Europe, nor does it copy the cultural experience of the French, the Germans, the English, or the Americans, as this book will show. Situated historical and cultural experiences always shape the ways in which scholars define and formulate questions of the middle classes. Beyond the issue of cultural specificities, anthropological studies of the middle class have yet to synthesize the lines established by the three theoretical frameworks.

The middle class in Chinese studies

Like English, Chinese has many terms to refer to the middle class. The common ones include the "middle stratum (or strata)" (*zhongjian jieceng*, or simply *zhongceng*), "middle income" (*zhongchan*), "middle income stratum (or strata)" (*zhongchan jieceng*), "middle income class(es)" (*zhongchan jieji*), "petty bourgeois" (*xiaozi*), and "white collar" (*bailing*). Their meanings are diverse, referring to different aspects of the Chinese middle class within different contexts.[28]

My survey of Chinese language publications shows that the middle class has become a popular and important topic in China. Scholars who are influential in the production of knowledge about the Chinese middle class mainly come from such disciplines as sociology, history, communications, and business. Since the late 1990s, a small group of sociologists based at major universities and research institutions in Beijing, Nanjing, and Shanghai have published a number of large-scale surveys and systematic studies of "social stratification" (*shehui fenceng*).[29] These empirical and comprehensive studies have established a series of benchmarks for understanding and interpreting the complicated phenomena of social differentiation since 1978. The middle class in these works is part of the overall development and changes of social "groups" (*qunti*) or "strata" (*jieceng*). Among those who explicitly investigate the formation of middle classes, two types of studies are worth mentioning. Some produce systematic empirical data about the middle class. The sociologist Zhou Xiaohong at Nanjing University, for example, led a group of a dozen scholars who surveyed more than 3,000 individuals in five major cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing, and Wuhan) in 2004. Informed by a systematic survey of major theoretical models and empirical studies of the middle classes in other countries (Britain, France, the United States, Canada, northern Europe, Japan, Russia, India, Korea, Brazil, Taiwan, and Hong Kong) and other statistical surveys, their study defines the Chinese middle class as "the middle income strata" (*zhongchan jieceng*), consisting of six subgroups according to the criteria of "occupation" (*zhiye*), "education"

(*jiaoyu*), and "income" (*shouru*).[30] They argue that the rapid development of the "middle income strata" in China is undeniable fact. Chinese society, however, has yet to become a middle-class society, a supposedly "post-industrial society" (*hou gongye shehui*), in which the middle classes become "the masses" (*dazhong*).[31]

While sociologists use large-scale surveys to understand the Chinese middle class in statistical terms, scholars in business communication and public relations offer detailed "roadmaps" (*luxiantu*) to becoming middle class. Although they do not engage in empirical investigations, they do incorporate some of the findings of comprehensive surveys of social stratification in general and of the middle class in particular. The popular book, *A Road Map to Becoming Middle Class* (*Zhongchan luxiatu*), for example, is written for general readers who do not understand what the "middle class" (*zhongchan jieji*) is but aspire to become part of it.[32] The book portrays a middle-class subject in vivid terms such as "wearing a grey-color suit, eating green foods, and reading orange-color newspapers," and describes three major ways of becoming middle class, whether through professional salaried employment (*zhiye*), self-employment (*ziyou zhiye*), or through establishing a small-size enterprise (*chuangye*). To assist the readers to identify with the middle class, the book profiles successful individuals in these three situations. In the broad context of knowledge production, while using statistical information to show the necessity of developing a middle-class society, the author produces self-help related information as part of the social engineering of a Chinese middle-class society.

In English language publications, scholars – who are critical of the empirical knowledge produced by scholars based in China[33] – share two major concerns. One is about the description of the middle class through statistical information: who the middle classes are, how they are classified, where they are located, and how many they are. Another concern is about potential problems or irregularities of statistical benchmarks such as income, profession, and education. Common questions include whether the empirical information or statistics is accurate or reliable; and whether profiles of the ideal middle class are in fact typical. While sharing these concerns about how the meanings of the middle class are encoded in China, I focus on examining the ways in which the production of knowledge about the middle class in China contributes to the development of the Chinese middle class as part of building what the Chinese president Hu Jintao calls a "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*). The Chinese middle class, as I will discuss, is a state project of managing risks in Chinese society under specific historical conditions.

Besides referring to studies of the middle class in China, the English language scholarship also incorporates the three theoretical models inspired by Marx, Weber, and Habermas. With respect to the Marxian intellectual tradition, issues of class as a relational category of social difference are explored. Among the most detailed ethnographic accounts of class formation in contemporary China, Pun Ngai's study of the *dagongmei* (laboring girls), or the young rural migrant women working for transnational factories based in the Shenzhen Special