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China's Middle Class: Unified or Fragmented?

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Abstract

Based on data collected from a representative-sample survey conducted in five Chinese cities (Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, and Hangzhou) in the middle of 2008, this study examines the behavioral orientations of Chinese middle class toward the local elections which are held in urban areas, and the attitudinal orientations of Chinese middle class toward the current regime. The results indicate that there is a strong division within the group of the middle class, especially along the lines of the relationship with the state. Therefore, this study suggests that the Chinese middle class is a class without a shared class identity.

China's middle class: unified or fragmented?

The middle class has been widely considered the most potent agent of the sociopolitical transition toward democracy, and the cornerstone for the survival of such a political system (e.g., Lipset, 1959, 1981; Fukuyama, 1993; Huntington, 1991; Glassman, 1995, 1997). This conviction about the role of the middle class is mainly based on one crucial assumption that the middle class will act for democracy in a uniform fashion. Yet, does a middle class *in such a transitional society as China* act for democracy in a collective fashion and hence serve as the harbinger of democratic change in that country, as the earlier studies of the middle class in the West suggest? As China's new middle class has gradually emerged as an increasingly salient social force in the country's urban areas since the onset of the post-Mao reforms, political scientists and China watchers alike have become more and more interested in the question (see, e.g., Chen, 2002; Glassman, 1991; Goodman, 1999; Pearson, 1997; Li, He, 2003). However, their answers to this important question do not as yet point to a consensus on the role of the middle class in a potential democratic transition. One exception is Jie Chen

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and Chunlong Lu's new article in 2011 – 'Democratization and the Middle Class in China'. This article systematically examines Chinese middle class's attitudes towards democracy based on a representative survey, and concludes that the middle class in China does not necessarily support democratization and there is a negative correlation between the middle class's dependence on the state and its support for democracy.

This study has a different focus, that is to understand whether the newly rising Chinese middle class has a shared class identity and definition of class interests. By examining the behavioral orientations of Chinese middle class toward the local elections which are held in the urban areas (including the local people's congress election and the urban self-government system election), and the attitudinal orientations of Chinese middle class toward the current regime, this article suggests that this new middle class is not unified but fragmented; it is a class without a common class identity. Such a conclusion is supported by three multivariate regression models based on data collected from a representative-sample survey conducted in five Chinese cities in the middle of 2008 (see Appendix).

Who is the middle class in contemporary China?

Subjective and objective approaches to the conceptualization of the middle class

In the conceptualization and operationalization of the middle class as a sociopolitical group, there are two distinct theoretical traditions in the studies of Western societies. One is the so-called 'subjective' approach (see, e.g., Centers, 1949; Eulau, 1956a, 1956b; Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Lipset, 1968; Hayes, 1995; Walsh *et al.*, 2004), and the other is the 'objective' approach (see, e.g., Alford, 1962; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Lipset, 1968; Milbrath, 1977; Nie *et al.*, 1969; Verba and Nie, 1972; Wright, 1997). The subjective approach suggests that, because a 'social class is a psychological attachment that is part of an individual's overall self-concept' (Walsh *et al.*, 2004: 470), the middle class is identified according to an individual's belief or perception that he or she belongs to the middle stratum of a certain society. According to this approach, more importantly, such a psychological attachment to a social class significantly affects a person's attitudes toward and participation in politics. For example, some empirical studies of the US public found that those who subjectively identified themselves with the middle class scored higher than did those who identified with the working class on measures of attitudes and behavior that were conducive to the maintenance of the democratic system in the United States (Eulau, 1956a; Walsh *et al.*, 2004).

On the other hand, the objective approach argues that a sociopolitical class is mainly determined by such important objective socioeconomic indicators as income, education, and occupation. Within this approach, there are two conceptual branches. One branch emphasizes the quantitative, cumulative property of the objective indicators (e.g., Nie *et al.*, 1969; Verba and Nie, 1972; Milbrath, 1977; Sherkat and Blocker, 1994). This branch, the 'quantitative' branch, suggests that the best way to capture an individual's

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class identity is to form a quantitative index of income, education, and occupation, and then to identify the person with a social class according to the person's position on the index. As a result, the middle class usually consists of those who are in the middle range of the scale.[1] The other branch, or 'qualitative' branch, of the objective approach stresses the qualitative property of the various objective indicators of social class (e.g., Burris, 1986; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Glassman, 1995; Wright, 1997; Zipp, 1986). This branch argues that the middle class is composed of those who possess a set of certain socioeconomic attributes, which qualitatively distinguish them from other social classes. These qualitative attributes are derived directly from some key modern occupations in a society, such as private entrepreneurs of small/medium firms, managerial personnel, and white-collar professionals. Finally, both branches of the objective approach argue that either quantitative or qualitative objective indicators of social class significantly influence people's beliefs about politics.

An approach to the identification of China's middle class

In this study, we choose the objective approach, over the subjective one, to the identification of China's middle class. The main reason for this choice is that the unique social background of the emergence of the middle class in China seems to entail the objective approach to the conceptualization of this social class. Only until the late 1980s, was the middle class by Western standards said to emerge gradually in China (Zheng and Li, 2004; Xiao, 2001; Lu, 2004); and, moreover, as we just mentioned, the social identity of the Chinese middle class is still in formation. While the subjective approach requires most of the population to have at least a basic understanding of the middle class (vs. other classes, such as working class and upper class) that takes a long time to shape up (Milbrath, 1977; Hayes, 1995; Eulau, 1956a, 1956b), the objective approach relies only on objective indicators that are less likely to be affected by the perception or misperception of the class. Within this unique historical and social context, therefore, the objective approach to the identification of this class seems to be much more suitable than the subjective one.

Both the quantitative and qualitative branches of the objective approaches have been applied to the identification of middle class in some early studies conducted in the Chinese setting. Within the *quantitative* branch, a person's income has been the most common indicator of social class.[2] However, this income-based, quantitative measurement of middle class has suffered a serious drawback: it is very hard to achieve

[1] For example, Nie *et al.* (1969) formed a weighted, quantitative index of such objective indicators as education, income, and occupation, and determined the middle class to be those who were in the middle third of the index.

[2] For example, Goodman (1999) suggests that a person with a monthly income of 5,000 to 6,000 RMB is regarded as a middle class person in the more developed, coastal parts of South and East China in 1997, while a person with a monthly income of 3,500 to 4,500 RMB is regarded as a middle class person in the less developed parts of West China. Still, Johnston (2004) uses a monthly household income to define middle class. He suggests that 'the middle class is constituted by respondents whose monthly household income is 3,000 RMB or more' (Johnston, 2004: 609). Zheng and Li (2004) argue that in

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any consensus on the criterion of income when defining middle class, since *actual* personal income is hard to detect[3] and varies dramatically with areas in such a fast-changing society as China.[4]

On the other hand, within the *qualitative* branch of the objective approach, several key modern occupations have been used to define the middle class in China.[5] This branch of the objective approach seems to be promising in overcoming the drawback that the quantitative branch has suffered. This is mainly because, in contemporary China, occupations are much easier to detect and more constant across regions than is actual personal income, and they tend to present 'groupings that are distinct and separate from one another' (Oppenheimer, 1985: 7). Therefore, such an occupation-based, qualitative measure (of the objective approach) seems to be a more reliable and practical indicator of the middle class in the Chinese setting. In addition, such a measure seems to be more suitable for cross-nation comparison, since the modern occupations used in this measure (e.g., professional, private entrepreneur, managers, and white-collar office workers) are derived mainly from the general trends of modernization and industrialization at the global level and hence share commonalities across countries (see, e.g., Marsh and Kaase, 1979).

More importantly, two groups of the Pacific Asian scholars designed a common operationalization of the middle class from this occupation-based, qualitative measure to suit the situations of the countries in the region of Pacific Asia, and thereby to ensure rough comparability across countries in this region (Hattori *et al.*, 2003; Hsiao and So, 1999). According to these scholars, the middle classes in the Pacific Asia include salaried professional, technical, administrative, and managerial white-collar workers who have special skills and expertise, small proprietors and the self-employed, and salaried, non-manual routine clerical workers and personal service workers. Therefore, by adopting the same occupation-based, qualitative measure, this article seeks to compare the findings of the Chinese middle class, which has been left behind by the two groups of the Pacific Asian scholars,[6] with the existing studies of other countries in the Pacific Asian region.

2000 a person with a monthly income of 1,000 to 10,000 RMB should be regarded as a middle class person in all of China, while for Beijing residents, a person with a monthly income of 2,000 to 20,000 RMB is regarded as a middle class person.

3 There tends to be a huge gap between reported (or nominal) and actual incomes in many occupational groups in China, and the latter is often kept secret for various purposes, such as tax evasion (which is highly prevalent in China). For more detailed information about the gap between actual and nominal incomes in contemporary China, see Chen (2004: 89–92) and Shi (1997: 150).

4 See, for example, the average monthly income of residents in developed East China is 2.5 times higher than the average of those in underdeveloped West China (See, Li, Chunling, 2003).

5 For example, Lu Xueyi and his associates (2002 and 2004) present a comprehensive picture of social stratification in China by mainly drawing upon the occupation-based, qualitative measure. They found that around 11% of the Chinese population belongs to the middle class.

6 For example, as So (2004: 273) pointed out, it is necessary to go beyond the study of small Asian states to include large states such as China in the second-phase research of the middle classes in Pacific Asia.

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Table 1. *The occupational composition of the Chinese middle class*

	Occupations
Managers	The managers of state-owned enterprises and collective enterprises; the managers of private enterprises; the managers of *foreign-related* enterprises
Professionals	Scientific researchers, all kinds of technicians and managerial personnel of scientific and technical work and their assistants, economic and legal professionals (i.e., accountants, lawyers and so on), teaching staff and cultural and sports workers
Civil servants	The staff members in the government and party agencies; the office workers and staff members in public organizations and all types of enterprises
Self-employed laborers	Small business owners (having enough capital to hire less than eight non-family employees but they themselves participate in management), self-employers (having enough capital to run a business but hiring no employees), small share speculators and share holders and those who live on bank interest

Consequently, based on the qualitative branch of the objective approach, we operationalize the middle class in urban China by combining four occupational groups typically used in both Chinese and non-Chinese settings:[7] self-employed laborers (i.e., private entrepreneur of small or medium-sized business in the Chinese context), managerial personnel, professionals, and civil servants (i.e., white-collar office workers in the Chinese context). The composition of each occupational group in Chinese society is summarized by the following Table 1.

The results of these four occupational groups combined showed that within the working population in five cities (excluding students and retired), about 47% of our respondents belonged to the objectively conceptualized middle class. Furthermore, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs, due to the continued importance of the state institutions in influencing ordinary Chinese citizens' life opportunities during the reform era, the formation of the middle class in contemporary China follows two distinct paths. The first is through the state institutions, where the middle class is employed in government and party agencies, state-owned enterprises, collective-owned enterprises, and public organizations. The second path is through the market institutions, where the middle class is employed in the private sector (e.g., private enterprises, foreign-related enterprises, and private organizations) or self-employed (e.g., self-employed laborers). The result indicates that within the working population in the five Chinese cities, about 28% of our respondents belonged to the subgroup of

[7] For the use of this occupation-based, qualitative measure in identifying the middle class, in the Western settings, please see, Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992), Glassman (1995), Wright (1997) in the Pacific Asian settings; please see, Hattori *et al.* (2003), Hsiao and So (1999) in the Chinese settings, please see, Lu Xueyi and his associates (2002, 2004), Zhang (2005).

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Table 2. *The distribution of social classes in five Chinese cities within the working population*

Objective class identity	Frequency	Percent
Upper class[1]	74	3.4
Middle class[2]	1,031	47.2
Middle class in the private sector	616	28.2
Middle class in the public sector	415	19.0
Lower class[3]	1,079	49.4
Total	2,184	100

Notes:[1] Upper class includes ranking administrative personnel of state affairs and social affairs and private entrepreneur of large business.
[2] Middle class includes private entrepreneur of small or medium business, managerial personnel, white-collar professional, and civil servants.
[3] Lower class includes service workers, industry workers, and unemployed.

the middle class in the private sector, while 19% belonged to the subgroup in the public sector (see Table 2). This finding clearly indicates that about a half of the Chinese middle class is employed in the public sector, and this finding is consistent with some earlier observations of the Chinese middle class (Zhang, 2005; Zheng and Li, 2004). This result also confirms the suggestions from some earlier China studies that the Chinese state played an important role in creating and shaping the middle class in that country (e.g., Goodman, 1999; Tomba, 2004; Zhang, 2005; Zheng and Li, 2004; Zhou, 2005).

Does the Chinese middle class have a shared class identity?

Does the Chinese middle class have a shared class identity and take collective political action? The theoretical insights on which we base our answer to this question come mainly from the studies of Western societies in general and the observations of the Pacific Asian countries in particular, which are supplemented by the newly emerging yet still very limited literature from the Chinese setting.

The general studies of Western societies

Within the general studies of Western societies, the predominant view suggests that the middle class does act for democracy in a uniform fashion. First, these studies contend that they are most likely to *act for democracy* because they have a high level of political efficacy; that is, they are more confident of their role in public affairs and more competent participating in politics than are members of the lower class (e.g., Eulau, 1956a, 1956b; Nie *et al.*, 1969; Verba and Nie, 1972; Milbrath, 1977; Lipset, 1981). According to this argument, such confidence and competence come mainly from three sources. One is the experience and expertise related to the occupations of middle class individuals. As small/medium entrepreneurs, managerial personnel, and white-collar professionals, these individuals have experiences in running businesses and supervising

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others, and many may have expert knowledge. As a result, they feel more competent than lower class individuals to participate in various social and political activities (e.g., Lane, 1959). A second source is that they are better informed about public and political affairs. Due to the nature and needs of their occupations, middle class people have a bigger stake in acquiring information about public policies and politics in general than working class people. As owners of small/medium businesses, managers and professionals, for example, these peoples need to have timely information about changes of government policies and of leaders at various levels, because such changes could directly affect their immediate and long-term occupational interests. As Luskin (1990: 336) argues, people in the middle class have 'more politically impinged occupations [that require] more political information . . . about what the government is doing or is likely to do . . . and what effects its actions are likely to have'. The last, but not least, source of middle class people's confidence and competence is their social network (as opposed to clientelist ties with the state power). Compared to the working class, those in the middle class have broader social networks due to the nature of their occupations and professions (Kahl, 1957; Mills, 1953; Milbrath, 1977). For example, while small/medium business owners have to contact people in various walks of society for the operation and growth of their businesses, managers and professionals need networks at least in their professions for the maintenance and advancement of their careers.

Second, these studies assume that the middle class will act in a unified fashion. In the view of the modernization theorists (e.g., Lipset, 1959, 1981; Huntington, 1991; Glassman, 1995, 1997), the middle class as a group appears to be a consistent agent for democracy within a society, and will act in a collective way for democracy. Based on this assumption, they further suggest that with economic development in a society, the middle class will emerge and gain in size, and, in turn, work as a causal agent for the establishment of democracy. Moreover, modernization theorists assume that this developmental path is linear – economic development creates an affluent middle class in a society, which, in turn, leads to a democratic system – and can be generalized to all countries and regions (Glassman, 1995, 1997).

However, this belief leaves these scholars in a weak position. As suggested by Dietrich Rueschemeyer and his associates (1992: 53), 'not all classes are collective actors in history; nor do they become eventually such actors with any generalized necessity'. Furthermore, they suggest, 'neither class consciousness nor class organization and collective action follow with any simple necessity from class position'. Dietrich Rueschemeyer and his associates (1992: 56) further suggest that 'the structure of the economy and its development have strong direct effects on the organizational formations of a class', and they argue that the state's role in the economy will shape the way how a class forms its identity and interest, and how a class acts for its interest.

The observations of the Pacific Asian countries

Throughout the developing world, the activities of the state have been a primary source of the formation of the middle class. As Dale Johnson has observed:

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> In less developed societies the state tends to grow to the limits of resources that can be taxed or otherwise appropriated by government . . . In part, this overdevelopment compensates for the presence of weak classes of local capitalists, or even their virtual nonexistence: States assume entrepreneurial functions, giving birth to technocratic, managerial, and technical groupings. (Johnson, 1985: 15)

Many empirical observations of the Pacific Asian societies suggest that the rise of the middle class in these countries is a direct consequence of rapid state-led economic development in the past several decades (e.g., Bell, 1998; Brown and Jones, 1995; Hattori and Funatsu, 2003; Jones, 1998; Koo, 1999; Torii, 2003). A large sector of the newly emerged middle class in the Pacific Asian societies is 'dependent upon the state for their employment, either as public servants, or as employees of state-supported companies' (Brown and Jones, 1995: 92). The direct result of this active state intervention in the formation of the middle class in the Pacific Asian societies is that this class is highly dependent upon state patronage (e.g., Bell, 1998; Brown and Jones, 1995; Jones, 1998; Torii, 2003). This unique relationship between the state and the newly emerged middle class in the Pacific Asian societies makes this class quite different from its counterparts in the Western democratic societies.

Moreover, these studies tend to suggest that since the state often played a very active role in creating and shaping the formation of the middle class in the Pacific Asian societies, the emergence of a unified and distinctive middle class identity was nearly impossible. These studies further suggest that the political orientations of the middle classes in these societies are not unified but fragmented (e.g., Koo, 1999; Shin, 1999).

As Ulf Sundhaussen concluded, inquiry into the political orientations of the middle classes in the developing world such as the Pacific Asian countries 'would have to begin with distinguishing between the different kinds of Middle Classes'. Furthermore, he observed that:

> the salaried professionals, often in state employ, are usually too dependent on their employer, especially if the state has been organized along patrimonial lines . . . Only, the intellectuals, academics, lawyers and journalists, can reasonably be expected in Third World countries to champion the cause of democracy. (Sundhaussen, 1991: 112)

Some empirical observations of the Pacific Asian societies have found that the political orientations of the middle classes in the Pacific Asia are not unified but divided (Hattori and Funatsu, 2003; Koo, 1991; Shin, 1999). In Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand, and South Korea, a large sector of the upper middle classes, which are employed either in the state bureaucracy or in businesses with links to the ruling political party, have generally supported the consolidation of authoritarian rule, since these upper middle classes were the main beneficiaries of the state activities in the past decades; thus they have a vested interest in the continuity and stability of authoritarian rule (Bell, 1998; Jones, 1998; Englehart, 2003; Brown and Jones, 1995; Lam, 1999; Rodan, 1993). On the other hand, in these countries, a majority of the new middle

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classes, which consist of professional and technical workers, as well as managers, tends to be more progressive and is more likely to demand democracy than the upper middle classes which have close ties with the state. Therefore, it would be difficult to summarize the general political orientations of the middle classes due to such intra-class variation in these countries.

The dependence of Chinese middle class upon state power

As has been the case in other Pacific Asian countries, the development of China's middle class was influenced by national politics and government policies. In the past 50 years, government policies and the changes in the state institutions determined the patterns of social stratification in Chinese society. Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a small middle class, including managerial personnel, professionals, small businessmen, and civil servants, constituted approximately 7% of the Chinese population (Lu, 2004). In the period beginning in 1949 and ending in 1978, China was a statist society ruled by a strong Leninist party; the private economy was gradually eliminated, and private entrepreneurs, small and medium-size businessmen, as well as independent professionals, disappeared in Chinese society (Bian, 2002; Davis, 2000; Lu, 2004; Qiu, 2004; So, 2003; Whyte, 1975). During this period, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) successfully transformed the pre-1949 independent middle class into a subservient stratum (Davis, 2000).

Since 1978, the CCP has gradually legitimized the existence of the private economy in Chinese society and has taken genuine measures to encourage its development (International Finance Corporation, 2000; Pearson, 1997). The CCP has abandoned their monopolization of occupational mobility, allowing ordinary Chinese citizens to have greater freedom to choose their occupations (Zhou, 2004; Qiu, 2004), and the CCP has also de-emphasized the importance of political loyalty and activism in educational attainment and occupational advancement (Cao, 2001; Walder *et al.*, 2000). The post-Mao reform has changed the social structure of China and consequently paved the road for the emergence of a middle class. Since the late 1980s, a middle class by Western standards has emerged in Chinese society.

However, due to the continued importance of the state institutions in influencing ordinary Chinese citizens' life opportunities during the reform era, the formation of the middle class in contemporary China follows two separate paths (e.g., Li, Chunling, 2003; Li, Qiang, 2003; Lu, 2002, 2004; Zhang, 2005; Zheng and Li, 2004; Zhou, 2005). The first is through the state institutions, where middle class positions in government and party agencies, state-owned enterprises, collective-owned enterprises, and public organizations are considered to be 'closed' positions, and access to these positions is subject to screening for political loyalty and party membership. This sub-group, the middle class employed in the public sector, which includes managers in the state-owned enterprises, professionals in the public organizations, and staff members in the government and party agencies and public organizations, is, in varying degrees, still affected by state power (e.g., Lu, 2002, 2004; Zhang, 2005; Zheng and Li, 2004). The

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second path is through the market institutions, where middle class positions in the private sector are considered to be 'open' positions, and the access to these positions is determined by the workings of the market institutions. This sub-group, the middle class employed in the private sector, which includes managers in the private and foreign-related enterprises, professionals in the private sector, self-employed laborers (i.e., private entrepreneur of small or medium-sized business in the Chinese context), and white-collar office workers in the private entities, is much more independent than the first sub-group in terms of its relationship to state power (e.g., Lu, 2002, 2004; Zhang, 2005; Zhou, 2005).

The Chinese middle class's views on the Communist government

Since Chinese middle class is highly dependent upon the state power, we expect that this new middle class is very supportive of the Communist government, because most middle class members 'enjoy a comfortable lifestyle and a high socioeconomic status relative to other groups' in the post-Mao state-led development (Wright, 2010: 83). Moreover, we hypothesize that the middle class people in the public sector are more likely than those in the private sector to support the current political regime. There is at least one rather straightforward rationale behind this hypothesis. Because the middle class individuals in the public sector have close relations with the Communist party and government, and enjoy many privileges sanctioned by the party-state (e.g., Lu, 2002, 2004; Zhang, 2005; Zheng and Li, 2004), they have a vested interest in the continuation of the current regime.[8] For example, as David Goodman points out, the managers in the state-owned and collective enterprises, and the professionals in the public sector, in general, 'far from being alienated from the [P]arty-state or seek[ing] their own political voice, [appear] to be operating in close proximity and through close cooperation' with the party-state (Goodman, 1999: 260–1). As a result, the public-sector middle class people tend to have a very positive evaluation of the currently implemented political regime. On the other hand, the private-sector middle class people who are employed in the private entities or self-employed often do not have close ties the party-state; thus they are independent from the CCP (e.g., Lu, 2002, 2004; Zhang, 2005; Zhou, 2005). Moreover, the material benefits enjoyed by the private-sector middle class were mainly acquired through the market (Zhang, 2005; Zheng and Li, 2004). As a result, the private-sector middle class people do not feel attached to the current political regime. On many occasions, when their interests are impinged on, the private-sector middle class people lack powerful political patrons to protect their interests and very often they have to rely on legal weapons;[9] therefore they have a fairly strong

[8] As Luigi Tomba (2004: 24) observed, members of the Chinese middle classes whose social status is dependent upon the party-state (e.g., professionals in the public sector) 'are generally supportive of the present national leadership and feel that their social status today is largely dependent on the reform policies and the present program to manage the economy'.

[9] In the last five years, incidents related to property rights protection have increased in large and medium-sized cities. Owners of commercial apartments, most of which are members of middle class

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demand for an institutionalized democracy to guarantee the proper functioning of the market, to contain the widespread corruption, and to secure their property and their bourgeois lifestyle.[10] This rising demand for democracy will, of course, constitute a major challenge to the current political regime, since the current regime can at best be characterized as semi-democratic, which is not consistent with the expectations of those who strongly believe in democratic principles.

Our measurement of support for the government (or diffuse support) within the middle class is designed based on the theoretical framework developed by David Easton (see, Easton, 1965, 1975). Diffuse support, often seen as the more influential dimension, represents a person's support for the regime that refers to the fundamental values, norms, and institutions of the government. It is believed that citizens are linked to the regime by diffuse support stemmed from their assessment of the fundamental values, norms, and institutions of the government. Thus, diffuse support for the regime is also regarded as the 'belief in legitimacy' of the political regime (Easton, 1965: Chapter 18). According to this conceptualization, specifically, diffuse support in this study refers to the middle class's supportive attitudes toward the fundamental values that the current, post-Mao regime advocates, and the basic political institutions through which the regime rules the country.

To measure Chinese urban residents' diffuse support for the current political regime, we asked respondents to assess the following seven items (or statements): 'I believe that the Communist party can represent my interests'; 'I believe that the National People's Congress can represent the Chinese people's interests'; 'I believe that the Liberation Army can protect our country'; 'I believe that the security forces in China guarantee the fair enforcement of the law'; 'I believe that the courts in China guarantee fair trials'; 'I have an obligation to support the current political system'; 'I feel that my personal values are the same as those advocated by the government'. Respondents were asked to assess each of these seven statements on a 5-point scale, where '1' stands for strong disagreement with the statement and '5' refers to strong agreement with it.

We ran a factor analysis among these seven items within the respondents of the middle class. The results from the factor analysis indicated that only a single dominant factor emerged among these seven items, accounting for 80% of the original variance. Given such a degree of coherence among these seven items, the factor score from

in the private sector, have engaged in many activities to protect their properties such as collecting signatures through Internet online forum, organizing Home-Owners' Associations, and calling for more democratic decision-making process of community affairs. For example, see Zhang (2005), Cai (2005).

[10] For example, An Chen (2002: 415–16) observed that the top priority of small entrepreneurs and businessmen (i.e., one main component of the middle class in the non-public sector) is to 'strive for institutionalization of and ideological (or constitutional) justification for capitalism in order to make their businesses and capitalist way of life politically safe ... [and this priority] has an obvious pro-democratic element as it exerts pressure on the Communist regime for some fundamental economic-political changes.'

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Table 3. *Ordinary least square (OLS) regression of diffuse support*

	Diffuse support[1]		
	b	s.e.	beta
The indicator of the two subgroups of the middle class[2]	−0.860*	0.327	−0.291
Sex[3]	−0.136	0.117	−0.034
Party membership[4]	−0.168*	0.088	−0.193
Age	0.013*	0.004	0.167
Education[5]	−0.093*	0.034	−0.148
Personal income[6]	−0.008	0.012	−0.028
Constant	2.023*	0.835	
R Square		0.332	
Adjusted R square		0.312	
N		1,018	

Notes: * $p < 0.01$.
[1] The value of diffuse support is the factor score of the seven items ('I believe that the Communist party can represent my interests'; 'I believe that the National People's Congress can represent the Chinese people's interests'; 'I believe that the Liberation Army can protect our country'; 'I believe that the security forces in China guarantee the fair enforcement of the law'; 'I believe that the courts in China guarantee fair trials'; 'I have an obligation to support the current political system'; 'I feel that my personal values are the same as those advocated by the government').
[2] Public-sector middle class = 0; private-sector middle class = 1.
[3] Male = 0; female = 1.
[4] Party member = 0; Non-party member = 1.
[5] Middle school and below = 1; high school = 2; post-secondary professional training = 3; four-year university education = 4; graduate level = 5.
[6] Income is measured by Chinese currency, *yuan*.

the factor analysis will be used as the collective indicator of diffuse support in the multivariate analysis that follows.

To test the hypotheses that have been discussed above, we ran a multiple regression model (OLS) based on the sample of middle class respondents. In this model, particularly, we included a dummy variable for the two subgroups of the middle class (with public-sector middle class = 0; private-sector middle class = 1) to in order to confirm the impact of such a division on diffuse support for the Communist government. Table 3 presents the results of this multiple regression model. Overall, the results from the regression model are consistent with our expectations: even independently of some key sociodemographic attributes, the division between public-sector middle class and private-sector middle class influences diffuse support for the Communist government.

From the results from Table 3, we can see that those who belonged to the private-sector middle class were much less likely than those who belonged to the public-sector middle class to support the current Communist regime (b = −0.860). Such an

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attitudinal division between the two subgroups of the middle class may indicate that Chinese middle class does not have a shared class identity. To further confirm this argument, we will examine the behavioral orientations of the two subgroups of the middle class. We expect that the two subgroups of the middle class may have different behavioral orientations in a similar fashion as diffuse support for the Communist regime.

Dependent variable: voting behavior

In the democratic societies, the middle class is more likely to participate in conventional political activities than other social groups. This participation is crucial for the maintenance and functioning of a democratic system (Dahl, 1971; Lane, 1959; Milbrath, 1977). According to Sidney Verba and his associates, conventional political activities are 'legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and the actions that they take' (Verba *et al.*, 1978: 46). Moreover, Verba and his associates identify four *modes of conventional political participation*: voting, campaign activity, communal activity, and particularized contact. From the outset of the post-Mao economic and political reforms, ordinary Chinese citizens have been participating in public affairs and politics at least at the local level (Shi, 1997; Tang and Parish, 2000; Chen, 2000, 2004; Manion, 1996; Jennings, 1997), even though the Chinese political system is at most semi-democratic. Studies of Chinese politics have identified several common *modes of conventional political participation*: voting, campaign behavior, and particularized contact (Chen, 2000, 2004; Shi, 1997).

It was established earlier in this study that the two subgroups of the middle class in China are supposed to act in a divided way, that is the middle class individuals employed in the public sector will act differently from the middle class individuals employed in the private sector. Given this assumption, what are the participatory orientations of the two sub-groups of the middle class in regard to these conventional political activities?

This article is going to explore this question by examining how the two sub-groups of the middle class act in the elections of (1) the local people's congress and (2) the urban self-government system. There were several reasons to choose the voting behavior in the elections of (1) the local people's congress and (2) the urban self-government system as the case to study the participatory orientations of the two sub-groups of middle class people. First, all Chinese middle class people are urban residents, thus it is necessary to study political behavioral orientations of the middle class people by examining how they act in the public affairs and politics in the urban areas of China. People's participation in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system by no means exhaust their political behaviors in urban China; nonetheless, they may serve as a good test of the *relationship* between people's class identity and political behavioral orientations in urban China. Second, people from all socio-economic classes of the urban areas are familiar with the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system, and they tend to act in a more sophisticated way in the elections of the local people's congress and the

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urban self-government system. Therefore, people's participation in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system may represent their fundamental political behavioral orientations. Third, in the reform era, people are free to choose to participate or not to participate in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system.[11] For this reason, survey questions about these acts were 'unlikely to make respondents give interviewers false answers' (Shi, 1997, 27). Thus, people's behavioral orientations toward the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system provide a good opportunity to study the impact of class identity on their behavioral orientations.

The nature of the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system

In order to fully understand the voting behavior of the two subgroups of the middle class, it is necessary to provide an overview of the nature of the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system first. Since the onset of the post-Mao reform, the Chinese central government has made genuine efforts to democratize the local people's congress and the urban self-government system and encouraged urban residents to participate in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system. Moreover, the Chinese government viewed the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system as the symbol of democratic development in that country.[12] However, the Chinese government has imposed several constraints on the elections of local people's congress and the urban self-government system to an extent that both elections can be characterized as 'semi-democratic'.

First, with regard to the local people's congress election, the Communist government has firmly imposed two formidable constraints to prevent any organized and individual opposition from challenging its ruling position. The Communist government has directly or indirectly controlled virtually the entire process of local people's congress elections: from the nomination of candidates, electorate deliberation, to the determination of final candidates on the ballot (Halpern, 1991: 38; Burns, 1999: 591). Such control of election process has been done mainly through the party-dominated, local election committees (Shi and Lei, 1999: 21–3). Meanwhile, the Communist government has designed and implemented a list of measures in order to prevent the local people's congress elections from becoming a forum spreading bourgeois liberal thoughts or political views contrary to the official ideology. The party prohibits any large-scale or publicized electoral campaign that is considered part of 'bourgeois democracy' (as opposed to 'socialist democracy'), and it requires that all electoral activities and deliberations be carried out within a limited scope (e.g., work

[11] In the Mao era, Chinese citizens were required by the party to participate in these political activities to show their support for the regime. Non-participation was punished by the party.

[12] For example, please see 'Building of Political Democracy in China', Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, October 2005, Beijing.

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unit or *danwei,* 单位) under firm control by the party-dominated election committee (Shi and Lei, 1999; Wang, 1998).

Second, with regard to the urban self-government system election, there seems to be a consensus in field observations by China scholars. This consensus suggests that the urban self-government system has *to a certain extent* liberalized political life in urban China through such measures as elections of community residential committee (CRC or *shequ juweihui* 社区居委会) leaders and the creation of residents' representative assemblies. But the consensus also maintains that this grassroots political system can be characterized as 'semi-democratic' (Benewick *et al.*, 2004; Derleth and Koldyk, 2004; Gui *et al.*, 2006). This is because elections of CRC leadership and the management of self-government are in general dominated and controlled by local party organizations. For example, Wang and his associates (2003), have summarized the serious problems in various areas (e.g., election committees, nomination procedures, election competitiveness, and the relations between the state and urban self-government) of the urban self-government system that have prevented this system from being *truly* democratic and autonomous.

Comparison of the voting behaviors between the two subgroups of the middle class

Specifically, participation in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system were measured by the following two questions:

1. Have you voted in the last election of the local people's representatives?
2. Have you voted in the last election of the local community residents' committee members?

Respondents were asked to answer each of these two questions on a dummy scale, where 1 indicated respondents' participation, and 0 referred to their non-participation.

Based upon the above discussion, we expect that the two subgroups of the middle class have different orientations toward the two voting behaviors. In specific, we hypothesize that the private-sector middle class is less likely to participate in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system. There are two reasons to support this expectation. First, as we have observed, those who belonged to the private-sector middle class were much less likely than those who belonged to the public-sector middle class to support the current Communist regime. Thus, the private-sector middle class people's negative evaluation of the current regime may cause the private-sector middle class people to engage in non-participatory action to express their discontent with the current political system; on the other hand, the public-sector middle class people's positive evaluation of the current regime may cause the public-sector middle class people to vote in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system to express their support for the current system.

Second, the middle class individuals in the public sector have close relations with the current regime; moreover, many of them are situated within the current political system (*tizhinei*), and, as a result, they have more access to the electoral process when

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the elections take place. On the other hand, the middle class individuals in the private sector in general are excluded from the current political system, and, as a result, they have less access to the electoral process. For example, ballot boxes and stations might not be available for them at election time. In addition, the public-sector middle class is more likely to be coopted by the Communist party than the private-sector middle class; therefore, the public-sector middle class is more likely to be mobilized by the party to vote at election time. In our survey, approximately 28% of the public-sector middle class reported the party membership, whereas about 8% of the middle class people in the private sector had the party membership.

To test our hypothesis, we ran two logistical regression models, with one regression using vote in the election of the local people's representatives as the dependent variable, and the other regression using vote in the election of the CRC members as the dependent variable. The results of two logistical regressions are illustrated in Tables 4 and 5 respectively.

Overall, the findings from the two logistical regression models are consistent with our hypothesis. Specifically, and first of all, as Table 4 indicates, after controlling for other objective social-demographic variables, the objective indicators of the two subgroups of the middle class have an independent influence on vote in the election of the local people's representatives. That means, the private-sector middle class is less likely to participate in the elections of the local people's congress than the public-sector middle class. Table 5 indicates a very similar result, after controlling for other objective social-demographic variables, the objective indicators of the two subgroups of the middle class also have an independent influence on vote in the election of the CRC members. That means, the private-sector middle class is less likely to participate in the elections of the urban self-government system.

Second, both regression models indicate, among the middle class respondents, there is a positive relationship between diffuse support for the current regime and voting behaviors in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system. This finding suggests that the middle class people who are supportive of the current political system tend to vote in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system. As we have established before, the public-sector middle class is more likely to be supportive of the current regime than the private-sector middle class. Combining these findings in one picture, we may imply that the public-sector middle class people's positive evaluation of the current regime causes the public-sector middle class people to vote in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system; whereas the private-sector middle class people's negative evaluation of the current regime causes the private-sector middle class people to engage in non-voting behavior.

Conclusions and discussions

Does the middle class in China act for democracy in a uniform way? It is seems to be too ambitious for us to answer this question in this study. Instead, we only focus

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Table 4. *Logistic regression of voting behavior in the election of the local people's representatives*

	Vote in the election of the local people's representatives	
	b	s.e.
The indicator of the two subgroups of the middle class[1]	−0.213*	0.057
Sex[2]	−0.030	0.062
Party membership[3]	−0.194*	0.073
Age	0.007*	0.002
Education[4]	−0.127*	0.043
Personal income[5]	−0.010	0.012
Diffuse support[6]	0.890*	0.335
Constant	1.827*	0.564
−2 Log likelihood	467.910	
Model chi-square	45.346*	
Degree of freedom	7	
N	1,019	

Notes: * $p < 0.01$.
[1] Public-sector middle class = 0; private-sector middle class = 1.
[2] Male = 0; female = 1.
[3] Party member = 0; non-party member = 1.
[4] Middle school and below = 1; high school = 2; post-secondary professional training = 3; four-year university education = 4; graduate level = 5.
[5] Income is measured by Chinese currency, *yuan*.
[6] The value of diffuse support is the factor score of the seven items ('I believe that the Communist party can represent my interests'; 'I believe that the National People's Congress can represent the Chinese people's interests'; 'I believe that the Liberation Army can protect our country'; 'I believe that the security forces in China guarantee the fair enforcement of the law'; 'I believe that the courts in China guarantee fair trials'; 'I have an obligation to support the current political system'; 'I feel that my personal values are the same as those advocated by the government').

upon one aspect of this question: does the middle class in China have a shared class identity and take collective action? Overall, we find that the Chinese middle class can be divided into two subgroups: public-sector and private-sector. Moreover, the two subgroups of the middle class have different orientations toward diffuse support for the Communist government and act differently in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system. Therefore, we may conclude that the Chinese middle class is a class without a common identity. Here we highlight these findings and implications.

First of all, the public-sector middle class people are more likely to support the current regime and thus are more likely to vote in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system. On the other hand, the private-sector

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Table 5. *Logistic regression of voting behavior in the election of the CRC members*

	Vote in the election of the CRC members	
	b	s.e.
The indicator of the two subgroups of the middle class[1]	−0.279*	0.061
Sex[2]	−0.027	0.032
Party membership[3]	−0.161*	0.049
Age	0.005*	0.001
Education[4]	−0.118*	0.045
Personal income[5]	−0.018	0.020
Diffuse support[6]	0.925*	0.407
Constant	3.013*	0.840
−2 Log likelihood	510.183	
Model chi-square	49.670*	
Degree of freedom	7	
N	1,019	

Notes: * $p < 0.01$.
[1] Public-sector middle class = 0; private-sector middle class = 1.
[2] Male = 0; female = 1.
[3] Party member = 0; non-party member = 1.
[4] Middle school and below = 1; High school = 2; post-secondary professional training = 3; four-year university education = 4; Graduate level = 5.
[5] Income is measured by Chinese currency, *yuan*.
[6] The value of diffuse support is the factor score of the seven items ('I believe that the Communist party can represent my interests'; 'I believe that the National People's Congress can represent the Chinese people's interests'; 'I believe that the Liberation Army can protect our country'; 'I believe that the security forces in China guarantee the fair enforcement of the law'; 'I believe that the courts in China guarantee fair trials'; 'I have an obligation to support the current political system'; 'I feel that my personal values are the same as those advocated by the government').

middle class people are less likely to support the current regime and thus are less likely to vote in the elections of the local people's congress and the urban self-government system.

The implications of these findings are twofold: first, the CCP still enjoys political legitimacy in the minds of the public-sector middle class, but, on the other hand, the CCP shall need to make necessary reforms to meet the political demands from the private-sector middle class. Second, there is a strong division within the group of the middle class, especially along the line of the relationship with the state. That is, the private-sector middle class acts in a different from the public-sector middle class. Therefore, we conclude that the Chinese middle class is a class without a common identity and consequentially cannot act in a uniform way.

Previous studies have found class can be defined upon objective criteria, but to take class-unified action it requires a well-formed class identity. Jon Elster (1985: 331)

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clearly articulates that 'a class is a group of people who by virtue of what they possess are compelled to engage in the same activities if they want to make the best use of their endowments'. Dietrich Rueschemeyer and his associates also articulate that the 'objective conception of class must be supplemented by an analysis of the subjective mentality, ideas, and dispositions found among members of a class . . . not all classes are collective actors in history; nor do they become eventually such actors with any generalized necessity' (Rueschemeyer *et al.*, 1992, 53).

Why does the Chinese middle class fail to form a common identity? First of all, Chinese middle class came into being within the short period of one generation since the post-Mao reform. In the West, the growth of the middle class has a very long process of more than 200 years, in which many middle class families have shown higher inter-generational succession. However, in China, as we have discussed, since the establishment of Communist China in 1949, the middle class has been gradually eradicated from Chinese society because of a series of Maoist policies. Therefore, the newly emerged middle class in contemporary Chinese society is in a sense the first generation of middle class (Zhou, 2005). Therefore, this first-generation middle class still need time to form a common identity. Second, the development of Chinese middle class is heavily influenced by state power. Based on the distance from the state power, Chinese middle class can be divided into two subgroups: public-sector and private-sector. The sharp diversity between these two subgroups tends to produce the variant political orientations within the middle class. Based upon these two reasons, we conclude that the formation, maintenance, and strengthening of a unified and distinctive middle class identity in China is impossible in near future.

Moreover, the findings from this study echoed many previous studies. These studies have found that since the state often played a very active role in creating and shaping the formation of the middle class in the transitional world, the emergence of a unified middle class was nearly impossible. As a result, these studies suggest that the political orientations of the middle classes in the transitional world are not unified but divided along the lines of the relationship with the state. As Ulf Sundhaussen (1991: 112–13) concluded, inquiry into the political orientations of the middle classes in the transitional world 'would have to begin with distinguishing between the different kinds of Middle Classes'. Furthermore, he observed that:

> the salaried professionals, often in state employ, are usually too dependent on their employer, especially if the state has been organized along patrimonial lines . . . Only, the intellectuals, academics, lawyers and journalists, can reasonably be expected in Third World countries to champion the cause of democracy.'

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Appendix: Survey and sample

The data used in this study came from a public opinion survey conducted in five Chinese cities (Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, and Hangzhou) in the middle of 2008. The survey was based on a probability sample of the general urban residents of the five Chinese cities, aged 18 years and older. This probability sample was derived from a multistage sampling strategy. Three urban districts (*qu*) were randomly chosen at the first sampling stage in each city. At the second sampling stage, two streets (*jiedao*) were randomly selected from the three districts in each city, yielding a total of 30 streets. From each of the 30 streets, two residents' communities were randomly chosen at the third stage of sampling, yielding a total of 60 residents' communities in five Chinese cities. Then 2,400 households were randomly chosen from 60 residents' communities. At the final stage, one individual was chosen randomly from each of the 2,400 households as the interviewee. The adjusted response rate of this survey was 91% (2,184), which was very high by Western standards, but quite similar to the response rates from other surveys conducted in Beijing (e.g., Shi, 1997; Chen, 2004). The key socio-demographic attributes of the sample are described in Table 6.

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Table 6. *Sociodemographic attributes of the surveyed respondents*

Major sociodemographic attributes		Percentage
Sex	Female	49.5%
	Male	50.5%
Age	18–29	23.1%
	30–39	20.2%
	40–49	24.3%
	50–60	32.4%
Education	Elementary school and below	10.4%
	Middle school	42.2%
	High school/technical school	23.4%
	College/university and above	24%
Monthly	1,999 yuan and below	46.6%
Personal	2,000–2,999 yuan	22%
Income	3,000–4,999 yuan	20.6%
	5,000 yuan and above	10.8%

Note: The figures presented in this table approximate the results from the representative-sample survey of the population in the five cities (i.e., Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, and Hangzhou) (please see *China Statistical Yearbook, 2009*; *Urban Statistical Yearbook of China, 2009*).

College students of political science were employed as field interviewers; they were trained by project members in field interviewing techniques before the actual survey was carried out. The technique of face-to-face interviews was used in the survey. Our interviewers conducted face-to-face interviews in the respondents' homes, reading the well-designed questionnaire in the same manner (ensuring reliability). Respondents were offered confidentiality and encouraged to provide answers that best captured their true feelings. In general, circumstantial evidence and evidence from other public opinion surveys conducted in China (e.g., Chen, 2004) suggest that Chinese urban residents feel free to express their views in such public opinion survey as ours.

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