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THE PUZZLE OF THE CHINESE MIDDLE CLASS

Andrew J. Nathan

Andrew J. Nathan is Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science at Columbia University. He is the author or editor of twelve books on China and East Asia, including China's Search for Security (coauthored with Andrew Scobell, 2012) and Will China Democratize? (coedited with Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, 2014).

I never met Seymour Martin Lipset; I came to Columbia after he had left. I was amused to read in the autobiographical essay “Steady Work” Lipset’s account of becoming a doctoral student at Columbia in 1943. He had received a teaching fellowship in the sociology department at City College, and the fellowship required the recipient to be registered somewhere as a graduate student. Since Columbia was only a mile away, down one hill and up another, he went there.¹ I wish it were that easy to choose a graduate program today.

As a graduate student and young instructor at Columbia, Lipset worked with giants such as Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld, laying the foundations of modern political sociology. By the time I got to graduate school in the mid-1960s, Lipset’s work was required reading for our Ph.D. qualifying exams. Today, conforming to type as a senior faculty member, I grumble that students do not read the classics of the discipline. But Lipset’s *Political Man*, first published in 1960, is an exception. Especially influential is his famous 1959 essay, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” which appears in the book as a chapter entitled “Economic Development and Democracy” and contains his thesis that “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy.”² Lipset argued (acknowledging the influence of Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Marx) that economic development would enlarge the middle class and that the middle class would support democracy.

There has been much debate over exactly how to interpret this theory,³ but the consensus that the field has reached, and to which I adhere,

THE SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET LECTURE ON DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD

Andrew J. Nathan delivered the twelfth annual Seymour Martin Lipset Lecture on Democracy in the World on 20 October 2015 at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and on October 13 at the Centre for International Studies at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto. The title of his lecture was “The Puzzle of the Chinese Middle Class.”

Seymour Martin Lipset, who passed away at the end of 2006, was one of the most influential social scientists and scholars of democracy of the past half-century. A frequent contributor to the *Journal of Democracy* and a founding member of its Editorial Board, Lipset taught at Columbia, the University of California–Berkeley, Harvard, Stanford, and George Mason University. He was the author of numerous important books, including *Political Man*, *The First New Nation*, *The Politics of Unreason*, and *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. He was the only person ever to have served as president of both the American Political Science Association (1979–80) and the American Sociological Association (1992–93).

Lipset’s work covered a wide range of topics: the social conditions of democracy, including economic development and political culture; the origins of socialism, fascism, revolution, protest, prejudice, and extremism; class conflict, structure, and mobility; social cleavages, party systems, and voter alignments; and public opinion and public confidence in institutions. Lipset was a pioneer in the study of comparative politics, and no comparison featured as prominently in his work as that between the two great democracies of North America. Thanks to his insightful analysis of Canada in comparison with the United States, most fully elaborated in *Continental Divide* (1990), he has been dubbed the “Tocqueville of Canada.”

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is as follows: First, the middle class tends to prefer democracy, supporting it if it already exists and wishing for it—although not necessarily taking action—if it does not yet exist. These prodemocracy leanings are rooted in a combination of material interests, such as the ownership of businesses and property for which the middle class wants the protection of the rule of law, and cultural values, such as a sense of individual

self-respect and the preference for freedom of thought and speech that comes with independent economic status and access to education. Second, however, the existence of a middle class does not make a transition to democracy inevitable; such a transition is contingent on the stance of other classes, the balance of power within the regime, and the occurrence of unpredictable crises. And third, although Lipset's 1959 article drew its examples from the Western world, Latin America, and the English-speaking nations outside Europe in the 1940s and early 1950s, the logic of its argument was meant to apply—and has proven to apply—to other regions of the world and to later time periods as middle classes have developed.

In this context, the middle class in China presents a puzzle. Intermittently, to be sure, it demands democracy: during the prodemocracy movement of 1989, which spread to more than three-hundred cities and involved not only students but all kinds of urban residents; in the many local “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) movements against incinerators and chemical plants; in the protests against harmful consumer products, environmental-pollution incidents, and disasters such as the August 2015 chemical-warehouse explosion in Tianjin; and in the struggle of the “rights-protection” and “new-citizens” movements, feminists, and other groups for space to operate within civil society.

Based on such examples, many scholars—both Western and Chinese—have predicted that the middle class, as it grew, would exert more pressure for liberalization.⁴ The West's policy of engagement with China has been justified partly on this expectation, with the hope that engagement would foster a middle class and that the middle class would promote democracy.

Most of the time, however, the Chinese middle class has not acted according to expectations. Most members of the middle class avoid challenging the regime; when backed into a conflict with authorities, they adopt the strategy of remonstrance, proclaiming their loyalty to the regime's principles and policies and aiming criticism at their implementation by lower-level officials.

In survey after survey, middle-class respondents report high levels of support for China's authoritarian system. The late Tianjian Shi reported levels of trust in the government, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the courts, and the police exceeding 80 percent. In a later survey, Bruce Dickson found that “satisfaction with the central government” averages 7.58 on a scale of 0 to 10, with higher support among urban residents and those who reported improvements in income. Jie Chen's surveys and interviews, summarized in the 2013 book *A Middle Class Without Democracy*, along with a large body of other research, produced similar findings: China's middle class broadly approves of the regime and holds less favorable views of democracy than do other social strata, making the middle class an unlikely agent of democratic change any time soon.⁵

What is going on? Is China “exceptional” (to invoke another of Professor Lipset’s favorite themes, which he of course applied not to China but to the United States)? Is there a “China model,” by virtue of which the Chinese middle class behaves differently from middle classes elsewhere? In fact, Lipset’s approach, which attends to historical and sociological context, works well for China. It is because China’s middle class is differently placed in some critical ways from those that Lipset studied that it behaves differently in some ways, but not all.

Who Belongs to China’s Middle Class?

Before we analyze the situation of the middle class, we need to figure out whom we are talking about. Not all those who think of themselves as middle-class are middle-class in Lipset’s sense. For example, in the 2008 Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), which samples the entire population (both urban and rural) except for Tibet, when respondents were asked to place themselves on a ten-step ladder from the lowest to the highest status group in society, 58.2 percent ranked themselves in the middle positions, 5 through 7. This is understandable when we consider that 77.2 percent of respondents reported that their family’s economic condition was better now than a few years ago. One can understand that, for example, a factory worker who has been able to send money back to the village to help her family build a tile-roofed house and buy a motorcycle has good reason to think of herself as having risen to the middle class. But we would not consider her middle class in Lipset’s sense.

Nor is income a good way to define the Chinese middle class; incomes are changing so quickly that income groups have yet to settle into definable classes. (Also, many Chinese families have such diverse sources of income that they cannot accurately report how much they earn, and many who can are unwilling to do so.) By one income-based definition, in 2005 more than 800 million Chinese would have counted as middle-class—about 57 percent of the population.⁶

But this is not the middle class we are looking for, the one that should be prodemocracy according to Lipset’s theory. Lipset explained the prodemocracy preferences of his middle class by looking at class members’ social positions as rural small landowners, urban small businessmen, and white-collar independent professionals—typical roles of middle-class persons at the time and in the places that he was studying. They had both material possessions and a kind of property in their own skills and dignity, which gave them the need for protection from arbitrary government and the sense of a right to speak and be heard.

It turns out that Chinese sociologists trying to understand their country’s social structure—perhaps influenced by their own reading of Lipset—also use people’s professions as the main indicator of social stratification. (Interestingly, they refuse to use the word “class” [*jieji*]

because of its Marxist connotations of exploitation and class struggle, both of which are considered impossible in today's "harmonious society." So they substitute the word "stratum" [*jieceng*], using it to mean the same thing that Lipset meant by class.)

The most widely used typology of social strata in China was created by the late sociologist Lu Xueyi and his colleagues at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. They identified ten occupational groups, ranging from high-level state and enterprise leaders, who are above the middle class, to factory workers, agricultural laborers, and the unemployed, who are below it. In the middle strata are those who "chiefly rely on mental labor, support themselves from wages and salaries, can obtain professional employment with relatively high incomes and relatively good working environments and the corresponding level of family consumption and leisure life, and have some degree of discretion in their jobs, along with a sense of themselves as citizens with a sense of public virtue."⁷ These people work as professional and technical staffers of state and Party offices and enterprises, white-collar administrative employees, and owner-operators of smaller-scale private industrial and commercial enterprises.

What Is Different About China's Middle Class?

There are four ways in which the Chinese middle class so defined differs from Lipset's middle class. First, a much smaller fraction of the population makes up China's middle class. Lu and his colleagues estimated its size in 1999 as 14.1 percent of the population, and in a later interview Lu estimated that by 2008 it had grown to between 22 and 23 percent.⁸ Other scholars give similar figures. While Lipset did not say exactly what percentage of the national populations that he studied were middle class, he referred to a "diamond-shaped" social structure in which the middle section was the most populous.

By contrast, Chinese sociologists complain that their society is "pyramid-shaped"—a small middle class crowned by a tiny upper class resting atop an enormous lower class. The middle class occupies, in effect, a privileged social island—concretized in the gated communities now common in Chinese cities. Members of the middle class fear that in a majority-rule society their interests would be subordinated to those of the lower classes.

The second obvious difference from Lipset's middle class concerns the nature of employment. China's middle class comprises mostly civil servants, state-enterprise employees, and staffers of institutions such as universities, hospitals, and media enterprises that either belong to or are controlled by the state. The younger generation prefers these jobs because they pay decent salaries, are more secure, and offer better fringe benefits than most private-sector jobs. Ambitious young people strive to

join the CCP because Party membership is the key to influence and success in almost every field.

Unfortunately, I do not have any precise data on how many middle-class people are directly or indirectly employed by the Party or state. In one study of three large cities, 60 percent of middle-class respondents

For an established middle class, wealth is a spur to political participation; for a new middle class, political participation is a distraction.

were employed in the state apparatus, and this factor showed a strong negative relationship with support for democracy.⁹ Most doctors work for government hospitals and most writers for the official writers' association. Lawyers and law firms are nominally independent but supervised by the state. The only professions with many independent practitioners are art and architecture, but most of their members depend on state commissions to prosper. Independent business

owners make up just a small sliver of the middle class, and they depend on their close ties with officialdom to get anything done. In short, this is a dependent middle class, not an independent one.

It is worth pushing this point a step further. Sociologist Luigi Tomba writes that the Chinese middle class grew out of the housing reforms of the 1990s, reforms that heavily favored the employees of government offices and state enterprises, which owned most of China's housing during the Mao period and rented apartments to their employees. During these housing reforms, government and state-enterprise employees became property owners at low cost through three channels: Existing work-unit housing was privatized; work units built new housing and sold it to their employees at subsidized prices; and work units subsidized loans or purchase prices for employees to buy housing on the market. Employees who received these low-cost apartments were often able to trade up later as the housing market took shape. As a result, public-sector employees "today form what is popularly known as the *fangchan jieji* (propertied class)."¹⁰ Government employees also have superior medical insurance and pension funds, and (in recent years) a faster rate of salary increases than employees in other sectors.

The third special feature of the Chinese middle class is its newness. Lipset's middle class had its origins in the cities of Europe in the late Middle Ages and emerged as a distinct class as far back as the seventeenth century. It grew along with the modern nation-state and democracy itself, and possessed a well-established and legitimate identity. The Chinese middle class, by contrast, literally did not exist as recently as 1979. The small prerevolutionary middle class was destroyed in the 1950s and replaced by what Jean-Louis Rocca has described as "an army of stratified workers" living austere lives, surmounted by a miniscule Party elite.¹¹

The middle class reemerged during the reform-and-opening period of the 1980s, but did not begin to grow rapidly until the economic takeoff of the 1990s. China's per capita Gross National Income in Purchasing Power Parity terms was forty times larger in 2012 than in 1980; urban dwellers increased from 20 percent of the population in 1978 to 52 percent in 2012; and college enrollment grew from two million in 1990 to sixteen million in 2005.¹² This rapidity of change means that a majority of middle-class people are first-generation members of that class, living in a style dramatically different from that of their parents and surrounded by others with a similarly novel class identity. Even in two-generation middle-class families, there is often a wide cultural gap between generations.

It is hard to imagine the disorienting effect of such rapid change, which affects not only the individual, but also his or her social milieu. Those living in the gated communities are just in the process of forging a way of life, in part by self-consciously emulating what they understand of Western consumption habits. For an established middle class, wealth is a spur to political participation; for a new middle class, political participation is a distraction. For now, there is little sense of shared perceptions or common interests among China's middle class, let alone the settled conviction of social worth that leads more established middle classes to confidently assert their interests.

The fourth and final contrast between Lipset's middle class and China's is the nature of its associational life. The rich associational life of the Western middle class was one of Lipset's important themes. In "Steady Work," Lipset wrote, "Saskatchewan sensitized me to the relationship [between civil society and democracy] as I began to realize that this intensely politically active area, with a population of 800,000, had at least 125,000 positions in community organizations and government that had to be filled."¹³ He was alluding not to overtly political organizations, but to school and library boards, collectively managed grain elevators, cooperative stores, and the like—associations that, in a Tocquevillian sense, were training grounds for effective political participation.

The Chinese middle class has no such associational life. The government outlaws organizations that might compete with the official top-down youth, women's, and labor "mass organizations." It allows some staff-based (rather than mass-based) organizations to engage in advocacy regarding environmental issues, but deters local environmental protests. The government also prevents the rise of independent media and controls the Internet. It allows small-scale volunteer organizations to work in areas such as public health, environmental protection, education reform, and disaster relief, but only with a focus on service delivery, not policy advocacy.¹⁴

The government seeks to control religious life by licensing five recog-

nized religions and controlling their personnel, property, and activities. Independent religious organizations have to operate underground and do their best to avoid contact with the authorities. The government briefly tolerated some local-level civil society organizations, such as Yirenping and the New Citizen's Movement (which have now been crushed), that sprang up to fight discrimination and promote women's rights. In 2015, the authorities rounded up more than two-hundred "rights-defense lawyers" and staff, putting an end to their courageous small-scale efforts to use the legal system to defend the rights of various disadvantaged social groups.

Urban neighborhoods do not hold elections parallel to rural village elections (which in any case are tightly controlled by the CCP). Instead, neighborhood and residents' committees, which are viewed as organs of "self-government," are organized top-down, manned by government-paid staff, and charged with a variety of tasks. These include conveying state-sponsored information to residents, helping to maintain household registers and enforce family planning, carrying out cleanup and hygiene drives, and mediating disputes. One of the intended functions of the neighborhood and residents' committees, as Tomba argues, is to encourage middle-class residents to think of themselves as more "civilized" and of higher "quality" than lower-class persons, and to take pride in serving as models of social harmony and political compliance. About such committees, Benjamin Read writes, "Not only are they a key component of the surveillance network maintained by the security apparatus; they also help the state to act on that information and to intervene, at times, as part of political campaigns."¹⁵

Perhaps the most active forums of middle-class associational life are the homeowners' associations that have sprung up to represent apartment owners against the companies that construct and manage the buildings. The interests of these micro-associations are perforce limited to matters at the level of the apartment complex, and they normally negotiate with a private real-estate company rather than a government office, although the real-estate management company often is managed by the local government, supervised by the Party, and carries out family-planning and propaganda work on behalf of the state. While homeowners' associations may serve as schools of organizing and activism for some local leaders, the battles with management companies over issues of contract compliance or living conditions are not scalable to the level of a class interest defined against the existing political order.

What Are They Quietly Thinking?

Despite differences from Lipset's middle class, the Chinese middle class does have some of the key features that he identified as relevant to support for democracy. Members of the Chinese middle class own some

property, which they want the government to protect through the rule of law; they have responsible jobs, instilling in them an expectation of being treated respectfully; and they have education, which gives them the tools to be curious and to think independently. They have been heavily exposed to Western values through consumption practices, television, movies, the Internet, travel, and in some cases overseas study.

To be sure, despite the rise of social media, most middle-class people still get their news mainly from media directly or indirectly controlled by the government. The nightly news on China Central Television (CCTV) highlights the turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa after the Arab Spring; contrasts the stability in Iran with the chaos in Iraq, where the government was overthrown by the West; and reports on financial crises and slow economic growth in the West. But viewers still gain some familiarity with the concept of democracy, if only through government propaganda rejecting “Western-style democracy” in favor of an allegedly more authentic and culturally appropriate “socialist democracy.” Those with access to outside sources of information or who travel abroad tend to form more favorable views of the West and often are more critical of the Chinese system.¹⁶ So we are justified in probing beneath the understandable political caution of this new, vulnerable, and dependent class to try to figure out what they may be quietly thinking.

The results of the 2008 ABS China survey give some hints. We can identify middle-class respondents as those city dwellers who have at least some secondary-level education and who report that their household income allows them to cover their needs and put away some savings. These criteria identify 14.2 percent of the valid sample as middle class.¹⁷ Compared to non-middle-class respondents, these financially comfortable, relatively well-educated urban residents are more likely to express dissatisfaction with the way that the political system works (29.7 percent versus 18.9 percent)¹⁸ and more likely to endorse a series of abstractly stated liberal-democratic values such as independence of the judiciary and separation of powers (46.2 percent versus 24.7 percent).¹⁹

These attitudes are becoming more pronounced as young people join the middle class and older people exit. Indeed, thanks to the rapid growth of secondary and tertiary education in China, the middle class is much younger than the rest of the population. People between 18 and 29 years of age constitute 29.5 percent of the ABS’s middle-class respondents compared to 18.7 percent of non-middle-class respondents. Younger members of the middle class are even more likely than their older counterparts to voice dissatisfaction with the way that the political system works (34.0 percent versus 27.9 percent) and even more approving of liberal-democratic values (50.4 percent versus 44.5 percent).²⁰

In 2005, using in-depth interviews, Zhang Wei, a Chinese political scientist at the Central Party School, wrote an insightful book warning

of middle-class alienation. Criticizing Lu Xueyi and other leading Chinese sociologists for expecting the middle class—due to its education, social privileges, and higher social “quality”—to serve as a force for social harmony and stability, Zhang Wei found a Chinese middle class that instead is silent, indifferent, and alienated:

Their political alienation is a forced rather than chosen political indifference; in contrast to ordinary political coldness, it is not a factor for stability. It is instead a state of tense expectation, a kind of recessive state in which political expectations have not achieved release. A closed political order can suppress the enthusiasm for political participation while at the same time building up the force of a future enthusiasm for political participation. . . . If one day political alienation turns into political participation, its pressure on the political order may be more dramatic than that of regular political participation.²¹

This analysis rings true to me. Middle-class people whom I have met (not a representative sample, of course) feel politically locked out. They respond to this circumstance in a variety of ways. A few, to be sure, become dissidents; they do exist, and they are heroic. The puzzle here is why they are so few. Some in the middle class emigrate—large numbers, but given China’s demographic size, only a small share. Most middle-class people fall into four other groups.

The largest group, perhaps, comprises the politically *anesthetized*. My impression is that members of this group are especially common among the second generation. Being young, they have no memory of 1989, much less the Cultural Revolution; they have grown up in a milieu that emphasizes career and consumption; and they tacitly understand that politics is a third rail. An exaggerated version of this group can be seen in the popular Chinese movie series “Tiny Times” (*Xiao shidai*), a kind of Chinese “Sex in the City” in which beautiful, wealthy young Shanghai denizens fuss over their clothing and love affairs.²²

In the second group are the *acceptors*.²³ Among the acceptors would be the young academics I have met who have never heard of Liu Xiaobo and are not curious about 1989. Some are “political-thought instructors” who work hard to teach their students loyalty. The sense I get from talking with such people is that China is where they live and want to live; the Chinese regime is the regime that China has; and the regime’s truth is the truth they are prepared to live with. Even if China remains an authoritarian system, life is freer and better than it was two generations ago under Mao Zedong. Therefore, as Tianjian Shi pointed out, although the ABS China survey respondents rated democracy as highly desirable and suitable for China, on average they also rated the Chinese system as already quite democratic (7.22 on a scale of 10).²⁴

In the third group are the *ameliorators*. They see flaws in the system, but have also seen progress in their lifetimes and believe that through

teaching or writing or legal work, they can contribute in their own way to further progress. If one believes that progress can be achieved, it is certainly worth working for.

In the final group, we find those who might be called the *alienated*.

What the Chinese middle class lacks is a sense of security. Its prosperity is hostage to the management skills of a secretive bureaucracy that is navigating a risky transition to an unclear future.

The alienated are perhaps more common among the older or more highly educated members of the middle class. They have no illusions about the regime, but are not ready to risk their necks in opposition or to give up their privileged status and connections for a less privileged and less connected life in a foreign country. If they could design a perfect world it would be different, but they go on living the lives that they have.

The members of all four of these groups are, in a sense, realists, and I respect them for it. The events of 1989 were able to happen partly because the then nascent middle class felt that its new prosperity was threatened by inflation and corruption, and partly because the regime signaled irresolution, which gave portions of the middle class a chance to express their worry in political form. Today, however, inflation is under control, corruption is under attack, and the regime appears determined to hold onto power. The Chinese middle class knows that it is not now in a position to challenge the authoritarian political system. I think it is these considerations that produce the kinds of puzzling survey results described at the beginning of this essay.

But I would use another “A” word to describe a common characteristic of all those who have decided to live within the reality that is available to them: They are *anxious*. What the Chinese middle class lacks is a sense of security. Economically, except for the few who are wealthy enough to park money abroad, the prosperity of middle-class Chinese people is hostage to the management skills of a secretive bureaucracy that is navigating a risky transition to an unclear future. Every economic slowdown feels like a harbinger of possible disaster. Politically, the middle class is caught between a ruling party above, in which obscure and dangerous struggles appear to be taking place in the form of an anticorruption campaign, and a mass of workers and peasants below, who are perceived as uncivilized, seething with discontent, and possessing interests that the middle class sees as adverse to their own.

Such is the conflicted psychology of people trapped in a status quo that feels unstable. This could be why the current regime seems to be running so scared of the middle class despite that class’s high level of expressed support. Xi Jinping’s regime has been trying to deter the middle class from action with a new national-security law and draft laws on

Internet security and foreign civil society organizations, as well as by cracking down on rights lawyers, intensifying demands for ideological conformity, and creating what has begun to look like a form of neo-totalitarianism. The stress on a “harmonious society” pursued during the previous period under Hu Jintao and the opening of some limited space for small-scale civil-society activity have given way to something more coercive and threatening. This seems to deter the middle class from challenging the regime, but at the cost of increasing that class’s sense of anxiety.

Cultural Exceptionalism?

Does all this mean that China is culturally exceptional? There is indeed a discourse that argues that the Chinese middle class is politically deferential because of its preference for the values of harmony and collectivism. I agree that different cultures have distinctive *mixes* of norms and values (neither Chinese nor Western culture is monolithic). And it is true, as Tianjian Shi has shown, that values favoring collective interest and hierarchy remain relatively strong in formerly Confucian societies.²⁵

But here again, we should follow Lipset’s guidance. His probing examinations of American exceptionalism in several books emphasized institutional rather than cultural roots for such U.S. attributes as the lack of a strong socialist movement, the race divide, and the frequent recurrence of right-wing extremism.²⁶ The same is true for the attitudes of the Chinese middle class: These attitudes are responses to institutional realities that today’s China has inherited from the past—the one-party system, state dominance of the economy, and the persistence of large working and peasant classes. Many other late-developing economies have followed similar institutional pathways, and their middle classes were similarly quiescent until they grew much larger. In this sense, the Chinese middle class is not exceptional at all.

But China is changing. What might the future bring for China’s middle class? Even though Lipset warned that social scientists are not good at predicting the future, we may hazard some guesses.²⁷ As long as the Chinese economy continues to grow at something like its current annual rate (supposedly 7 percent, but perhaps more accurately around 5 percent) and the political system remains stable, the middle class will continue to expand. The implications of this scenario for democracy are mixed. Chinese sociologists hope that rising prosperity will diminish social conflict, and that a pro-stability middle class will support the regime. On the other hand, if the values of the middle class continue to become more liberal, its sense of alienation from the political system will grow, even if it continues to tolerate a regime that keeps delivering prosperity.

In the unlikely event that a faction in the regime tries to carry out a

democratic transition from above, we should expect the middle class to welcome the attempt, as long as it proceeds without disrupting social peace and economic stability. Should the regime appear to split, as it did in 1989, the middle class might again awaken politically and act on its buried dissatisfaction.²⁸ But even in this scenario, we cannot expect the middle class to be a decisive force for democratization unless it somehow overcomes its cultural and social isolation from other classes, or until in due course it finally becomes China's largest class in a diamond-shaped social structure.

If economic growth stagnates, however, or if the regime makes an unlikely left turn and launches an attack on middle-class interests, the well-being of the middle class will be threatened. Urban lifestyles will suffer, and the growing number of college graduates will fail to find good jobs. We should remind ourselves that Lipset did not say that the middle class would always and only support democracy. When lacking economic and status security, Lipset recounted in another famous article ("'Fascism'—Left, Right, and Center"), the middle class is likely to support some form of extremism.²⁹ In China, this extremism could grow out of the xenophobic form of nationalism that the government has been promoting as a way to buttress its legitimacy. To express its anger, the middle class might challenge the government as traitorous and weak, which could push the regime in an even more authoritarian direction.

Both scenarios are full of risk, and it is just this kind of thinking that keeps the Chinese middle class where it is today. What middle-class persons dread is an economic or military crisis or an internal power struggle that triggers a breakdown of order. It is the fear of such a crisis that explains why a middle class that increasingly embraces liberal values still supports an authoritarian regime.

NOTES

1. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Steady Work: An Academic Memoir," *Annual Review of Sociology* 22 (1996): 7.

2. *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, expanded and updated ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 31.

3. For a good literature review of this debate and its application to China, see Jie Chen and Chunlong Lu, "Democratization and the Middle Class in China: The Middle Class's Attitudes Toward Democracy," *Political Research Quarterly* 64 (September 2011): 705–19.

4. For a review of the English-language scholarship on this issue, see Bruce Dickson, *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival* (Oxford University Press, 2016). For a review of the Chinese scholarship, see Cheng Li, "Chinese Scholarship on the Middle Class: From Social Stratification to Political Potential," in Li, ed., *China's Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 55–83.

5. Tianjian Shi, "China: Democratic Values Supporting an Authoritarian System," in Yun-han Chu et al., eds., *How East Asians View Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 229; Dickson, appendix to *Dictator's Dilemma*; Jie Chen, *A Middle Class Without Democracy: Economic Growth and the Prospects for Democratization in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

6. Based on a definition of the Asian middle class as those with consumption expenditures of \$2 to \$20 per person per day in 2005 PPP\$, which counts more than 800-million Chinese as middle-class in 2005. This is according to the Asian Development Bank, *Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2010* (August 2010), 5, www.adb.org/publications/key-indicators-asia-and-pacific-2010.

7. Lu Xueyi, ed., *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui jieceng yanjiu baogao* [Research report on social strata in contemporary China] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2002), 252.

8. See "Lu Xueyi Exclusive Interview: Middle Class Grew by One Percentage Point per Year," Xinhua, 17 August 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2009-08/17/content_11894452.htm (in Chinese).

9. Chen and Lu, "Democratization and the Middle Class in China," 713–14. The study was conducted in Beijing, Chengdu, and Xi'an.

10. Luigi Tomba, *The Government Next Door: Neighborhood Politics in Urban China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 104.

11. Jean-Louis Rocca, *A Sociology of Modern China*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 16.

12. For income, see: <http://knoema.com/pjeqzh/gdp-per-capita-by-country-1980-2014?country=China>; for urbanization: World Bank and the Development Research Center of the State Council, People's Republic of China, *Urban China: Toward Efficient, Inclusive, and Sustainable Urbanization* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2014), 3; for enrollment: Jing Lin and Xiaoyan Sun, "Higher Education Expansion and China's Middle Class," in Li, ed., *China's Emerging Middle Class*, 222.

13. Lipset, "Steady Work," 9.

14. Jessica C. Teets, *Civil Society Under Authoritarianism: The China Model* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

15. Benjamin L. Read, *Roots of the State: Neighborhood Organization and Social Networks in Beijing and Taipei* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 107.

16. Haifeng Huang, "International Knowledge and Domestic Evaluations in a Changing Society: The Case of China," *American Political Science Review* 109 (August 2015): 613–34.

17. The middle class identified in this way occupies a smaller share of the sample than the 20-plus percent identified by sociologists cited earlier in this essay. There is no direct way to compare the two groups, but we are probably safe in considering the ABS-defined middle class as more urban and better off than the middle class defined as a larger group.

18. The ABS question is "How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in our country?"; the question is designed for cross-national research, and we believe taps into satisfaction with the political system in general because all Asian governments claim to be democracies. By way of comparison, see Jonas Linde and Joakim Ekman, "Satisfaction with Democracy: A Note on a Frequently Used Indicator in Comparative Politics," *European Journal of Political Research* 42 (May 2003): 391–408.

19. These are the percentages endorsing four or more of seven liberal positions on the ABS's battery of "Liberal Democratic Values." For findings about the universality of the pattern by which more modernized sectors of a population adhere to more liberal values, based on the World Values Survey and comparing Asian to non-Asian countries, see Christian Welzel, "The Asian Values Thesis Revisited: Evidence from the World Values Surveys," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 12 (April 2011): 1–31.

20. For similar findings on youth attitudes in Asia and China, see Yun-han Chu and Bridget Welsh, "Millennials and East Asia's Democratic Future," *Journal of Democracy* 26 (April 2015): 151–64, and Min-hua Huang, Yun-han Chu, and Cao Yongrong, "China: The Impact of Modernization and Liberalization on Democratic Attitudes," in David Denemark, Robert Mattes, and Richard G. Niemi, eds., *Growing Up Democratic: Generational Change in Post-Authoritarian Societies* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, forthcoming).

21. Zhang Wei, *Chongtu yu bianshu: Zhongguo shehui zhongjian jiecheng zhengzhi fenxi* [Conflict and uncertainty: political analysis of the middle stratum in Chinese society] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2005), 406–407.

22. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=q61X3zfBE8g.

23. The analysis here echoes, among others, Eva Bellin, "The Dog That Didn't Bark: The Political Complacency of the Emerging Middle Class (with Illustrations from the Middle East)," in Julian Go, ed., *Political Power and Social Theory*, vol. 21 (Bingley, U.K.: Emerald, 2010), 125–41; Kellee S. Tsai, "Capitalists Without a Class: Political Diversity Among Private Entrepreneurs in China," *Comparative Political Studies* 38 (November 2005): 1130–58; Teresa Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism: State-Society Relations in China's Reform Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

24. Tianjian Shi, *The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 195. These data come from the 2003 ABS China survey. Similar findings appear in the other waves.

25. Shi, *Cultural Logic*. Shi, however, would agree with Lipset that culture and values are gradually shaped by social structure and institutions.

26. Seymour Martin Lipset with Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790–1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); Lipset with Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

27. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Predicting the Future: The Limits of Social Science," in *Consensus and Conflict: Essays in Political Sociology* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1985), 329–60, orig. in Lipset, ed., *The Third Century: America as a Post-Industrial Society* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1979), 1–35.

28. Andrew J. Nathan, "Foreseeing the Unforeseeable," *Journal of Democracy* 24 (January 2013): 20–25.

29. In Lipset, *Political Man*, ch. 5.