

## Book Review

**Ying Miao: *Being Middle Class in China: Identity, Attitudes and Behaviour*. New York: Routledge. 2016. 150pp. ISBN 9781138595736**

In the past few years, China's middle class have caught the attention from both academics and the mass media. Surrounding this attention, two questions are often asked: What are the characteristics of China's middle class? Will the growing middle-class population lead to China's democratisation? Miao's book titled *Being Middle Class in China: Identity, Attitudes and Behaviour* (2016) is one of the studies that aims to better understand the middle class of the "middle kingdom". However, before answering what the middle class is like, Miao asked a more fundamental question: how do the middle class in China see themselves? To this end, Miao conducted a survey involving 439 participants from the fieldwork site in Ningbo, Zhejiang province in China. 19 respondents were also drafted for in-depth interviews. These participants all met the official definition of middle class in China. She found that although China has a middle class in socioeconomic terms, individuals of this middle-class population do not necessarily perceive each other as members of the same social group.

After reviewing some sociological theories on social class and outlining the background of the study (chapter 1), the author reported in what way the middle class in China understand the term "middle class" in chapter 2. While some respondents described themselves as "middle class", a considerable number of them identified themselves as "salaried class". The major difference between the two groups lies in their perspectives to life and their concept of "spare money", which is subjective. The self-identifying middle-class group, who see themselves as relatively solvent, seem to lead a more "cultured life-style". They tend to attach much value to quality of life such as quality consumption, ability to travel and send children abroad for education as well as intellectual pursuits. In contrast, the salaried class, who see their income as just enough for them to get by, are more anxious in life. They often emphasised on the importance of meeting financial needs, especially the ability to have their own property.

Chapter 3 of the book analyses the way the Chinese middle class see the state's policy on various issues such as health care, education and pension system. Although there is a widespread disappointment with the state's role as a service provider and as a redistributor of national resources, the middle class do not appear to have much discontent with the state, it is partly because they believe that the private market can solve some of the problems that cannot be fulfilled by the state.

Chapter 4 deepens the discussion about social inequality and socio-political affairs in the eyes of the Chinese middle class. Miao's study illustrates that China's middle class's sense of social equality and political orientation is complex, and somewhat self-contradictory. Although social inequality is felt by the middle class, especially in the areas of income gap and property ownership, most of them thought that this disparity is acceptable.

This rather self-contradictory phenomenon is one of the reasons why China's middle class as a social group is difficult to understand. Miao observes that the Chinese middle class are aware of the effect of state policies on social inequality. In particular, they most likely live in the urban areas of coastal provinces where they have access to quality education. Many middle-class workers also work in well-paid jobs provided by the government or state-owned

enterprises. Some of them are even members of the Communist Party. This intricate relationship between the government and the middle class means that reshuffling of the social and political structure will potentially harm the interests of the middle class. In other words, despite feeling deprived in certain aspects, the middle class also understand that they are the beneficiaries of China's current policy. This explains why the middle class in the study express their strong support for a more democratic government on the one hand, but they are also reluctant to see a dramatic change in the current situation on the other hand. Miao concludes that these sentiments give the middle class in China very little motivation to fight for social and political reforms.

Chapter 5 focuses on how traditional Chinese culture is perceived by the middle class and the way they see some countries in dispute with China. Miao's survey data found that the middle class in China do not appear to be ethnocentric nor hostile to foreign influence. This finding is largely consistent with previous studies that the middle class in developing countries tend to be quite "global" oriented (p.78). Meanwhile, the interviewees also believed that traditional Chinese culture is disappearing. Many of Miao's interviewees believed that the social upheavals between the 1950s and 1970s and the economic reform since the late 1970s contributed to the erosion of traditional culture, which results in moral decay in Chinese society.

Regarding countries in dispute with China, the middle-class respondents generally think China's foreign policy as too "soft", and that China should have taken a more hawkish approach to countries that are historically or currently in dispute with China, such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Japan.

Chapter 6 of the book illustrates how gender issues and other social groups (such as migrant workers) are perceived by the middle class in China. Miao's study found that the middle class are still quite conservative in regards to various gender issues. Although the middle class agree that women should have the right to choose to be single without being labelled as "leftover women" (often defined as unmarried women in their late 20s or older); homosexuality should be more accepted and equal rights should be given to migrant workers from rural areas, they often assume there is a strong collective view in society on these issues. Therefore, individual effort is too weak to fight for social change, which also means attempts to make changes is not practical.

Miao's book provides readers with a very comprehensive report on the Chinese middle class. It teases out some paradoxical phenomena in this social group in great detail. Although in certain parts of the book arguments about the link between Confucianism and the behaviour of the middle class requires more evidence and explanation, the book is undoubtedly a must-read for those who want to better understand the middle class in China.

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