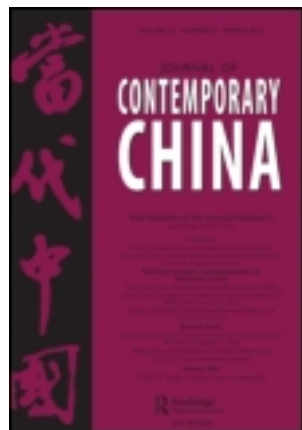


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Journal of Contemporary China

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjcc20>

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Published online: 23 May 2012.

To cite this article: Yingjie Guo (2012) Classes without Class Consciousness and Class Consciousness without Classes: the meaning of class in the People's Republic of China, Journal of Contemporary China, 21:77, 723-739, DOI: [10.1080/10670564.2012.684956](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2012.684956)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2012.684956>

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Classes without Class Consciousness and Class Consciousness without Classes: the meaning of class in the People's Republic of China

YINGJIE GUO*

The meaning of class, like many other things, is conferred by historically specific chains of signification or discourses that constitute the identity and significance of class as a social reality. Therefore, much of the conceptual purchase and explanatory power of class will be lost when the concept is taken out of the theories in which it is embedded. This is exactly the case with the use of class in the People's Republic of China in the last two or three decades, when the Marxist approach to class has been rejected and 'forgotten' by the social analysts and the Chinese Communist Party—even though the latter continues to pay lip service to Marxism—in favour of alternative concepts, methodologies and theories that sidestep class relations. The point of departure here is not so much sociological as political-ideological.

Concepts of class vary considerably, and not just because they refer to different social realities; more importantly, they take their place in a broad range of methodologies of class analysis and theories offering different explanations of social stratification and conflict. In addition, the concepts mostly made their appearance in social and political thought at a time and under circumstances which at once gave them ideological significance in the contest between competing political movements. Furthermore, '[a] large part of the chequered history of the concept of class has to be understood in terms of the changing concerns of those who have made use of the notion, concerns which reflect changing directions of emphasis within sociology itself'.¹ Those concerns are not easily separable from the theories' ideological orientations or unrelated to common perceptions of social structure, social relations, normative social configurations and the reorganization of status orders.

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1. Anthony Giddens, *Studies in Social and Political Theory* (London: Hutchinson of London, 1977), p. 99.

Restated from the viewpoint of discourse theory, the meaning of class, like many other things, is conferred by historically specific chains of signification or discourses that constitute the identity and significance of class as a social reality. Therefore, much of the conceptual purchase and explanatory power of class will be lost when the concept is taken out of the theories in which it is embedded. This is exactly the case with the use of class in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the last two or three decades, when the Marxist approach to class has been rejected and 'forgotten' by the social analysts and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—even though the latter continues to pay lip service to Marxism—in favour of alternative concepts, methodologies and theories that sidestep class relations. The point of departure here is not so much sociological as political-ideological.

What is particularly striking about the current class discourses in the PRC is the extent to which class has become a nominal category or an aggregate of population defined by means of objective criteria which is hardly able to generate class consciousness or action. Yet, most Chinese analysts are not only interested in class structure but also collective consciousness and propensities for action. Equally striking is the social analysts' preoccupation with the middle class, variously defined, and the shift of the CCP's primary concern from the working class to the middle strata of society. Without a doubt, the new class *par excellence* in China is the middle class instead of the industrial proletariat. As the former is created and privileged over other classes, the PRC's existing class map has become outdated and must be redrawn, the established status order in society reorganized and the polity redefined. This is a significant political development in so far as social classes express the fundamental identity of society and major changes in the socio-political status order entail the reorganization of both the polity and society.²

Structure, consciousness and action

The class discourses in the PRC have accentuated a number of basic questions about the class concept, analysis and theories which have been the subject of recurrent debates in the social sciences in the last several decades, although some aspects of the discourses are rather unique. To begin with, what constitutes a class? What are classes capable of doing and what do they actually do? Are they social forces or collective actors? If so, what galvanizes them into action or makes the action possible? Is it class consciousness, collective identity, common interests, predispositions, antagonism, solidarity, or something else? How do these things come about? Above all, what is the point of class analysis? Answers to these questions no doubt shape or dictate conceptualizations of class, analytical methodologies, and explanations of social relations and trajectories of change.

Marx's class discourse has been at the centre of debates on class not only in the PRC but also in the social sciences at large, due in part to the comprehensive analysis of capitalist society that Marxists provide with a view to effecting its transformation and in part to the centrality of class in their analysis and explanations of the transformation. The move away in China from Marx's class discourse is also consistent with general

2. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

trends in the English-speaking world, although it has resulted from a different set of factors. These debates and trends provide the broad theoretical and political-ideological contexts of the class discourses in the PRC and are pertinent to their analysis.

From a Marxist perspective, and that of other theorists who treat structure, consciousness and action as facets of the same phenomenon, the purpose of class analysis is to give an account of the role of classes in socio-political change. This approach is informed by the assumption that classes cannot be discussed independently of consciousness,³ that classes as social realities must manifest in the formation of common patterns of behaviour and attitudes and differentiated 'class cultures'.⁴ Consequently, class theories consist of two analytically separable elements: 'the theory of class formation and the theory of class action'.⁵ Instead of looking at the one or the other, most analysts turn their attention to the links between formation and action,⁶ objective and subjective dimensions,⁷ aggregational and relational aspects,⁸ or they look upon structure and agency as inseparable.⁹

What is of utmost importance in Marxist accounts of classes is the proposition that conflicting class interests may be identified corresponding to the dichotomous structural location of individuals and groups, and likely class action then derived from these interests and relations. This unity between structure, consciousness and action is the essence of what Pahl calls the S-C-A model,¹⁰ which might be thought to be a characteristically Marxist progression but is commonly accepted by non-Marxists, implicitly or explicitly.¹¹ Without that unity, Marx's theory of class and historical materialism will become untenable, and his class concept will be disabled as well. The same can be said about non-Marxist class theories and conceptions informed by some version of this model.

The most widely adopted alternative approach in class analysis is one that pursues empirical investigation of class structure, which may be labelled the 'structure model' for the sake of convenience. Here, class is used to describe structures of material inequality or groups ranked in a hierarchical order: classes mean groupings unequally rewarded in material and symbolic terms. In the English-language literature, occupation even tends to take precedence over income as a marker of class.¹² Indeed, class structure and occupational structure are normally taken to be

3. Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 10.

4. Giddens, *Studies in Social and Political Theory*, pp. 111 and 134.

5. Richard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset, 'Karl Marx's theory of social class', in Richard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds, *Class, Status and Power*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1967), p. 153.

6. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959).

7. Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

8. David Stark, 'Class struggle and the labour process', *Theory and Society* 9(1), (1980), pp. 89–130.

9. Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1973); and Pierre Bourdieu, 'What makes a social class?', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 22, (1987), pp. 1–18.

10. Raymond Edward Pahl, 'Is the Emperor naked? Some questions on the adequacy of sociological theory in urban and regional research', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 13(4), (1989), pp. 711–720.

11. See, for example, David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958; 2nd edn 1989); Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*; Bendix and Lipset, 'Karl Marx's theory of social class'; and John Goldthorpe, Catriona Llewellyn and Clive Payne, *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987; 1st edn 1980).

12. Blau and Duncan, for example, believe that occupation has become, for the majority of the population, probably the most powerful single indicator of levels of material reward, social standing and life chances in general in modern societies. See Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure* (New York: John

synonymous.¹³ The classes thus labelled are objective entities which can be empirically investigated, and class analysis essentially means the sorting of unequal individuals or aggregates of populations into unequal positions.

This way of identifying classes resembles Charles Tilly's basic model of how inequality comes about,¹⁴ except that the positions are considered class positions in this type of class analysis. The simplest version of the model contains three elements: a set of unequally rewarded positions which are demarcated by objective, gradational indexes of a more or less particular quantity (such as income); a sorting mechanism that channels people to different boxes; and individuals who vary in objective characteristics that the sorting mechanism detects, whereas subjectivities are not taken into consideration in the classification. It is as though individuals and groups are brought to the scanner, evaluated, and sent to a devised position. The occupants of such a position or a cluster of positions are considered a class.

An important divergence has developed between the structure model and the S-C-A model,¹⁵ which predominate in class analysis. Two major differences set these models apart. First, the former is concerned with class formation and composition, the latter with class consciousness and action as well as formation. Thus, classes in the former are predominantly objective groupings, but they are considered objective entities with collective consciousness in the latter. Second, the structure model is gradational in that it investigates indexes of a quantity, while the S-C-A model is relational because it is concerned with relations of exploitation, domination and so on. Differently stated, the concept of class refers to positions within the technical division of labour in the structure model and to social relations at work, or positions within the social division of labour, in the S-C-A model.¹⁶

The structure model has little to say about consciousness or action and lacks theoretical depth. That is not a problem if the analyst is not concerned with class subjectivities. Its principal value lies in the fact that the identified classes are among the most useful indicators of material advantage and disadvantage in modern societies and are widely used in research on social policy, marketing and advertising, and so on.¹⁷ It may also give one some idea about the shape, composition and trajectory of society. In comparison, the S-C-A model has much more explanatory power and compelling quality, but it is merely a theorem that must be confirmed or falsified theoretically and empirically.

Revisions and criticisms of the Marxist approach to class over the last century have obviously contributed to the decline of interest in it and the watering down of the S-C-A model. Criticisms levelled at Marxian class theory on ideological grounds are best exemplified by Margaret Thatcher's comment that 'Class is a communist

Footnote 12 continued

Wiley, 1967). Reid defines social class as 'a grouping of people into categories on the basis of occupation'. See Ivan Reid, *Social Class Differences in Britain* (London: McIntyre, 1981).

13. Rosemary Crompton, *Class and Stratification: An Introduction to Current Debates* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 77.

14. Charles Tilly, 'Relational origins of inequality', *Anthropological Theory* 1(3), (2001), p. 361.

15. Crompton, *Class and Stratification*, p. 12.

16. Nicholas Abercrombie and John Urry, *Capital, Labour, and the Middle Classes* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 109.

17. Crompton, *Class and Stratification*, p. 10.

concept. It groups people as bundles and sets them against one another'.¹⁸ Similar remarks abound in the Chinese-language literature. Other critics stress the class concept's loss of ideological significance and political centrality as a result of the decline of Marxism, the collapse of Soviet communism, and the waning appeal of socialist ideologies and class radicalism.¹⁹ That, they suggest, at least partially explains why both the Right and the Left are abandoning their preoccupation with class issues, with the former turning its attention to morality and ethnicity while the latter looks towards gender, ecology, citizenship and human rights.

Sociological critics who focus on class as a social reality typically argue that class is an increasingly redundant issue.²⁰ One set of cited reasons is that the importance of class cleavages has declined as stratification in the industrialized West has become increasingly pluralistic, multidimensional and shaped by factors located outside the workplace, while the old class divisions based on them are decomposing under the impact of the welfare state, occupational differentiation, rising affluence, changing political dynamics, market fragmentation and the rise of institution-based divisions.²¹ Another, overlapping set of reasons is that classes are dissolving, class divisions are losing their self-evident and pervasive character, class identities are challenged by new associations and new social movements, and most advanced, post-industrial societies are no longer class societies.²²

A second cluster of criticisms is concerned with the utility of the class concept and insists that the ability of class to explain social and especially political processes has declined,²³ or that class as a concept is ceasing to do any useful work for sociology.²⁴ The most rigorous theoretical critiques in this cluster focus on questions of structure, consciousness and action. Some contend that class action is not inevitable, as classes merely represent possible bases for common action,²⁵ as the differentiation of property classes need not result in class struggles and revolution.²⁶ Others stress the difficulty of applying Marx's 'abstract' or 'theoretical' conception of class to 'concrete' classes.²⁷ Still others question the objectivity of interests pursued by diverse actors in various sites of struggle, concluding that classes are simply not collective actors or social forces.²⁸

A similar decline of interest in Marx's class discourse became apparent in the PRC in the late 1970s. It must be stressed, however, that the move away from class here by

18. *The Guardian*, (22 April 1992).

19. Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters, *The Death of Class* (London: Sage Publications, 1996).

20. Robert Holton and Bryan Turner, *Max Weber on Economy and Society* (London: Routledge, 1989).

21. Terry Nichols Clark and Seymour Martin Lipset, 'Are social classes dying?', *International Sociology* 6(4), (1991), pp. 397–410; and Terry Nichols Clark *et al.*, 'The declining political significance of social class', *International Sociology* 8(3), (1993), pp. 279–293.

22. Pakulski and Waters, *The Death of Class*.

23. Clark and Lipset, 'Are social classes dying?', pp. 397–410; and Clark *et al.*, 'The declining political significance of social class'.

24. Pahl, 'Is the Emperor naked?', p. 710; and Pakulski and Waters, *The Death of Class*.

25. See Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 181.

26. Anthony Giddens and David Held, eds, *Classes, Power, and Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 69–70.

27. Giddens, for example, believes it is difficult to apply Marx's 'abstract' or 'pure' conception of class to specific, historical forms of society or to connect the former to 'concrete' classes. See Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, p. 30; and Anthony Giddens, *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp. 220–221.

28. Barry Hindess, *Politics and Class Analysis* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

no means echoes the criticisms found in the English-language literature. In fact, few Chinese analysts deny the relevance of the class concept and class analysis. What they reject is the Marxian class discourse. Their case against it has nothing to do with the theoretical validity or invalidity of Marxist and alternative approaches; nor is it based on critiques of Marxism or empirical findings that contradict it or support the alternative approaches. By and large, it is driven by abhorrence of a class struggle that has traumatized many Chinese and the resultant yearning for a preferable model of polity and society or modes of socio-political life.

Throughout the greater part of the 1980s the slogan of ‘farewell to revolution’—specifically to the violent act of one class toppling another—rang loud. The thrust of the slogan was the rejection of the theory of class struggle. It is the Marxist theory of class, it is widely believed in China, that caused the loss of countless lives and brought suffering to millions of Chinese. Therefore, it must be rejected *in toto*; whether class was a useful concept or a social reality that must be understood and whether class analysis had any sociological value was simply not an issue. Unsurprisingly, the rejection of class in Chinese academia and society at large met with little obstruction from the CCP. After all, the Party had already abandoned class struggle and ‘continuous revolution’ in favour of economic development through marketization at the third session of its 11th congress in 1978. As Deng Xiaoping reiterated, the Party’s new guiding principles and policies ‘centred on the shift of focus from class struggle to the development of productive forces’.²⁹

Needless to say, to renounce class struggle is to renounce historical materialism, for the latter is premised on the assumption that the struggle between the ‘warring classes of society’, especially the two ‘great classes of capitalism’—the proletariat and the bourgeoisie—is the motive force of history propelling human societies from capitalism to socialism and communism.³⁰ In PRC textbooks, historical materialism and dialectic materialism are taken to be the two planks of Marxism. While the latter is an outlook on the natural world, the former is its social-scientific core and the cornerstone of its systematic account of socio-political change and revolutionary programme. It is therefore reasonable to argue that the CCP’s renouncement of historical materialism is tantamount to abandoning Marxism’s social-political theory and vision. Even if the CCP continues to uphold dialectic materialism, it is doubtful that this ideology has any impact on the Party’s socio-political blueprint. It is even more doubtful that the outlook can be claimed to be unique to Marxism.

Nevertheless, class cannot be ignored due to its place in the Party’s ideology, and its allegiance to Marxism, albeit spurious, prevents it from renouncing Marx’s class concept and class theory. Additionally, class is a political reality that cannot be dismissed, as the PRC’s class structures, class composition and class relations have changed dramatically over the last three decades and these changes must be explained and justified without contradicting the Party line. On the other hand, neither the idea of class struggle nor the notion that there is class warfare in Chinese society is acceptable to a party that now stresses the primacy of social stability and harmony.

29. Deng Xiaoping, ‘Xingshi poshi women jinyibu gaige kaifang’ [‘The situation is forcing us to deepen reform and opening’], in Deng Xiaoping, *Deng Xiaoping Wenxuan* [Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping], vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), p. 269.

30. Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society, 1934), p. 37.

It is therefore not surprising that the Party-state and mainstream Chinese media are keen to downplay the class concept and formations of class consciousness face the prospect of being short-circuited, as Wanning Sun notes in the next issue of *Journal of Contemporary China*.

Consciousness divorced from structure: utility of class to the CCP

Class poses a daunting dilemma to the CCP for the simple reason that it was central to its ideology in the past, but has now become an obstacle to reform and the construction of a 'harmonious society'. In the Mao era, the Party looked upon the proletariat and peasantry as the principal agency of revolution and the reactionary classes, its enemies. Part and parcel of 'reform and opening' has been the abandonment of class struggle in favour of economic development through marketization. As a consequence, the CCP's primary concern has shifted from the working class to chief creators of wealth and consumers with ample purchasing power.

In fact, the Party's ambivalence towards class has been apparent ever since 1949, especially when it is divided over whether to assign first priority to continuous revolution or economic development. The significance of class has fluctuated as the pendulum swung between those poles. This is coupled with ideological inconsistencies and confusion throughout the history of the CCP. On the one hand, the class concept has been enshrined in the constitutions of the CCP and the PRC as well as the national flag and national emblems. By definition, the CCP is the vanguard of the Chinese proletariat guided by Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, while the PRC is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship, led by the proletariat and based on the alliance of the workers and peasants. The PRC's legitimate political subjects, or 'masters of the country', including the CCP, the proletariat, the peasantry, the petit bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie, are represented by the five stars in the national flag and emblems. That leaves no doubt about the classness of the Party or the state.

However, those state symbols are out of date as they were introduced in the early 1950s, before the 'socialist transformation of productive property', which eliminated the national bourgeoisie. But why is it that a party that attaches great importance to names and political symbols has left the eliminated classes in the flag and emblems? The CCP's difficulty, of course, is that state symbols need to remain stable while socio-political change is constant, that the Party cannot update these symbols every time they become obsolete for fear of creating impressions of ideological-political instability and inconsistency. The fear becomes even more acute in the light of entrenched perceptions in China that associate modifications of state symbols with the collapse of dynasties.

Hence, instead of revamping the national flag and emblems, the Party chooses to obliterate their original symbolism and to give them a new meaning. The five stars in the state symbols are now said to stand for the CCP and the 'whole Chinese people': The classness of these symbols is thus erased and replaced by nationhood.³¹ However,

31. Yingjie Guo, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China: The Search for National Identity under Reform* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

the classness of the CCP and PRC as defined by their constitutions cannot be erased as easily and unnoticeably; it is therefore downplayed and diluted through the introduction of Jiang Zemin's theory of 'three represents', which transforms the identity of the CCP from a class organization of the proletariat to a national party representing the whole nation. Of course, whether it can protect the interests of all the PRC nationals, including the conflicting interests of the contending parties in a dispute, is another question.

There is even more confusion and contradiction in another class scheme the CCP has devised, which was in circulation in the greater part of the Mao era and beyond. It features the bourgeoisie, landlords, rich peasants and other 'reactionary classes' in addition to the proletariat, peasantry and intellectuals. Though the CCP declared as early as the 1950s that exploiting classes had disappeared, the Party continued to label the family backgrounds of some members of society as bourgeoisie, landlords, rich peasants and so on. This practice lasted well into the 1980s, affecting millions of Chinese to varying degrees, although discrimination gradually eased in the reform era. Those who were thus labelled were relegated to the bottom of the PRC's status order, deprived of a broad range of civil and political rights and had less favourable life chances.

Additionally, the CCP has maintained consistently that class struggle will continue for a long time, and that statement is retained in the current constitutions of the CCP and the PRC. It is inconceivable that the Party will contemplate another full-blown class struggle without being concerned about its potential impact on the stock market and the Chinese economy. The statement is presumably retained in the constitutions in part because the Party—or some of its leaders—sees it as advantageous to use the idea as a deterrent to political opponents, and in part because the statement accords with the Marxian proposition that class struggle pervades all class societies. Thus, the Party pays lip service to Marxism by acknowledging class struggle, but only as a latent or theoretical possibility it can manipulate, while disabling the theory by denying the existence of exploiting classes and class antagonism.

The two classes (the proletariat and peasantry) in the CCP's current class map can be rolled into one working class or working people. While the Party acknowledges the emergence of new social groups in the reform era, it does not treat these groups as classes separate from the working class but as part of the latter or as transitional groups that do not belong to any existing class.³² Even those who work with large volumes of capital and rank among the richest in the country and in the world are placed in the working class 'because they were originally members of the working class and now work under a political system opposed to exploitation'.³³ In this milieu, the CCP has thrown open its doors to private entrepreneurs and businesspeople and, indeed, prioritized their interests.³⁴

That class scheme and its justification are not in the least convincing, and they are refuted by overseas authors and members of the Left in China. Dickson and So, for

32. Jiang Zemin, 'Zai qingzhu Zhongguo gongchandang chengli bashi zhouniandahu shang de jianghua' ['Speech at the celebration of the eightieth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party'], in Jiang Zemin, *Lun sange daibiao* [On the Three Represents] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2001), p. 169.

33. *The People's Daily*, (17 February 2001; 25 April 2001).

34. Jiang Zemin, *Lun sange daibiao*.

example, have pointed to a class of 'red capitalists'³⁵ and 'a cadre-capitalist class' which 'has emerged to monopolise economic capital, political capital, and social/net capital in Chinese society'.³⁶ Deng Liqun argued in the early 1990s that the bourgeoisie had already taken shape as a class and that there was acute class struggle in Chinese society.³⁷ Numerous other commentators on the Left continue to make the same point,³⁸ although their comments are not known to many despite the fact that they are allowed to circulate relatively freely. The Party can only deny the emergence of a bourgeoisie, for 'we will not allow a new bourgeoisie to take shape'; 'if a bourgeoisie has emerged, we must have gone astray'.³⁹ But these statements are meaningless in the absence of proper class analysis.

Evidently, the CCP's class schemes are not related to the actualities of class structures and class consciousness; nor are they the result of sociological investigation. What mattered to the CCP in the past was a general judgement on the extent to which classes or strata of classes were supportive or opposed to the CCP. Classes were treated as friends or enemies, while the point of class analysis was to identify the friends and enemies. The value of the judgement was best seen from political outcomes instead of sociological evidence. What matters in the reform era is the maintenance of a class scheme that conforms to the constitutions of the CCP and the PRC. The nominal status of the industrial workers as the leading class, in particular, does not square with the fact that over 61% of the class are now employed in the private sector,⁴⁰ while the rest are only nominal owners of China's public property or have joined those tens of millions of laid-off workers or 'weak and disadvantaged social groups' that Solinger writes about in the next issue of this journal.

In either case, the Party's class schemes are devised and maintained for political-ideological purposes more than anything else. Little attempt is made to establish the unity of class structure, consciousness and action; on the contrary, while the unity is assumed, consciousness and action are often detached from structure, or ignored altogether, to allow the arbitrary labelling of classes. A consequence of this is the creation of classes or class elements without the matching class consciousness and class consciousness independent of class structures. This is advantageous to the CCP on several accounts. For one thing, the Party is able to deal with class conditions and consciousness separately. For another, there is little benefit for the Party to lock

35. Bruce Dickson, *Red Capitalists in China: The Party, Private Entrepreneurs, and Prospects for Political Change* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

36. Alvin So, 'The making of the cadre-capitalist class in China', in Joseph Cheng, ed., *China's Challenges in the Twenty-First Century* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2003), p. 478.

37. Deng Liqun, 'Have a correct understanding of contradictions in socialist society, grasp initiative in handling contradictions', *The People's Daily*, (23 October 1991), p. 5, translated in FBIS-CHI, (29 October 1991), pp. 22–29; and Deng Liqun, cited by Lam in: Willy Wo-Lap Lam, *China's Struggle for 'Democracy'* (2001), available at: www.cnn.com/Asia (accessed 1 August 2001).

38. Such writings can be found, for example, at Wuyou Zhi Xiang [*Utopia*], available at: <http://www.wyzsx.com/>; and Mao Zedong Qizhi Wang [*Mao Zedong Flag*], available at: <http://www.maoflag.net/?action-viewthread-tid-1469882>

39. Deng Xiaoping, 'Zai Wuchang, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shanghai dengdi de tanhua yaodian' ['Essential points from talks in Wuchang, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shanghai and other places'], in Deng Xiaoping, *Deng Xiaoping Wenxuan*, pp. 110–111.

40. Lu Xueyi et al., *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui jiegou* [*Social Structure of Contemporary China*] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2010).

individuals into classes so that members of the good classes need not exert themselves while the rest despair of ever escaping from the bad classes. Thus, class membership is manipulated in such a way that it functions as an incentive structure, with individuals being rewarded and punished with membership in the good and bad classes on the basis of consciousness or 'political performance' alone.

In fact, the focus of the CCP's 'political thought work' throughout its history has been placed on examining individuals' subjectivities, instilling the right consciousness in them and turning them into loyal followers of the Party and new Chinese with a socialist outlook. That is to say, the right consciousness is not simply a criterion by which the progressive classes are defined, nor does it derive automatically from their relations to the means of production, but it is to be nurtured, instilled or, in Solinger's words, drummed into peoples' brains.⁴¹ Similarly, the separation of structure and consciousness enabled the CCP to assert in the Mao era that there were still exploiting classes long after the elimination of what made these classes exploiters and indeed classes. The Party could also claim that the proletariat remained a proletariat even after it had become part of the ruling class who owned all the means of production in the PRC. To this extent, class was primarily a signifier of the CCP's desirable and undesirable beliefs, values and behaviour.

In the reform era, the CCP has not only shied away from the Marxian class discourse but also gone to great lengths to de-class Chinese society and to cover up the actualities of class structures and relations. The proletariat and peasantry are nothing but occupational categories that serve a perfunctory ideological function, while the class map is altered by placing the intellectuals in the working class and by eliminating the nominal categories of exploiting classes. These alterations have little to do with changes in actual class structures but are justified purely on the grounds of consciousness or action, that is, those 'reactionary' classes are now said to have ceased to exist in subjective forms decades after their class structures were eliminated.

Whether this is actually the case can best be ascertained through proper class analysis, and if the CCP really adheres to Marxism, as it asserts, there is no reason why it should resist a Marxian analysis of the PRC's class conditions. The only explanation is that such an analysis will inevitably identify a bourgeoisie with a considerable amount of productive property, a proletariat deprived of the means of production, and class exploitation and class antagonism. Similar conclusions may emerge even if China's class structures and relations are analysed from numerous non-Marxian perspectives. Such a class map is not something the CCP wants to highlight or acknowledge, for it cannot be squared with the Party's claims about its adherence to Marxism or the socialist nature of the PRC. Without the will or the recourse to resolve this fundamental contradiction, the CCP can only paper over the gaping holes in the superstructure.

41. Dorothy Solinger, 'The urban underclass and its consciousness: is it a class', *Journal of Contemporary China* 21(78), (November 2012).

Classes in themselves: hegemony of the structure model

Two approaches predominate in class analysis in the PRC: 'class analysis' and 'strata analysis',⁴² both of which are based on the structure model. The two-class framework has two variants: one takes all social strata to be constituent groups of the two existing classes; the other treats some strata as free-floating or transitional groupings which neither belong to the classes nor form separate classes. An alternative approach, which has prevailed in Chinese academia in recent years, is unanimously described as 'stratum analysis' by Chinese sociologists. Analysts who take this approach break up the two-class structure and rearrange all the identified groupings into a new hierarchy of strata.

Variants of the two approaches in class analysis in the mainstream Chinese-language literature may differ from these in terminology, the number and typology of categories or the combination of classification criteria, but what they have in common is the definition of classes, strata or groups with reference to occupation. It matters little in the classification whether or not the classes and groups share other characteristics, as nothing but occupation determines their group or class membership. Other causal components of life chances, such as income, education or political, economic and cultural capital, mainly affect the individuals' ranking within the groups and the groups' ranking in the overall hierarchy, or the totality of classes.

In the CCP's class scheme, for example, the proletariat and peasantry are occupational categories. The new groups that have emerged in the reform era are classified into occupational categories too, including managers and technical personnel in private enterprises and foreign-owned enterprises, individual-operated business proprietors, private entrepreneurs, employees of intermediate social organizations, and independently employed professionals.⁴³ A private entrepreneur who has a Ph.D. degree and owns a fair amount of productive property and a blue-collar worker with no means of production, little education and meagre wages may become members of other strata or groups if, and only if, they move into other occupational groups, but they both belong to the same class irrespective of their group membership. In other words, the identity of individuals who are sorted into occupational classes and groups is fixed regardless of the other criteria.

This is also the case with the 'stratum analysis', which is by far the most sophisticated and influential of all class schemes in the Chinese-language literature and therefore deserves more attention. The approach is best exemplified by the work of Lu Xueyi and some 20 colleagues of his at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).⁴⁴ In an influential series of three volumes on social stratification, mobility and structure in post-Mao China, Lu *et al.* divide China's 'occupied population'

42. Lu Xueyi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui jieceng yanjiu baobao* [Social Stratification in Contemporary China] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2002); Lu Xueyi *et al.*, *Social Mobility in Contemporary China*, translated by Xiaowen Bao and edited by Harold Bashor (Montreal: America Quantum Media, 2005). The Chinese version is entitled *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui liudong*, (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2004). Also see Li Chunling, *Duanlie yu suipian: dangdai Zhongguo shehui jieceng fenhua shili fenxi* [Cleavage and Fragmentation: An Empirical Analysis of Social Stratification in Contemporary China] (Beijing: Shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005).

43. Jiang Zemin, *Lun sange daibiao*, p. 169.

44. Other writers who take the same approach include Li Lulu, *Zai shengchan de yanxu—zhidu zhuanxing yu chengshi shuhui fengceng jiegou* [The Continuation of Reproduction—Systemic Transformation and Patterns of Social

(*congye renkou*), totalling 700 million, into ten occupational strata.⁴⁵ These include state and social administrators, managerial personnel, private entrepreneurs, professional and technical personnel, clerical personnel, individual-operated business proprietors, commercial and service personnel, industrial workers, agricultural labourers, and the unemployed and partially unemployed.

A critical question to ask here is whether any of the categories can be called classes, and if they can, what kind of classes they are and for what purposes the class schemes are constructed. Certainly many analysts in the PRC speak of strata or groups instead of classes, and the terminology, as well as the analytical methodology, is politically contested.⁴⁶ In the class scheme of Lu *et al.*, no sharp distinction is made between these terms, although they opt for 'stratum' in Chinese publications 'in order to indicate that the groups in our classification are different from "classes" which were defined according to political criteria in the civil war and the Cultural Revolution', but use stratum and class interchangeably in English publications.⁴⁷ It is also possible that they do not want to be seen in China to be openly challenging the official class scheme. In manipulating the terms this way, they reject the Marxian or Maoist class concept without noticeably overstepping official boundaries of permissible dissent.

In any case, by 'strata' or 'groups' Lu *et al.* mean 'classes', except that their classes are conceived consciously in opposition to the Marxian variety. Their classes not only differ from Marx's, they are not classes at all in the eyes of Marxists, or non-Marxist class theorists who deal with class relations and class conflict, for these classes might be considered (objective) classes in themselves, but not (conscious) classes for themselves. Though they asked their respondents questions about their own class identification and their attitudes towards China's reforms, their general satisfaction and so on, they found little that could be seen as class consciousness. Their failure to give a satisfactory account of class consciousness and action is largely a result of their occupation-aggregate class analysis and other problems. This approach is not well suited to the exploration of the links between structure, consciousness and action,⁴⁸ as class is conceived here in respect of positions in the technical division of labour, in contrast to relational schemes that conceive classes to be rooted in mutually exclusive relationships which produce such deep and fundamental cleavages as to constitute enduring bases for conflict and struggle.

In Marxian analysis, for example, the development of classes is a single, non-resolvable source of conflict which splits society into 'two great hostile camps': the propertied and propertyless. These classes are placed in a situation of reciprocity such that neither can escape from the relationship without losing its identity as a distinct

Footnote 44 continued

Stratification in Chinese Cities] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2003). Li Chunling takes this approach too, although, unlike Lu Xueyi *et al.*, she often uses 'class' instead of 'stratum'. See Li Chunling, *Duanlie yu suipian*.

45. Lu Xueyi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui jieceng yanjiu baobao*; Lu Xueyi *et al.*, *Social Mobility in Contemporary China*; Lu Xueyi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui jiegou*.

46. Yingjie Guo, 'Class, stratum and group: the politics of description and prescription', in David S. G. Goodman, ed., *The New Rich in China: Future Rulers, Present Lives* (London: Routledge, 2008).

47. Lu Xueyi *et al.*, *Social Mobility in Contemporary China*, p. 419.

48. John Goldthorpe and Gordon Marshall, 'The promising future of class analysis: a response to recent critiques', *Sociology* 26(3), (1992), pp. 381–400.

class.⁴⁹ Not that Marx envisioned a two-class model of society, as is widely believed, but that the other classes, such as the landed aristocracy, the middle classes, the peasantry and so on, are not the major historic role-players like the proletariat and bourgeoisie. From a Weberian perspective, classes derive from social relations of exchange, and though the links between class relations and action are probabilistic rather than deterministic, classes are nevertheless located in paired relationships of domination and subordination. All relational class theorists conceive classes in similar terms. It is such relations of exploitation and domination, these theorists believe, which generate class identities, awareness of class interests, group cohesion, class values common patterns of behaviour—in short, class consciousness. In other words, relations grounded in deep and fundamental cleavages of one kind or another are what turns population aggregates into classes and supports the S-C-A model.

To be sure, the classes in the scheme of Lu *et al.* are not entirely unrelated to one another. For example, the private entrepreneurs who own companies and their employees, including professional and technical personnel and industrial workers, may be differently related to the means of production and, if they are in the same company, may occupy different positions in the authority structure as well. But these relations are obscured or rendered insignificant as individuals and aggregates are taken out of their actual socio-economic situations and sorted into multiple, abstract occupational categories. It is not explained, for instance, how professional and technical personnel, individual-operated business proprietors, commercial and service personnel, industrial workers, agricultural labourers and the rural and urban jobless are related to each other.

Class relationships are obscured further when the organizational, economic and cultural capital of class members is represented in numerical scores and when the classes are placed into gradational hierarchies according to the class average score on these three scales.⁵⁰ The ‘upper middle tier’ of the overall hierarchy encompasses state and social administrators, managerial personnel, private entrepreneurs, professional and technical personnel, clerical personnel, and individual-operated business proprietors. The ‘lower middle tier’ comprises the commercial and service personnel, industrial workers and agricultural labourers; and the bottom tier includes the unemployed and partially unemployed. There is an upper tier vaguely termed the ‘wealthy tier’ or ‘economic elites’, but it is not specified which classes fall into this tier.⁵¹

The only notable relationship between the classes can be seen in their ranking on the three scales. Thus, it can be said that state and social administrators possess more organizational capital than the other classes; private entrepreneurs and managerial personnel receive higher incomes than industrial workers, agricultural labourers, and the unemployed and partially unemployed; and professional, technical and clerical personnel have more cultural capital than the rest. That relationship may be characterized by inequality but not exploitation or domination. Indeed, the occupational classes are stripped of all deep and fundamental cleavages and antagonistic relations, while the multiple-class hierarchy does not represent a common social field of relevance

49. Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, p. 29.

50. Lu Xueyi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui jigou*, p. 402.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 408–409.

where classes struggle along a single line of division or around a common causal component of life chances, such as ownership of productive property in Marxian class analysis or market capacity in the Weberian approach.

One explanation of this methodological choice is that there are no relations of exploitation and domination in Chinese society. Another explanation is that most social analysts and commentators in the PRC consciously refrain from delving into social conflict and construct social structure and social classes in such a way that fundamental class cleavages, irreconcilable class conflicts or warring classes are evaded or concealed. The second is more plausible in the light of the Party-state's emphasis on social stability and harmony. Class and antagonistic class relations, as well as methodologies that capture these relations, have little place in the utopia of 'harmonious society' simply because these will undercut images of harmony or add to the challenge of building a 'harmonious society'. In fact, Lu Xueyi states explicitly that stability and harmony are important considerations in 'stratum analysis' as opposed to 'class analysis':

There is a view among Chinese sociologists that class analysis and classification was a practice of the revolutionary epoch, which was associated with class struggle. Stratum analysis, on the other hand, is advantageous to social harmonization and integration ... The purpose of classifying China's 1.3 billion people into strata is to bring out the enthusiasm of the whole society, harmonize the relations between the social strata, and build a relatively harmonious and stable society.⁵²

To that end, conflicting relations are circumvented in the ten-class scheme of Lu *et al.*, while social mobility is conceived to be intra-occupation mobility or trans-occupation mobility, which can be achieved without drastic socio-political change. Social stratification, similarly, means gradational gaps which can be narrowed between members of the same class, the classes and the tiers of the overall hierarchy. Another way of putting this is that class members, classes and tiers are, by and large, differentiated by the technical division of labour and demarcated by gradational indexes of a more or less particular quantity. It is surely easier to increase that quantity than to reverse productive relationships or to alter technical divisions of labour than social relations of exploitation and domination. It is also easier to justify and tolerate gradationally unequal material rewards resulting from the technical division of labour than class exploitation, domination and antagonism. After all, few in Chinese society would disagree that doctors and lawyers, for instance, should be better paid than factory workers.

So far as the Party-state is concerned, social inequality with the potential to destabilize society can be addressed through the social policy of 'controlling the growth of top strata of society, expanding the middle strata, and reducing the bottom', which was adopted at the 15th CCP congress. The Party-state can also address the issue through limited redistributive intervention without having to deal with inequality-generating productive processes and relations. In fact, it is not desirable to alter existing productive processes and relations in favour of equality, for China's 'reform and opening' is intended, first and foremost, to promote efficiency at

52. Lu Xueyi, 'Xietiao ge shehui jieceng de guanxi, goujian hexie shehui' ['Harmonize the relations between all social strata and build a harmonious society'], *Kexue juece yuekan* 9, (2006), p. 21.

the expense of equality. This rationale largely accords with liberal functional theories of stratification which see the structure of inequality as a mechanism through which the best-qualified persons are allocated to the functionally most important positions in society. China's social scientists may not see eye to eye with the Party-state on everything, but it is their common objective to maintain the momentum of 'reform and opening' and to construct a stable and harmonious society. It should not come as a surprise, then, that the analysis of occupational hierarchies in the PRC relies on theoretical models of society which stress the importance of social harmony and functional interdependence associated with the division of labour, and that functional class theorists, especially Davis, Moore, Blau and Duncan, appear more frequently in the Chinese-language literature than conflict theorists.

Despite the lack of convincing evidence about class consciousness, however, social analysts and commentators in the PRC continue to make claims about the subjective attributes of largely objective classes. It is particularly worth noting that most of the complimentary remarks are reserved for the middle classes or strata. Zhu Guanglei *et al.*, for example, assert that the white-collar workers are among the most important components of strata of Chinese society and are a positive force for social development.⁵³ Lu Xueyi claims that the middle classes are 'a politically and economically stabilizing force', 'a social stabilizer', 'promoters of advanced culture', 'a natural opponent to violence and dictatorship' and 'represent moderation and rationality'.⁵⁴

With these writers, it is at least possible to figure out which middle classes or strata they are talking about; more often than not, putative qualities, values and propensities for action are ascribed to a taken-for-granted middle class that appears to be no more than a phantom or figment of the imagination. The result is the creation of a subjective middle class that is not grounded in specified or identifiable structures.⁵⁵ Still, it is commonplace for analysts to suggest that the consciousness derives from actual structures. Although many reject Marx's class discourse, they proceed from the S-C-A model, habitually assuming that classes are conscious collectivities and agencies, and freely use a combination of elements of structure and S-C-A models. In this respect, they differ little from Party-state officials who are steeped in the deterministic view that the consciousness of people as social forces and political actors are determined by their social existence, except that their new class *par excellence* is the middle class.

The middle class fetish says much about the shifting status of dominant social groupings in the PRC's new status order and the fundamental identity of Chinese society as expressed by the dominant classes. The fetish has gathered momentum regardless of the CCP's unease about the middle class as a concept and social grouping. As early as the 1920s, Mao Zedong equated the 'wavering middle class' with 'national bourgeoisie', and most of the groups now included in the middle class would fall into the categories of 'national bourgeoisie' or 'petit bourgeoisie' in Mao's classification.⁵⁶ For a long time, 'middle class' in English versions of the works of

53. Zhu Guanglei *et al.* (2007), *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui ge jieceng fenxi* (Analysis of the Social Strata in Contemporary China), Tianjin: Tianjin remin chubanshe, p. 78.

54. Lu Xueyi, 'Xietiao ge shehui jieceng de guanxi, goujian hexie shehui', p. 23.

55. Yingjie Guo, 'Class, stratum and group'.

56. Mao Zedong (1967), *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Vol. 1, Peking: Foreign Language Press, p. 3.

Marx and Engels was translated into ‘*zichan jieji*’ (bourgeoisie). Additionally, the most recent edition of the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* still defines the ‘middle class’ as ‘middle-ranking bourgeoisie’. Worse still, some Marxist writers dismiss the middle class as a dubious Western concept and look upon China’s middle class fetish as a sign of Western influence eroding China’s political system.⁵⁷

For these reasons, China’s social analysts and commentators attuned to the class concept of the Maoist era use such terms as ‘middle stratum’, ‘intermediate groups’, ‘middle income stratum’ and ‘middle income groups’ instead of ‘middle class’. Yet, the distinction is often lost as these terms are used carelessly, interchangeably or with deliberate ambiguity in academic writings and the mass media. In addition, the Party theorists’ concerted emphasis on the importance of the middle reaches of society and the CCP’s promotion of an olive-shaped, harmonious and well-off society have enabled the middle class fetish to escalate and have added fuel to the flames.⁵⁸ All in all, the Party-state and the social analysts have worked together to make the middle class the new class *par excellence* in the PRC and to transform its class status order and political identity.

Conclusion

There is no doubt, then, that class has not become a redundant issue in the PRC; nor do Chinese analysts or the CCP believe that the concept of class and class analysis is no longer of much use. It is equally evident that the utility of class in China is more political-ideological than sociological. While the Party has abandoned Marxism in favour of economic development and social harmony, it remains important for the CCP to make believe that it has not betrayed its own class base or abandoned its ideology. Hence, it is left with a dissynchronized ideology and a dissynchronized ideology–practice nexus. The former is exemplified by glaring ideological inconsistencies and the latter by the ideology’s failure to legitimize the class structure and class relations to be found in Chinese society. These contradictions significantly affect the ways in which class structure, consciousness and action in China have been and can be described and analyzed.

The CCP’s move away from Marxism has enabled Chinese social analysts and commentators to abandon the Marxian class concept, analysis and theory; yet, few go so far as to openly challenge the Party’s official position on the issue and most prefer to beat around the bush and challenge the Party line within permissible boundaries. Despite the differences amongst Chinese analysts and commentators, their common ideological orientations are nonetheless apparent. It is commonplace to debilitate the Marxian class concept and break up the structure–consciousness–action chain which unpins Marx’s class theory and gives it explanatory power and ideological significance. Disrupting the S-C-A chain facilitates the political-ideological use of class as it allows the advocates of new model classes to make these classes by

57. See, for example, Qing Lianbin, ‘Woguo shehui shifou you yige “zhongchan jieji”?’ [‘Is there a “middle class” in China?’], *Zhongguo dangzheng ganbu luntan* [Forum for Party and Government Cadres] 3, (2001), p. 24; and Zheng Bijian, ‘Sange daibiao sixiang shi xin shiji dangjian de weida gangling’ [‘The theory of “Three Represents” is a great guiding principle for building the party in the 21st century’], *Guangming ribao*, (11 July 2001).

58. Yingjie Guo, ‘Class, stratum and group’.

projecting desirable attributes onto objectively defined groupings and to proceed to make claims about their progressive role in socio-political change.

What is rather ironic is—although perfectly in keeping with general trends in the social sciences all over the world—that interest in class, particularly the middle class, has soared in the last two decades or so in the wake of the farewell to class. The rise of this class contrasts with the fall of the proletariat, which is now rarely mentioned in the mass media or Party-state communications. The middle class fetish also contrasts with the silence on the bourgeoisie, which cannot be legitimately named. Although members of the Left continue to write about the emergence of a new bourgeoisie and proletariat, their writings do not make it into the mainstream mass media or the academic literature in the PRC, since what they have to say is deprived of discursive legitimacy.

It is ironic too that the construct of the Chinese middle class has not been subjected to the same sort of critical scrutiny as the Marxian class concept, even though the construct also illustrates the limitations of class analysis when it obfuscates social relationships or lacks rigorous empirical grounding. The middle class should be no exception if classes are dissolving, if class identities are challenged by new associations and new social movements, or if class as a concept has lost the ability to explain socio-political processes and is ceasing to do any useful work for social analysis. Similarly, this class cannot be thought to be a social force and collective actor if classes as a whole cannot be considered as such. However, these criticisms of class analysis should be critically examined too. There is little reason to dismiss the possibility of classes becoming social forces or collective actors unless such dismissal is backed up both theoretically and empirically. In contrast to political-ideological uses of classes, the sociological utility of class lies in conceptual clarity and sound analytical methodologies.