

Interview with Professor David Goodman

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David S G Goodman is Professor of Chinese Politics at the University of Sydney. He was educated at the University of Manchester (Politics and Modern History), Peking University (Economics), and the London School of Oriental and African Studies (Chinese language and Chinese Politics). His research is concerned primarily with social and political change in China, particularly at the provincial and local level. His recent book, Class in Contemporary China, examines the emerging structures of class and social stratification in China.

Q. *How would you define the dominant/middle/subordinate classes in China? How did you arrive at the conclusion that there are 3% of the population in China who belong to dominant classes, 12% middle class, and the rest subordinate classes?*

A. Class is family-based. The dominant class are those who own and control wealth and power. The middle class are those who owe their Intermediate position In the hierarchies of wealth, status and power to their possession of skill, knowledge, expertise and experience. The subordinate classes are those whose wealth and status rests only on their manual labour. The calculation of proportionate stratification is complex. It can be found in *Class in Contemporary China* pages 58-63 and pages 107-109 (Polity, 2014). It is based on estimates derived from survey work undertaken in China, notably by CASS Institute of Sociology.

Q. *If you had to describe in one sentence, what kind of people would count as middle class in China?*

A. Those who serve the state and corporate world in professional, managerial, and entrepreneurial roles as a result of their skills, expertise, knowledge, and political status.

Q. *There are many urban inhabitants that would meet the middle class criteria by*

income standards. However, they often do not see themselves as such, and exhibit certain levels of anxiety with their current living standards and lifestyle. How would you explain this mismatch between subjective class identity, and objective class positions?

A. Income alone is no measure of middle classness, just middle incomeness. Anxiety is actually universally held to be a characteristic of middle class identity. It is true though that there is a hiatus between subjective class identity and the objective class position often found by the analyst. In China a series of interviews over about twenty years has demonstrated that when asked by interviewers most people in China deny they are middle class, but when asked to self define, the majority say they are middle class. This is as much a function of middle class anxiety as anything else.

Q. *How much social mobility is there in China? What are the main routes for social mobility? If someone was born in rural China, whose parents are both migrant workers, or if someone was born in the urban subordinate class, whose parents are without a good income — how likely do you think they can work to become middle class, through effort?*

A. The myth of the middle class - that any individual can better themselves in terms of wealth, status and power through their own efforts is very pervasive in most contemporary societies. The evidence for this though is very limited. Gregory Clarke in his study of several countries published in February 2014 showed that in most of the world there is a 73% intergenerational transfer of wealth and status. In China he estimates that it is about 83%. This accords with my own research which independently and with a different methodology shows that 82-84% of today's local elite are direct descendants of the pre-1949 local elite. Other research on China suggests that social mobility is even lower. A joint study conducted by researchers at BeiDa and Australian National University indicated that women's occupation, status and wealth is almost completely determined by their father's occupation and status. For men, that determination is only about 80%.

The main routes for social mobility are clearly still education and politics. But it doesn't happen very much, or at least not as much as everyone thinks. Of course, intergenerational transfer of privilege at 82% still means that 18% of those who are now privileged in these ways haven't inherited. It is though more unequal than the cup being half full/half empty. The odds are stacked against someone from a poor, disadvantaged background succeeding in gaining considerable wealth, status and

power. Of course it does happen. But one must beware of the ecological fallacy. One swallow doesn't make a summer (Old English saying.) The key questions are what are the chances of the poor and disadvantaged being able to be (upwardly) socially mobile based on their own efforts and luck, and what will the state do to help provide opportunities for those who are not privileged at birth from reaching their full potential.

Q. There are numerous studies already about how women's class are subverted to her husband's class, as well. What do you think this means for modern women struggling to make their way in society? Is it a sociological observatory fact that women's social status is still subverted to the men closest to them? If so, does this lend some grain of truth to the (increasingly controversial) 'popular' advice that the most important indicator for women's social status is whether they marry well (for both they and their children, especially daughter's sake)?

A. It is indeed the case that women's social status does on the whole get subverted by their closest men or hidden behind them. It is even the case that women to a large extent prefer this. A study of women entrepreneurs by Minglu Chen showed that most women entrepreneurs put their businesses in their husband's name. They even employ their husband to be a front person for the company so that they shouldn't be seen publicly as the boss. All the survey data show that women hope to marry 'up' and that this is a driver of behaviour. Where are the social models for women to have a social status independent of men? There are some, but they remain exceptional rather than the norm.

Q. In your new book, you mentioned that the local elites of pre-1949 China managed to regain their local elite status after 1978, through an "intergenerational transfer of privilege". How resilient do you think such intergenerational transfers of privileges are? To what extent can this process survive sociopolitical upheavals and unfavourable political climates?

A. Like most people I came to this kind of sociological research thinking that sociopolitical upheavals (and even unfavourable political climates) would make significant dents in the continued patterns of elite dominance. Not so. Elite strategies for self preservation run deep. Some examples: imagine you were a local elite family in 1948. Wouldn't you suggest that one son joined the CCP and the other the Nationalist Party? If by chance you had no CCP links after 1949 wouldn't you

marry off your beautiful daughter to one of the incoming soldiers? If you were a landowner in 1946-9 might you not give your land away and become a poor and lower middle peasant? Social capital - knowing you are elite and all the skills and expertise and ways to do things that comes with that - does not disappear just because a family's economic status may have taken (what turned out to be) a temporary hit. Why do you think that Chairman Mao struggled with the red/expert dichotomy so much?

Q. In your book, you also mentioned that the Chinese middle class is deeply embedded in the party-state. What kind of political implications does this have?

A. Essentially it means that the middle class are state reinforcing, and likely to be limited in size, scale and impact. There is a widespread expectation in the rest of the world that a growing middle class will necessarily lead to liberal democracy of the Anglo-American kind(s) in China. I beg to differ. China's politics are certainly changing with economic development but it is too easy an equation to see all socio-economic development as leading to the same goal.

Q. How do you think the relationship between the middle class and the party-state affect their middle class attitudes?

A. Greatly. But in this case there are middle class attitudes are state supporting and reinforcing. The middle class have been major beneficiaries of three decades of reform and economic growth. They don't want to risk their wealth, status and power. Though of course they are more altruistic than any section of the subordinate classes.

Q. What do you mean by altruistic, in terms of what? And how does that tie into their relationship with the party-state?

A. The evidence from recent research (for example: Marty Whyte, Chin Kwan Lee, Beibei Tang) is that it is the middle class(es) who have concerns about the increased inequalities in Chinese society, rather than those (the subordinate classes) who are most disadvantaged by recent (last three decades) changes. How does tie in with their relationship to party-state? To a large extent it seems they see themselves as loyal opposition. Critical of state policies, but not of the state as system.

Q. *Most of academia have already acknowledged that the Chinese middle class have deeply vested interest in the party-state, which in turn is reliant upon China's continued economic growth. Do you think the middle class will turn against the party-state, if economic growth slows down, and their expectations are no longer being met? Do you think this is essentially what are witnessing in the emerging homeowner's associations and their movement for their rights?*

A. No. Homeowners' associations and rights movements are both important and a significant change in the political environment. But they do not presage regime change. Indeed, they occur because they want the current system to work better for them. Not to replace it. It is hard to see a middle class which is so dependent on and derived from the party-state turning against it, even with an economic slow-down. More would be required, such as a complete breakdown of social order.

Q. *How should the party-state react to the emerging middle class? Can you give a few policy examples?*

A. Am worried by the verb 'should' (应该). The party-state has clearly desired the growth of a large and vibrant middle class. This is part of the push for urbanisation and consumerism. There are though structural limits to both. There is only a limited welfare state, which means that people save rather than consume. The system of household registration is a clear check on urbanisation and on the growth potential of the middle class.

Q. *If most people in China still belong to the subordinate classes, what kind of political attitude do you think they have? How would this affect China's political development?*

A. In general around the world the subordinate classes are characterised by their authoritarian personalities - they are angry about their status but defenders of the status quo. Generally speaking (and despite Chairman Mao's articulation of counter ideas) subordinate classes do not lead political change they only provide the cannon fodder.

Q. *Why do you think this is? How is their dissatisfaction with the status quo and the defending attitude different from the middle class dissatisfaction and defending of the*

status quo?

A. The subordinate classes see things more individually. They object to the injustices wrought upon them not as generalised systemic injustices but as the acts of governments and officials. They complain that roads have been built through their houses, that schools have not been provided in their new residential areas where they were essentially forced to buy apartments, or that there is a lack of transport facilities in new residential areas. The middle classes may have these immediate concerns too but some sections of the middle class (and it is by no means everyone in the middle class) see the systemic problems that have come with the changes of the last three decades. And their complaints are raised on behalf of other (often more generalised) people. At the same time, most members of the middle class know when and why they are well off, and that's because of their close relationship to the state.

Q. *In your experience, what are the pros and cons of using western sociological concepts when analysing Chinese society? Are there any concerns, or precautions that we should take?*

A. An interesting question, which a team of researchers (of which I was part) started considering in detail in the early 1990s. Do the sociological concepts (class, for example) developed in a European context apply equally to China. If they don't then sociology needs to adapt to incorporate China's experience, otherwise sociology is not universal. So first off it's better to assume that societies are different rather than that they are the same, which is what many people do.

Q. *If you are familiar with Chinese internet vernacular — to what extent do you think the popular usage of invented words such as “diaosi/penis hair” and “tall, rich and handsome” reflect a subjective awareness of social stratification for certain groups of people?*

A. Yes I do think these terms and others indicate a subjective awareness of stratification that runs very deep in China. People are driven by considerations of 'people like us' and 'people not like us.' The whole debate about 素质 (suzhi) is about distinction and stratification.

Q. *What's your view on the 'China threat'?*

A. If by the 'China Threat' you mean other countries' concerns at the possible consequences of China's growing economic wealth, it clearly exists. But it is probably exaggerated. China is still a poor country compared to the major advanced economies. GDP per capita is still under \$10,000 US\$ per capita, little more than the Soviet Union was at the height of its economic performance. While the Chinese government does not want to be pushed around, there is not much evidence of its desire to dominate other countries to the extent of former colonial powers, or even the USA.

Q. *Our readers wants to know what you think of China's current ideology. Do you think ideology still has significance in today's world? What in your opinion does China's ideology really stand for?*

A. If by ideology you are talking about the current interpretations of Marxism-Leninism Mao Zedong Thought, then clearly it has become very market-oriented. What surprises me are the limits to commercialization and marketization in China. There is still no free labour market, despite changes, the household registration system sees to that providing a constant reserve pool of labour. Ideological constructions are clearly important to leaders, otherwise no one would bother with them anymore. On the other hand, there clearly is a very tenuous ideological link between leaders and ordinary people.

Q. *What is the use of ideological construction, if *not* to strengthen the link between the leader and the people? Do you think this is something the leadership is trying to strengthen, if yes, why is there limited success? (i.e. why is the ideological link tenuous?)*

A. Of course the leadership sees the function of ideology as providing legitimacy for their actions and strengthening the links with those being led. The point is that the people (generally expressed) have become more politically educated and less believing in the statements from leaders. There is considerable cynicism apparent on the streets and in the workplace as a result of ideological and political development over the last sixty years. In the early 1950s there was considerable popular enthusiasm for the ideology of the new regime. Today, much of this is seen as going through the motions. Look at how Chinese students regard their compulsory classes in political education.

Q. *What kind of strategies do you think the party-state have employed to encourage social equality? What are its principal motivations?*

A. Speaking generally, the market is a good distributor of resources, but the state is necessary to ensure equality of opportunity. In China's case the market is restricted in its operations and the state only provides limited help to restricted segments of the population with increasing support to ensure equality of opportunity. Things have improved a bit since 2002, but nonetheless greater investment in education, health and social welfare is needed.

Q. *Your research have been interdisciplinary over the years, spanning Sociology, Political Science, among others. What do you think is, or should be, the link between disciplinary studies, and area studies?*

A. Students should specialize in a discipline as an undergraduate and only move towards area studies as postgraduates.

Q. *You had taught in Australia and Britain, and now you have come to China. What is the main difference in how these countries approach China studies, do you think?*

A. In Australia and Britain, China Studies are about understanding the relationships between those countries and China. In China, China Studies is about understanding China's development in its own terms.

Q. *Do you think there are any major misconceptions about China in the West? If yes, what is the most glaring one?*

A. That the Chinese are spiritual, as compared to the Japanese who are materialistic. If there is a truth in these matters, the opposite is more the case.

Q. *Could you expand a little on this, and possibly give a few examples for our readers? In fact, one of our readers did ask what you thought about 信仰 in the Chinese context. He didn't specify what he meant by that word (religious? or simply a 'devout belief' that could be applied to communism/morals/money?). But that is a question that people throw around a lot. Do you think the Chinese have 信仰? If yes, what kind of 信仰 is it?*

A. This would be a fascinating area for research and one must be careful not to over-generalise. All the same, let's take a business world example. One reads a lot about the importance of special relationships in both countries, especially in the business world. The key to understanding difference in this case is that in Japan a banker will lend to someone just because he went to school with them (or some other reason) regardless of business plan. In China, there are of course special relationships, but a businessman needs a business plan and capital as well as political influence.

Is there 信仰 in China ? Not in the same way as in Europe. In Europe religions are exclusive belief systems. One cannot be a Muslim and a Jew. That might be unusual in China too, but it is common to see people worshipping Jesus, Confucius, Mao, and Daoist gods at the same shrine in different parts of China.

Q. *What do you think is the most often overlooked aspect in China studies, which should not be overlooked?*

A. The scale and variety of the Chinese experience. In China Studies there is a natural tendency to look for the ' typical' the 'average' and the 'norm'. China becomes over-generalised and essentialised.

Q. *Do you envision any major changes in China in the next ten or fifty years? If yes, what kind of changes are they?*

A. Change is inevitable in all societies. A situation of no-change would be the more remarkable. Economic growth will bring a more varied society and greater inequality.

Q. *If you are offered a chance to visit any historical character in China's history and ask one question, who would you choose to meet, and what question would you ask?*

A. Confucius. Did you write any of the works attributed to you, and if you did, what were you trying to do?

Q. *If you can offer one piece of advice to young China scholars across the world, what advice would that be?*

A. Sleep less.

Q. *Finally, can you recommend a China scholar, and any notable works of his/hers, to our readers?*

A. Dorothy Solinger, University of California, Irvine. Her *From Lathes to Looms* is a model of social science.