

NEW MIDDLE CLASS IN TAIWAN. A COMPARISON STUDY WITH CHINA

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Introduction

Over the past four decades, there has been a growing literature on various aspects of the middle-class phenomenon in the Republic of China (hereafter called ROC or Taiwan) and the People's Republic of China (hereafter called PRC or China). In both societies, the middle class was 'created' not only by market forces, but through political engineering (Hsiao and Wan 2014: 110). Social class differentiation and inequality has increasingly become a topic of public concern due to Taiwan's economic development during the period from 1965 to 1990, and since China's market reforms launched in 1978, resulting in the improvement of people's living standards. The middle classes in urban Asia have begun to receive attention far beyond the realm of economics such as their definition, political attitudes, social functions and consumer behaviour. For example, middle-class expansion throughout the world is expected to be broadly based, but heavily concentrated in Asia —by 2030, Asia might represent 66% of the world middle class population (Kharas 2017; *European Commission* 2018). However, some scholars believe that despite the fact that the middle class is a new constituent of Asia's class structures, class barriers are becoming increasingly more difficult to overcome, while mobilization has become even more rigid (Hong and Zhao 2015: 1). This study compares the socio-political ramification of the birth and growth of a group of middle incomers in Taipei and Beijing, as well as their social practices and representations. A constructivist approach will be employed by identifying factors that act as class grouping and barriers according to Bourdieu's class theory.

The middle class in Taiwan and China is a complex mosaic of groups and individuals that differ enormously from each other in terms of the class's occupational and sociological composition (Cheng 2010a: 4). In Taiwan's case, scholars refer to middle class as a 'conglomerate' (Chu 1996: 208) composed of many different social actors who have emerged in the course of industrialisation. Their increased earnings are tightly related to the consolidation of a market economy based on export integration into the capitalist world system in the late 1980s. The different patterns of growth and decline within the Taiwanese middle class have gone hand in hand with globalization and transnational trends towards social stratification, and Taiwan's political and economic transformation. Since the beginning of this century, however, the developed and internationally active economy of Taiwan has continued to grow, but growth with equity is no longer a feature of 'miraculous' economic development, and the conditions and structures that provide people with the opportunity to enter and remain in the middle class have also weakened (Hsiao and Wan 2014: 110; Lin 2015). For example, Taiwan's trade openness with China has led to a significant increase in gap distribution. It has also caused a decline in

class mobility, as well as political struggles between those supporting cross-Strait trade —main beneficiaries include capitalists and the new middle classes living in the north— or opposing it, as advocates of the Sunflower Movement (Lin 2015: 177; 191-192).

When looking at China, the homogeneity of its middle class has been the subject of much debate but little agreement. Although Chinese academia started debating this issue in the mid-1980s, the question of whether China has a middle class or not is still open due to the lack of a common definition shared by most scholars (Hong and Zhao 2015; Rocca 2017). Class as socio-economic structure, class as performance (the rehearsal of identity), and class as ideological formulation are all involved in the intellectual debate that has emerged in the PRC, particularly since the beginning of the 21st century (Goodman 2014: 5). However, in order to shed light on the middle class's formative process, we can note that for the most part, the intellectual debate has centred on two important issues: the first is "definitional", and the second issue involves "a sociological debate" on class in China today (Li 2010: 135-6).

This article is original in examining from a comparative perspective the construction, representations and social practices of the middle class in contemporary Taipei and Beijing. Previous studies, however, have examined from a comparative approach some aspects of the Taiwanese and Chinese middle classes such as education and parenting (Mok 2003; Berndt et al., 1993), political change (Gilley and Diamond 2008), political and legal trust (Shi 2001; Lai, Cao and Zhao 2010), gender (Chia, Allred and Jerzak 1997), Confucian values (Zhang, Lin and Nonaka 2005), environmental culture (Weller 2006), transnational networks (Saxenian 2004) or civil society and democratization (Dickson 1997; Salmenkari 2018). Researchers have found that the middle class in China and Taiwan share some significant features: they show similar consumption patterns; are basically comprised of first-generation middle incomers; have to a greater or lesser extent experienced intergenerational mobility, and were created and facilitated by state-initiated pro-growth policies; they possess higher educational qualifications and professional skills; have enjoyed economic affluence, and have constituted themselves as an emerging privileged class (Hsiao 2014: 6). Yet they differ from each other in a number of aspects, with the most defining difference between the two nations being the nature of political entity (Lai, Cao and Zhao 2010). Further, the approach of this paper is based on Rocca's perception on class analysis, which goes beyond the classical attempt to establish a reliable definition of the middle class by arguing that the size and the precise characteristics of the Taiwanese and Chinese middle class do not matter per se because they have no inherent signification in themselves beyond social imaginaries and hidden agendas (Rocca 2017: 5).

Consequently, the guiding research question is as follows: what is the difference in the social construction, representation and practices between the new middle class in both the ROC and PRC? This paper combines ethnography and data (collected via semi-structured interviews) in an attempt to address this question by exploring similarities and differences among members of middle class with respect to three aspects: (1) the emergence or 'construction' of the middle class in terms of historical trajectory, background, and class narratives; (2) the comparative analysis of middle class's social practices and representations in order to identify if there is something specific or unique about this social phenomenon in those particular societies; and (3) the review of Bourdieu's definition of social class and his concepts of capital possession and

'habitus' stratification to evaluate if his class theory is suitable to the wider understanding of class and its role in social stratification within contemporary Taiwan and China.

Data, Methodology and Theoretical Framework

To assess the extent of differences and similarities between Taiwan and China's middle classes, this study qualitatively compares data collected in Taipei and Beijing between September 2017 and December 2019. To document the incidence of multiple middle-class narratives in the ROC and PRC, a comparative analysis of literature reviews and empirical research is employed. The dataset of this study was collected in Taipei (in 2019) and Beijing (in 2017 and 2018) by conducting 20 semi-structured interviews¹ with young middle-class individuals (professional and technical staff, white collar workers, professors, civil officers, professionals, managerial staff and entrepreneurs). Since the purpose of this investigation is not to provide a definition of the middle class, and in order to ensure comparability, participants were considered middle class in Taipei and Beijing if they fulfilled three objective criteria: educational qualifications—including college, undergraduate, and above—and age range (between 25-65 years old). Finally, occupation activity, according to two models of identification of middle class will also be considered: the model developed by the East Asian Middle Classes (EAMC) project in Taipei, which is a simplified version of the 11-category class scheme proposed by Goldthorpe; and the model of the ten-groups typology of contemporary China's class structure by occupation, developed by Lu Xueyi (2002: 44) and his colleagues at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) Institute of Sociology, and which is drawn from the work of Giddens (1973) and Wright (1997).

By qualitatively comparing the data collected in Taiwan and China, this study uses Qualitative Comparative Analysis as a methodological tool to engage in a dialogue between cases and theories. Qualitative Comparative Analysis offers a relatively new, systematic way of studying configurations of cases when using case-study research methods. The comparative research is a research methodology which interprets the data qualitatively whilst also looking at causality between the variables. However, the comparative study is a challenging task for two primary reasons: the nature of data collected from two noticeably different societies and its associated interpretation require extra-caution; also, when their results vary in some more obvious aspects, researchers must be very attentive in order to distinguish the causes of these differences (Cao and Dai 2006; Lai, Cao and Zhao 2010).

This article considers the middle class in Taiwan and China not only as a new social grouping that emerges between the poor and the rich, but as specific or unique phenomena with much older roots in both nations. From a constructivist approach, this study analyses the formation and explicit characteristics of Taiwan and China's middle class regarding differences among scholars—Western, Taiwanese and Chinese—in debates about inequality, class formation and social stratification, and how objective and subjective criteria lead to the identification of a middle

¹ In order to protect the interviewees' identity, I will use fictitious names and avoid mentioning personal details.

class and the assessment of those criteria. Moreover, a key to capturing other narratives and policy positions in a 'bottom-up' way is to display a critical comparative analysis by uncovering hidden agendas and social imaginaries of middle-class narratives. Some analysts of social classes in Asian countries argue that, in most cases, the state plays a decisive role in creating social classes, such as the new entrepreneurs and the new middle classes, and hence in shaping their socioeconomic and ideological traits (Pearson 1997; Dickson 2003; Tsai 2006; Chen and Goodman 2013: 17). On this basis, rather than trying to 'discover' the non-ideological world, this paper aims to go further and reveal the narratives that have emerged around the middle-class phenomenon.

In order to probe whether the group of middle incomers emerged in Taiwan and China is a 'class' with unified social attitudes, behavioural orientation and occupational conditions, first 'class' the concept of 'class' must first be understood as an active grouping role in the historical process (Thompson 1963). In other words, understanding the formation of a class in the current global context needs to go beyond the opposition between objectivism (the objective social and economic conditions) and subjectivism (class identity), of which Bourdieu's class theory is "undoubtedly a classic paradigm" (Hong and Zhao 2015: 3). Therefore, Bourdieu's metaphorical *reconstruction* of the concept of 'capital' allows us to understand it not solely in economic terms, but metaphorically as the possession of a variety of resources (including knowledge and practices), the possession of which endows actors (or agents – Giddens) with the capacity to act in the social world (Wynne 1998: 24). For Bourdieu, such resources, forms of power or capital include cultural, social and symbolic capital, in addition to economic and, in very specific cases, political capital. Further, "Bourdieu replaces the concept of class structure with that of social space, the space where "people figuratively speaking exist" (Wacquant 1991: 52; Holgersson 2017: 14). Social space, Wacquant notes, may be understood as "the multidimensional distribution of socially effective forms of power (or capital [...]) underlying social positions" (1991: 52).

Because this space is at once "a field of objective forces and a field of struggles over the very criteria of group formation", where each actor possesses different amounts of capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) in different combinations (Wacquant 1991: 52), as such, Bourdieu's model of society – the *social space* to adopt his own terminology – is the multidimensional space where individuals are socially and culturally mapped in society. Using Bourdieu's approach for understanding class as a crucial tool to analyse class relations and practices means "considering not just the outcomes of economic inequality, but the way other forms of capital all operate in variable ways to reproduce class divisions" (Kirk 2007: 6). Hence, as Hong and Zhao note, class must be understood in Bourdieu's social theory as a group of individuals that share a common nature and the same external living conditions; by asserting that class analysis has both an economic and a symbolic dimension, Bourdieu refers to the three main dimensions of class formation (the amount of capital, the proportion of capital formation and the evolution of the historical track of status position) (2015: 4).

Class simultaneously entails an analysis of economic and symbolic relations —or a unique lifestyle associated with a particular social position: the habitus formation (Crompton 2008; Bourdieu 1984). In this context, lifestyle can be defined as "a set of practices and/or representations specific to a social group" (Mauger). Habitus is a hinge because it links social

structure and practices. Yet, as shaped by the social structure, habitus is also regulated by practices and other “stratifying” factors such as gender, age, ethnicity and region (Brubaker 2004). Consequently, habitus is acquired as a group thought, behaviour, and mode of leisure activities based on past experiences evolving from class position, in particular by experiences at an early age, including gender division of labour, household objects, modes of consumption, and family experiences such as parent-child relationships (Hong and Zhao 2015:4). Certainly, the habitus also incorporates “principles of vision and division” (Bourdieu 1998: 46) —meaning a general tendency to classify the things and people of the world in a determinate manner— that have been absorbed from the social environment in which it was formed (Weininger 2005: 107).

By analysing the symbolic differences and similarities in the lifestyle and in the dimensions of capital and habitus among China and Taiwan’s middle class, this paper aims to determine the current stage of the middle class’s formation within both societies’ existing class structure. But first, as the complexity of Taiwanese and Chinese socio-political and economic development cannot be fully explained by any of the existing sociological paradigms of development (Hsiao 1999), next section summarizes the trajectory of the middle-class phenomenon in both societies.

Differences and similarities in the construction of the middle class in Taiwan and China

The Chinese Civil War (1927-1949) between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Communist Party of China (CCP) resulted in the political separation of the ROC and PRC. While Taiwan followed the Western model by adopting capitalism and implementing a free market economy, China followed the Soviet model and adopted communism with a planned centralized economy (Chang and Shih 2004: 529). Such differences in economic and political systems have led to big differences in the construction of their social structures. However, patterns of middle-class formation in Taiwan trace its roots to Japanese colonial rule (1895-1945), which produced a relatively consequential class of small rural producers who existed side by side with large landowners of both Taiwanese and colonial Japanese origin² (Davis 2004: 166). Yet, Taiwan’s foreign occupiers were more concerned with their own mercantilist gains and, as a result, this distorted the social structure in rural and urban areas (Marsh 2003: 39). The infrastructure and factories built by the Japanese in Taiwan were dispersed throughout the island (Gold 1986: 45), avoiding class antagonisms within and between rural and urban populations (Davis 2004: 189).

After the Chinese Civil War, the KMT set up shop in Taiwan but, as they sought to establish a political hold on the state, the KMT’s cadres needed the country’s nascent cadre of rural middle classes as their local allies³ (Davis 2004: 192). Accordingly, land reforms which had initiated as

² In the early stages of the Japanese colonization, Taiwanese “business and banks were controlled by Japanese and 70 percent of the agricultural land was owned by them (...). By the end of the war, 80 percent of the cultivated land and 95 percent of the forest land was under the control of the Japanese Government” (Bullard 1997: 31).

³ As Davis notes, “this owned in no small part to the fact that a large proportion of the KMT exiles came to the island were themselves small-scale rural producers from agricultural provinces in the mainland” Such differences in economic and political systems have led to big differences in the construction of their social structures (...) Accordingly, in the KMT’s party congresses in Taiwan, farmers were identified as ‘first and foremost among labouring masses’ (Moody 1992: 20)” (Davis 2004: 192, 194).

soon as the KMT arrived on Taiwan and continued throughout the early 1950s accelerated the creation of the new small landowner class, while diminishing the previous landlord class (Hsiao 1986). After said land reforms, national aims not only consisted of industrialization, such as import-substitution industrialization and export-oriented industrialization-, but also the consequent emergence of industrial capitalists, the working class, and the middle classes, on the one hand, and further dislocated small landowners class, on the other (Hsiao 1986). At that time, class structure in Taiwan was characterised by a strong degree of inequality between Taiwanese and Mainlanders, “who exploited their influence in various social sectors, ranging from governmental office to military power and mass media, as well as industrial activities,” or even receiving “a greater share of public welfare (Gates 1981: 255; Tsai et al., 2014: 25-6). Despite this, towards the end of the 1950s, Taiwan began to move from this social model based on a society of ‘two nations’ (Mainlander-Taiwanese) to one of ‘two classes’ (the rich and the poor).

Due to the economic boom of the 1960s, workers became the major component of the labour force, unpaid family workers decreased (Hsiao 1987), and the elite expanded to include newly rich Taiwanese entrepreneurs, whose opportunities for upward mobility via political channels were restricted under Nationalist rule (Tsai et al. 2014: 26). In rural areas, while the agricultural gentry declined, the non-agricultural petty bourgeoisie increased (Sheu 1993: 188). At the same time, as a result of rapid industrial growth, not only “Taiwanese equipped with certain levels of education were recruited for numerous office jobs in new industrial and trading firms in the fledgling export sector,” but the expanded state sectors also “recruited Taiwanese personnel to fill rank and file jobs, whereas the privileged positions remained exclusively occupied by Mainlanders” (Tsai et al. 2014: 26). In this way, Taiwan’s social structure became more equal in terms of income distribution, wage differentials, and capital-labour income ratio (Hsiao 1987) because as an increasing proportion of wage workers were nonmanual, managerial and professional ‘knowledge workers’ (Clark and Clark 1993), the increase in income for workers was larger than that of capitalists and the petty bourgeoisie (Hsiao 1987).

Thus, Taiwan became a middle-class society and, like its counterparts among the other Asian Newly Industrializing Economies (ANIE), this new social grouping became heterogeneous in its class origins and had highly permeable class boundaries (Koo and Hsiao 1995, in Marsh 2003: 39). During the 1980s, these changes in Taiwan’s social structure partly reflected the internal progress of the economy as it began to exhaust both its labour-intensive comparative advantage and, arguably, the benefits of the regulated and protective institutional structure that had previously underlay earlier economic successes (Howe 1996: 1173). In general, however, the golden age for the middle class in Taiwan —as an archetypal ANIE— was during the period from 1965 to 1990, when “educational attainment jumped, incomes rose due to rapid economic growth, and job opportunities for middle-class women expanded,” which all contributed to increase “home ownership rates and the accumulation of other financial assets enlarged the wealth of middle class families, and the cost of many consumer goods fell, which enabled more people to live a middle class life” (Hsiao and Wan 2014: 110).

In contrast, as the CCP came to power in China and established the PRC in 1949, they did so in the name of the Chinese working classes. Since then, the PRC has remained an explicitly class-based political system, informed by the CCP’s Marxist–Leninist ideology (Goodman 2014: 1). Starting in 1950 over a period of essentially three years, class labels were applied to every citizen

as a descriptor “not closely tied to an individual’s actual occupational position but were instead grounded in CCP interpretations of pre-1949 history and contemporary politics” (Davis 2000: 254). Of these class labels, the primary distinction among those who were neither peasants nor manual workers were the capitalists (*zichan jieji*) and petty bourgeoisie (*xiao zichan jieji*). Such labels became the main determinant in every aspect of life for both individuals and their families during the PRC’s period of Mao Zedong-dominated politics, which lasted from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s; its application also provided every Chinese citizen with a new and coherent understanding of politics that lasted for decades to come (Goodman 2014: 1, 16; Unger 1984: 130).

Although a ‘socialist middle class’ existed during the Maoist period consisting of groups of urban “workers and employees” (*zhigong*) situated between the ruling class and the peasants- (Rocca 2017: 7), new social groups and new class relationships emerged in the PRC as a result of the market reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. The most distinctive features of this transformation were the creation of a working class in private enterprises, explicitly the creation of the proletariat with the ‘proletarianizing synthesis’ (Lin 2008), and the emergence of a group of middle incomers. It was not until the emergence of this group of middle incomers in the middle of the 1990s that Chinese sociologists accepted the existence of a middle class in China. Indeed, after the Tiananmen Incident of 1989, a new social contract was established between the Party and the population in which, in exchange for remaining the sole ruling force, the Party must keep the promises of the 1950s with regards to improving living conditions (Rocca 2017: 23).

As a part of this new social contract and in order to secure and consolidate economic growth, the Party opened up labour markets by abolishing recruitment quotas for state enterprises and mostly allowing firms to choose their employees (Yueh 2004: 150). Access to higher education was also eased. In 1999, the government launched “a policy to vastly expand higher education enrolment” and, as a consequence, “the number of college students and the opportunities to pursue higher education increased sharply.” Finally, in the 2000s, “the number of college students increased four times, and the opportunity to pursue higher education almost doubled” (Li 2010: 138).

In this context, although social engineering generally refers to the control and manipulation of ideas and behaviours, Tomba suggests a very concrete form of engineering, namely, the specific policies and practices through which the Party-state selectively promoted the creation of a middle class in the PRC. Housing and neighbourhoods in the last two decades reveal how these new members of a high-consuming class have built their housing careers (Tomba 2014: 89). We must therefore strike a balance between this ‘social engineering’, while simultaneously considering ‘cumulative factors’ to construct a ‘social *middlization*’ (*zhongchanhua*) or ‘middle class-ness’, such as the construction of a discourse on the middle class linked with the desire to civilize China, globalisation (the PRC’s integration with the world economy) and the rapid socio-economic development over three decades, income growth, socialist legacies, the legitimization of the current Party-state regime, etc. (Anagnost 2008; Guo 2013; Wright 2010: 2; Rocca 2017; Tomba 2014). All these reforms and cumulative factors of the 1990s eventually led to economic growth, a dramatic increase in living standards, the first manifestations of a consumer society

and the emergence of new social classes, new class relationships and new social practices and representations in the PRC (Rocca 2017: 5; Anagnost 2008).

In both Taiwan and China, as we have seen, the middle class emerged not only as a result of 'social engineering', but also through market forces (Hsiao and Wan 2014: 110; Hsiao 1993: 6-8; Lin 2015; Krugman 2007). In the early 1980s, as Taiwan entered a period of unparalleled economic growth, a new middle class (as opposed to the traditional middle class) gradually began to symbolize the shift from preserving the differential structure and old order of authoritarian rule to making assertions of individualism, equal rights for all groups, and social justice (Hsiao 1990; Chang 2019: 40). The demands and initiatives of urban, intellectual, and middle-class professional organizations (Consumer's Rights Movement, protests against industrial pollution, rights-based movements seeking equality for women, the disabled, workers, indigenous people, etc.) produced significant democratic reform and political liberalization. Further, these demands eventually led to the introduction of opposition parties, the lifting of martial law in 1987 and the introduction of a fully democratic system in 1996 (Chang 2019: 40; Gingerich et al. 2011). In contrast with the RPC, these arguments attributed social transformation to the growth of the middle class and the emergence of collective action, civil society and post-industrial values in Taiwan (Chang 2019: 40). As a result, the social-spatial change can be seen resonating with large-scale social transformations from Fordist to post-Fordist society, in which a professional and managerial middle-class expanded profoundly in Taiwan (Wang and Lau 2009).

Although Taiwan's social and political experience over the past thirty years has, to a great extent, confirmed the positive tripartite links of middle class, civil society, and democracy-making processes (Hsiao 2019: 36-7), its economy has been deteriorating (Chang and Shih 2004: 529). Initially Taiwan's economy clearly surpassed that of China during the period between 1965 and 1990, achieving not only "a remarkable record of high and sustained economic growth," but it was also "unusually successful at sharing the fruits of growth" (World Bank 1993: 1-2). By contrast, the implementation of economic reforms since the late 1970s has seen China become a rapidly developing economy enjoying a high economic growth rate —7.8 per cent in 1980, 3.9 per cent in 1990, 8.5 per cent in 2000, 10.6 per cent in 2010 and 6.5 per cent in 2018 (Chang and Shih 2004: 529; World Bank 2019). Due to market reforms, cumulative factors and 'social engineering', a group of middle incomers with new social practices and representations emerged in the PRC with the start of the new century.

Differences and similarities in the social practices and representations of the middle class in Taiwan and China. An assessment.

Consumption attitudes

Our survey asked the respondents to indicate their consumption behaviour in both online and offline shopping. While all the respondents in Beijing affirm that they prefer buying online rather than in the traditional way, and they all agree that this new method is their main source of purchasing, the interviewees in Taipei responded differently. 70 per cent of Taiwanese

informants affirm that they prefer online shopping rather than offline. Although the e-commerce market in Taiwan is mature and stable —64.2% of Internet users shop online (TWNIC 2018)—, most of our informants in Taipei prefer to “go to real shops, [and] see and try the real things”⁴; they also prefer interacting with salespeople. On the contrary, the main reasons to buy online given by our Chinese respondents are the possibilities of finding discount prices throughout several online platforms, the variety of goods offered, the ability to quickly compare the different qualities between products, which is also a way to “avoid wasting time at the shopping mall.”⁵ Indeed, since 2003, the growth rate of the PRC’s online consumer market has doubled every year (Krokou 2018: 12). The Chinese e-commerce giant, Alibaba, reached historic highs after publishing its first quarterly report for investors since its initial public offering, showing a 25 billion-dollar record in September 2014 (Carstern 2014) and growing profits year-on-year. Although a key driver for the e-commerce growth has been the mobile sector, its boom in China is inseparable from delivery companies, whose deliverymen are usually under-paid migrant workers.

While discussing brand consumption, our respondents in Taipei and Beijing consider prices abroad and exclusivity when making trips outside their countries. According to Mrs. Zhang, “I mostly buy online, and usually go shopping when I’m in Europe, like when I buy [Emporio] Armani products because they’re cheaper over there (...) In China, it’s so much more expensive.” Mr. Tsai from Taipei and Mr. Qiao from Beijing not only buy European brands, but also follow existing trends in Europe. If there is any new brand or item that calls their attention while travelling, then they will look for more information to decide whether or not they want to buy any of their products. This occurred during Mr. Tsai’s first visit to Hong Kong many years ago, “Many people there wear bags from Moncler”, he explains. Since he liked the brand, he looked it up online and liked the merchandise’s design. To avoid carrying a jacket until returning to Taipei, he searched for the cheapest way to buy one in Taiwan. He explained at length that in Taipei, “it was not a trendy brand”, there are only two stores that sell Moncler products, but their variety was lacking. The exclusivity of its merchandise and rarity within Taiwan motivated Mr. Tsai to buy a jacket from the brand’s official website. In a matter of days, the items had arrived at his doorstep, “I don’t want to wear what everyone else is wearing.” This also occurred to Mr. Qiao during his visit to Barcelona, “Many people there carry bags from Freitag”, while also stating, “I like things that are unique.”

These consumer habits allow consumers to show his or her high cultural capital by acquiring a product whose symbolic capital —a trip to Hong Kong, Europe, Japan or the U.S.— is not transferable to the social space because of the impossibility of differentiating whether a brand product was bought in Taiwan or China- except in the case of friends or family who actually know the individual had travelled abroad. Brands like Moncler, Emporio Armani and Freitag “are not cheap, but not too expensive, affordable and very popular,” as Mr. Tsai explains. As a result, these distinctive consumption practices are characteristic of the middle class in both societies.

Cultural consumption

⁴ Mrs. Lin’s interview.

⁵ Mr. Yang’s interview.

Regarding cultural consumption, the analysis lays bare that it is an important distinctive sign of the middle class. Cultural consumption, as noted by Rössel *et al.* (2015), can be characterized mainly by “consumption of goods and services with primarily aesthetic functions and only secondarily instrumental uses” (Rössel *et al.* 2015: 1). Cultural consumption is mainly related with the world of arts, culture and leisure, and its consumption practices vary from attending a classical music concert, to tasting a Hindu dish or going to the movie theatre. However, “the most influential dimension of cultural consumption in sociology—put forward prominently by Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984)—is the differentiation between highbrow and lowbrow kinds of cultural consumption” (Rössel *et al.* 2015: 7, 2). Therefore, based on his conceptualization of the “uneasy relations of economic and cultural capitals” (Ley 2003: 2528), Bourdieu argues that the economic distinctions of class inevitably generate the culture’s symbolic distinctions. Ley interprets the process as “valorization of cultural dispositions” (2003: 2528) and the conversion of cultural capital to economic capital which in turn regenerates and legitimizes the class structure (Gartman 1991).

On that basis, our respondents were asked to indicate how often they visit art galleries, go to the movies, to the theatre, to music concerts, attend the performance of operas and the number of books they buy monthly. Overall, in both societies, all interviewees who were asked about their consumer practices responded that, to a lesser or greater extent, they consume culture often. Additionally, we found that while some female interviewees are of the opinion that going to movie theatres, for them, is more of a family activity rather than an experience of artistic contemplation or personal enjoyment, some of the men who were interviewed consume mainstream cultural products because of their popularity and media coverage. Among Chinese and Taiwanese respondents, the most common activity is going to the movie theatre; next is literature, museums and going to concerts for Taiwanese, and visiting the theatre or opera for *Beijingers*. Finally, the least common pastime for Taiwanese is visiting the theatre, while in the Chinese case, it is going to listening to bands play and museums.

Our findings indicate that in both societies, people who identify as “middle class” are more active highbrow consumers than those who identify as “low middle class”, working class, or who reject to identify themselves by using a class category. Yet, the distinctiveness of Beijing’s middle-class consumption of culture is related to European classical music, ballet and purchasing ‘professional’ reading materials, such as economics books or textbooks. Conversely, the distinctiveness of Taipei’s middle-class consumption of culture is expressed in foreign cuisine and drink, and sophisticated taste (e.g. alternative music festivals, cocktail recipe books). Cultural consumption and the reasons provided for the choice of this cultural consumption are, in other words, what we might argue to be a habitus under which the Taiwanese and Chinese middle class tends to huddle with people they identify as being like themselves (not only in their choice of job, but also regarding consumption patterns, or choice of culture and clothing style).

Public Safety Perception

Over the past four decades, public trust has become a critical issue in transitional societies, such as Taiwan and China, where the legitimacy and accountability of the government in general, and legal authorities in particular, have frequently been scrutinized (Wu et al., 2012). Generalized

social trust is crucial not only as an important component of social capital, social cohesion, development and vitality of democracies, but also for a variety of individual-level and community-level outcomes (Paxton 1999; Putman 2000; Hsiao and Wan 1998; Hsiao and Wan 2014: 117).

Our respondents were asked directly whether they believe they live in a safe and protected society. Although one might expect to find a low level of political trust in repressive authoritarian societies, our data indicates that political trust in China is actually very high and is in line with the findings of previous investigations (Wang, 2005:155; Wu et al. 2012). For example, Wu et al. (2012) found that Chinese citizens have higher levels of trust in police than do Taiwanese. This higher level of trust among the Chinese, to a large extent, derives from greater confidence in macroeconomic conditions and satisfaction with government responsiveness.

Overall, in both societies, our respondents show a generalized social trust. This, as Delhey and Newton note, tends to be higher among citizens who are successful in life, while informal social networks are associated with trust such as participation in voluntary associations. Additionally, individual theories seem to work best in societies with higher levels of trust, and societal ones in societies with lower levels of trust (2003). Many countries with high levels of social trust are middle-class societies that also rank highest on economic equality, namely, the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and Canada (Rohstein and Uslaner 2011). However, our respondents in Taipei were apparently more satisfied than *Beijingers* —90 per cent of Taiwanese were satisfied, in contrast to 80 per cent of Chinese. Two of our respondents in Taipei coincided in ranking Taiwan “only less safer than Japan.”

Personal relationships: neighbours, workmates, friends, family and monogamy

Guanxi means “connections, social relationships or relationship”, and is the key term in the Chinese language which measures social capital (Sáiz 2012). It is a very influential element in society, as the interviewees have pointed out, “it is very important” for understanding social, economic and political interactions in China. Mrs. Ren says, “China is a *guanxi* society or *guanxi shehui*, it goes beyond Chinese culture”. However, many Western studies have simplified the definition of *guanxi*, reducing it to a mere instrumentalization of other individuals to achieve one’s goals. Our respondents in Taiwan stressed the importance of friendship (not only family ties) when talking about *guanxi*, and the similarity between this concept in traditional Chinese culture and the concept of “connections” in Western cultures. Middle class members choose friends and partners with similar lifestyles (“people like us”), while avoiding those who practise lifestyle alien to their own —more or less exclusive social groups will be formed on the basis of such choices (Jarness 2015). The crux of Bourdieu’s (1984, 1985) model of cultural stratification is that a system of class differences (‘the social space’) corresponds to a system of lifestyle differences (‘the symbolic space’), which, in turn, is structurally homologous relationship tied to group formation (Jarness 2015).

Many of our respondents in both societies have maintained friendships created during their university studies —both graduate and post-graduate— and, in the case of those coming from other cities, with friendships fostered during childhood and adolescence in their hometowns. Additionally, albeit to a lesser degree, Chinese participants consider some colleagues with whom

they eat together as friends, confirming a common practice in China that is not exactly a direct indicator of friendship, but only two interviewees say they stay with one colleague or another after workhours. On the contrary, many Taiwanese respondents consider some colleagues with whom they eat together as workmates, they are not friends. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that, although friendly relationships play an important role in middle class lives, the majority of participants in Beijing explain that they are far too busy most of the time and prioritize dedicating time with family (not only in the case of members of nuclear families), study or work, rather than with friendships.

In China, the perception of *guanxi* reflects the most cultural aspect of that interpretation that fits within the Chinese tradition, which aspires to the individual's harmonious relationships on the familial level and, in a more extensive manner, with the rest of society—as explained by Fei Xiaotong's theory of concentric circles, or *tongxinyuan* (1992). Despite involving mostly mutual benefit in both societies, *guanxi* in China is viewed as the means for achieving a sense of righteousness and returning favours to grantors 'harmoniously' (65 per cent). The most evident tendency among respondents in Taiwan when discussing *guanxi* as a mutual benefit, as Hwang et al. (2009) also note, is that is a major element in traditional culture to help others through one's own *guanxi* (55 per cent), but they also claim that it is not a decisive factor for becoming successful nowadays. Beyond the nuclear family, as Mrs. Hong explains, "The old generations are very close to each other, but not now." 95 per cent of Taiwanese perceive *guanxi* as a positive concept in Taiwan today, but their perceptions relationships and ties with family and friends are increasingly diverse in terms of structure, influence and functions. In general, our respondents in Taipei simultaneously manifest individualistic and meritocratic aspirations in their testimonies. Meanwhile, in the case of single individuals or married persons with children who are adolescent or younger, family time occupies less of their free time, especially for those from Taipei.

In both societies, relations with neighbours are practically non-existent during the participants' free time. They think activities organized by the community of neighbours encourage mostly retirees to stay active and motivated by spending time with their peers, but young people are not involved in them. Beijingers do not feel themselves integrated into the community, nor do they express having a close relationship with their neighbours. Although Mr. Qiao likes his neighbourhood in Beijing, he explains, "I already have enough relationships with my friends and family. I don't need any new relationships." However, some interviewees with children who are minors, such as Mrs. Lai (from Beijing), confirm having participated in some of the activities organized by her communities. Indeed, practices of leisure are also conditioned, overall, by the individuals' marital status and whether they have children. Also, some of our respondents are involved in activities outside the neighbourhood or the local temple, such as the activities organised by the CCP (in Beijing, 1), the church (in Taiwan, 1; and Beijing, 1), associations (in Taiwan, 1: LGBTI) and NGOs (in Taiwan, 1). Although Taipei's middle class spends more time with friends than *Beijingers* do, in the case of middle-aged married individuals with young children, free time is dedicated to family, children and parents in both Taiwan and China.

Loving relationships

The concept of love presents different meanings depending on the type of relationship — friendship, parental, or intimate partners. Therefore, social scientists have developed a large variety of models to differentiate it and attempt to quantify it. The absence of a consensus regarding the most effective model to measure it leads us to apply the methods most frequently used in the different research about this topic (Graham 2011), and then match them with results from studies about emotional relationships and romantic love in monogamous relationships undertaken in Taiwan and China. In this case, most interviewees in the study are married, and the initial question put forward concerned what they understood as “romantic love” between two people. As a result, many of their responses come from their experiences in marriage. The responses of single persons come mostly from their experiences in relationships when dating or during engagement.

Although some experts argue that dictated tendencies by Western cultural patrons present within globalization are ever more evident in Taiwan and China (Kim y Hatfield 2004), others state that traditional Chinese values, such as *enqing*⁶, have not faded away (Chen and Li 2007). Among our respondents in Beijing, the concept of love and marriage is associated to aspects of Chinese marital culture which foments commitment and, to a certain extent, the ideology of gender roles. Additionally, the testimonies distance themselves from younger generations that manifest individualist values associated with Western cultural patterns. This reaction, however, is apparent in the testimonies from middle-aged interviewees regarding younger citizens. All interviewees are aware of the difficulty faced by the younger generation to settle down and start a home.

On the other side, although Taiwanese are also aware of this difficulty faced by the younger generation in Taipei, they do not distance themselves from them; due to their individualist values, they do not even mention this generational difference. In fact, both Taiwanese and Chinese could share the individualistic approach with younger generations. As cited by Marshall et al. (2010), Chinese culture’s collectivist spirit emphasizes a strong commitment with the in-group, including one’s romantic partner and family. This can be observed in several testimonies in Taipei, such as Mr. Chen, a Taiwanese professional, who says, “After getting married, love mixes with family.” A Chinese lawyer explains that happiness in a marriage is not only the responsibility between the two spouses: “It also depends on my parents and her parents.” As such, it is worth noting that 50 per cent of couples in China get married not because of love, but because they are expected to marry, or because romantic love might be less valued by Chinese couples compared to Westerners (Cai 2010). Although contributions and sacrifices are expected in traditional Chinese marriages in both societies, they are not taken for granted and a particular form of marital affection develops (Chen and Li 2007: 407).

However, researchers have rarely used marital affection as a basis for understanding marital sacrifice in Taiwan. In fact, romantic love and its most recognizable romantic manifestations are not always a priority for our respondents in Taipei. Rather, they indicate that “caring for each other” or “helping each other” and having “similar salaries and educational backgrounds” are the main important components of sentimental relationships. In China, Mrs. Zhang and Mr. Zhou mentioned an additional element in their concept of love: “Having similar experiences, like being

⁶ Marital *enqing* is a culturally specific component of marital affection that involves the expression of feelings of gratitude and admiration toward one's spouse (Chen and Li 2007: 393).

able to talk and share,” and, “equality, mutual support and compromise.” Certainly, most interviewees in Beijing do not equate love with joy or happiness, but they still show a high degree of companionship when describing their partner. Chinese respondents *understand* love mainly through values like equality, respect, care giving or communication.

Perception and appraisal of inequality

In both societies, there have been social, material, and cultural differences between people, and the perceptions of these differences have been viewed from different perspectives since 1949. Today, the common name for social inequality is class (Holgerson 2017:1). However, it is not the *measured* inequality that is important, but rather the *perceived* level of inequality for a number of potential effects, such as voting behaviour, preferences for redistribution, the likelihood of social unrest and migration or class consciousness (Knell and Stix 2017: ii). It is therefore important to understand how the middle class forms its perceptions and appraisals of inequality, to which extent these determine to classify and be classified in society, and whether there are symbolic and economic narratives that can explain measured inequalities. Consistent with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, Bodovski found that individuals who experience poverty and hardship believe that external forces beyond their control shape the course of their lives, thus leading them to lack an internal locus of control (2015: 48). Our analysis focuses on three dimensions of perceived inequality: their own subjective rank, their perception of the dominant class and their perception of the subordinate class. To portray the perceived pattern of inequality, our respondents were asked to assess the origin of the gap between rich and poor. The aim of this section is not looking at each of these questions in isolation, but to investigate whether and how the answers of our respondents are related in terms of class membership and subjective social status.

Our findings indicate that in both societies our respondents defined themselves as middle class—80 per cent of our informants in Beijing, and 90 per cent in Taipei. The rest, just over 20 per cent in Beijing and 10 per cent in Taipei, do not know where to situate themselves, or do so without referring to the middle stratum, or place themselves near it without being specific. Moreover, the degree of justice or injustice perceived regarding inequality in Chinese society will be examined, in order to prove whether the participants express traits that could be associated to a certain class consciousness. We will keep in mind that various investigations, such as Whyte (2002) and Whyte and Han (2003; 2005), have concluded that Chinese citizens, besides their social class, present a higher level of acceptance and seem less angered by inequality compared to other post-socialist societies (Han and Whyte 2009: 195). However, the Taiwanese middle class’s awareness of income disparities is less than that of their Chinese counterparts, as Mr. Cong explains: “I don’t think the gap between the rich and the poor is so big in Taipei. I think it’s quite equal, we have a quite good welfare system. . . I don’t see so many poor people on the street, at least less than in London.” This is contrary to other studies such as the 2007 Taiwan and Hong Kong Social Image Telephone Survey, conducted by Hsiao and Wan (2014), which indicate that 91 per cent of the Taiwanese middle class rated the situation of income disparities as serious or very serious.

Our respondents in both Taipei and Beijing were not asked about their confidence in the current government/social services, but some of them spoke freely about such topic. Nine of our respondents in Taipei show confidence in the current government's policies to reduce inequality. They consider the widening incoming gap and current inequality as unjust, but does not pose a threat to social stability. In Beijing, seven respondents also show confidence in governmental policies to eliminate extreme poverty and, consequentially, they accept that China's market system helps avoid local grievances and social protests from becoming general challenges to that system. In both societies, most of our respondents consider that the existence of inequality is due to the lack of economic capital being related to a lack in cultural capital. In Beijing, this is caused by individuals with little economic capital not prioritizing the acquisition of cultural capital. Therefore, unjust distribution is caused by internal factors. Taiwanese do not seem to support the Chinese opinion that the causes of poverty are subjective: 40 per cent think both subjective and objective causes are related ("It is like a vicious circle."); 20 per cent think only objective causes ("There are poor people in Taipei because of globalization, capitalism, the ultimate outcome of capitalism: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer."); and 20 per cent of our sample blame, directly or indirectly, the more unfortunate for their situation ("Although it's not easy to make money now, the ones you see in the temples or the people sleeping outside (...) choose to be homeless."). Meanwhile, only three of the women interviewed living in Beijing—but having migrated from other provinces during their youth—show more empathy than the rest of their fellow citizens towards the situation lived by the more unfortunate; but at the same time, these three respondents blame the poor's poverty on not trying hard enough ("They don't work hard enough because there are more opportunities nowadays [than in the 1980s]. If you are willing, it's possible to get out of poverty.").

Finally, beyond academic debates speculating about the consequences brought on by inequality within a binary – stability vs. social upheavals – one must keep in mind the elements which come into play within each differing side of this debate. While analysing the perceptions of wealth in a society, not only economic factors must be considered. The concept of distributive justice is a key element to develop the concept of equality in human "capabilities" (Sen 1999). In this light, Lee points, "justice is not just about material (re)distribution of welfare but also individual dignity and the power and right to participate in the community" (2009: 214). In Taipei, as Mr. Tsai notes, "Taiwanese people respect rich people," and they 'defend' people who became wealthy in the 1980s and 1990s because "they saw the opportunity and got rich." Most of our respondents in Taipei do not see wealth as something imminent to rich people: "It is not about the money, it is about the person," and about a specific historical period in Taiwan. In Beijing, although "nowadays there is so much hostility towards the rich," our respondents defend businessmen who acquired their fortune in China in the 1980's, when the economic reforms were initially developed. Most of our respondents think "rich people work hard to have a better life." For example, as Mr. Qing states, "Those who work in online companies and make a fortune, many young people have become rich like this, they should be respected." Only 20 per cent of Chinese express a critical view towards the dominant classes by doubting the origin of their wealth ("How can they earn so much money when it's so difficult?") and by pointing out the lack of education (The new rich "need to be educated").

Class anxiety and subjective well-being (SWB)

The subjective measurement of one's social class is based on the individuals' perceptions about their position within a hierarchy (Jackman and Jackman 1973). The concept of happiness used in this study stems from Veenhoven (2004), who perceives it as a synonym of SWB, personal satisfaction and quality of life. In their paper, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi use happiness and SWB interchangeably, and they highlight that the term SWB is only "a more scientific-sounding term for what people usually mean by happiness" (2000: 9; Diener 2000: 24, in Ludwigs et al. 2017). Subjective appreciation, Veenhoven notes, "can be about different domains of life, such as work, family, or leisure" (2007: 224). Since people appraise life in numerous ways and often combine aspect appraisals, we attempted to evaluate them by asking our respondents whether they consider themselves happy and whether they worry about or feel any pressure in their lives.

Most of our respondents in Taipei and Beijing worry about their financial situation, high levels of work intensity, stress, being replaced by others and family issues (mostly about caring for elderly parents). They think "life is not easy" in such a big city as Taipei or Beijing. On the whole, however, 70 per cent of Chinese and 80 per cent of Taiwanese consider themselves happy, followed by a group who, although they do not identify themselves as "very happy", they also do not identify themselves as unhappy (20 per cent of Chinese and 10 per cent of Taiwanese). Finally, 10 per cent of our respondents in both societies are experiencing a tough time in their lives or are affected or feel disappointed because their expectations in life have not been fulfilled satisfactorily. The concept of harmony, pressure from work, optimism, and fulfilling social and family expectations are all themes frequently brought forth when discussing the issue of happiness.

Not surprisingly, the SWB ratings that members of the middle class in both societies give themselves were closely related to their class position: "the higher the class, the higher the level of satisfaction" or, in other words, "the lower the class, the greater the tendency to worry" (Hsiao and Wan 2014: 125, 123). More than half of respondents in both Taipei and Beijing were above sixty percent of satisfaction and, specifically, the highest degree was found in Taiwan (10 per cent more than in China, on average). While the most evident expression of happiness in Beijing comes from Mr. Yi: "I'm very happy [because] I'm satisfied with my circumstances and with myself," -he also quotes a Chinese idiom which states that a man is happy in any situation if he does not desire much: "I don't yearn for anything, which is why I think I'm content." In Taipei, the clearest expression of happiness is a 'proper' middle class example of a society's belief in success won from hard work (Wheary et al. 2007: 3, in Hsiao and Wan 2014: 123). Taiwanese civil servant Mr. Ren states: "I'm very happy because I always get what I want. I get a target and I work very hard...It does not matter how long it takes or how hard I have to work, but eventually...most of the times I get what I want."

Indeed, some scholars have suggested that being middle class is ultimately 'a state of mind' or a 'lifestyle' that relies on their own effort, rather than on the state, to support themselves and determine their path in life—it is the quality of "making something of yourself" (Hsiao and Wan 2014: 123) and not "avoid wanting too much." However, according to both, happiness depends on one's own personal attitude, meaning the subjective, and not the objective or material factors such as salary, a home or place of residence. Surprisingly, despite the fact that Taiwan

occupies an important position in the global economy, and China's economy is one of the world's largest, anxiety has emerged in the middle class of both societies.

Conclusions

Compared to Taiwanese society, in which the middle class has evolved and crystallized into a more stable social class, China's middle class is a class in formation "somewhat distant from class crystallization" (Hong and Zhao 2015). Two areas were examined: the engineering-political processes, not just in terms of its structure or social process, but also in historical terms, the social practices and representations (i.e. lifestyles). On the one hand, following Bourdieu's definition of class, although economic capital is the foundation of all other forms of capital, the identification of middle-class individuals cannot be reduced to the economic relations. Certainly, a middle class must be shown to exist at the demographic level before it can be expected to exist in any symbolic sense (Marshall et al. 1988: 45) because the conversion from economic capital to other forms of capital needs time, and it takes even more time for capital to shape habitus (Hong and Zhao 2015).

In both societies, our findings on cultural consumption show that the socio-economic characteristics, conspicuous consumption and urban lifestyle of the middle class are "structured and expressed" by a distinctive *habitus* —e.g. identifying 'exclusivity' when doing trips outside their countries— as other studies have also found (Bulter and Lees 2006; Ley 2003; Zukin 1987, in Wang and Lau 2008). This paper was built upon Bodovski (2015) argument that social perceptions of inequality, such as educational expectations, are part of one's habitus because individuals who experience poverty and hardship believe that external forces beyond their control shape the course of their lives. Generally, there is a clear middle-class trend among our respondents in both societies while talking about their subjective social status (SSS) and perceptions of inequality. Their perceptions are based on the idea that one's own actions and behaviour (as opposed to external forces) allow for the achievement of one's goals. However, our respondents in Taipei show a higher degree of internal locus of control ("I get what I want") than our respondents in Beijing. Regarding the overall assessment of SSS, class anxiety is also very similar in both societies, happiness depends mainly on one's own personal attitude; however, as expected, on the overall assessment of health care for the elderly, one issue of particular concern in Beijing's middle class is the price of health coverage for their parents.

In terms of social origin, although the emergence of the new group of middle incomers is clearly a phenomenon of reproduction in China due to the characteristics of power relations in pre-reform and reformed Chinese society (Rocca 2017: 45), two of our respondents in Beijing were rural students who escaped from their social destiny through their dedication to education for upward social mobility. As He (2015) notes, the "product of a conciliation of contradictories" (Bourdieu 2004: 111), cleft habitus originates from a "very strong discrepancy between high academic consecration and low social origin" (Bourdieu 2004: 69). The remaining participants in Beijing are descendants of the urban 'socialist middle class'. Their habitus, however, can also be understood as a "cleft habitus" (Bourdieu 2004, in He 2015: 143), a hybrid with different

dimensions ('pre-reform middle class' habitus and 'reform middle class' habitus), which can work against each other as well as reinforce each other.

The middle class in both Taipei and Beijing are clearly aware that they are better positioned in the social ladder than future generations. Objective class characterization and subjective class identification are virtually correlated and, as a result, class does matter in the minds of the public in Taiwan and China in terms of their own class identities (Hisao and Wan 2014:126). Both societies demonstrate generalized social trust (90 per cent of Taiwanese and 80 per cent of Chinese), which tends to be a characteristic of societies in which the middle classes are the backbone of the class structure. Furthermore, friendship also enhances the individuality that characterizes the contemporary middle-class lifestyle in global societies (Walker 1995); friendship is a form of affective interdependence and, at the same time, entails intimate emotional bonds among companions (Kerms 1996; Ladd 1190).

Although *guanxi* is perceived as a positive and important concept in both societies, Taiwanese express a more diverse perception than Chinese on relationships of family and friendship in terms of structure, influence and functions. Our findings in Taiwan indicate that the relationship among experiences of leisure and friendship is more present in the lifestyle of our respondents in Taipei than in Beijing. While talking about perception and appraisal of inequality, public appraisals of income inequality showed a different picture. On the one hand, most of the Chinese and Taiwanese middle-class respondents respect rich people and believe that they work laboriously or take the opportunity to improve their lot in life. On the other hand, the Chinese point that the causes of poverty are subjective (individuals with little economic capital not prioritizing the acquisition of cultural capital) does not seem supported by most of the Taiwanese interviewed. Rather, our respondents in Taipei think both subjective and objective causes are related ("It is like a vicious circle") in the existence of poverty. Hsiao and Wan's (2014) investigation supports the structural position thesis that middle class people are less likely than lower class people to consider personal outcomes (subjective causes) to be unfair. According to this, the Taiwanese middle class (causes of poverty to be objective and subjective) shared a more similar sentiment with lower classes (causes of poverty to be objective) than members of the Chinese middle class (causes of poverty to be subjective).

Among our respondents in both societies, there is a notable lack of participation in collective activities. However, while understanding civil society as a non-governmental sphere of social and economic life (Wakeman 1993; Schwartz 2004; Salmenkari 2018: 9), only two of our respondents (Taiwanese) are involved in activities related to civil societies (NGOs and the LGBTI community). In China, the forms of non-governmental (Party-state) associations are limited only to the neighbourhood or *xiaoqu* —e.g. homeowners' movements— whose practices are also conditioned by the individuals' marital status and whether or not they have underage children. Civil society is a sphere of middle-class activism, and such activism is one of the defining features of the middle class (Harriss 2006). Our respondents in Beijing do not participate in non-governmental associations, echoing what many scholars believe: while the Chinese middle class may not be politically docile and can achieve social change, it does so based on self-interest while being mindful and wary of how its actions are perceived by authorities, thus managing protests carefully so the middle class can continue to reap the economic rewards of state capitalism (Weber 2011: 25).

Finally, in both societies, romantic love and its most recognizable intimate manifestations are not always a priority for our respondents. However, their emotional relationships involve monogamous ones which foment commitment and, to a certain extent, the ideology of gender roles; that is, the “heteronormative, middle-class nuclear family” (McPhail 2009). However, most of our respondents in Taipei and Beijing consider themselves “happy” or “very happy.” The rate of SWB they had given themselves were closely related to their class position, “the higher the class, the higher the level of satisfaction” (Hsiao and Wan 2014: 125, 123). In this context, the highest degree was found in Taiwan (on average 10 per cent more than in China). As a result, in terms of happiness, class also does matter. On the overall assessment of the social practices and representations, the urban middle class in Taipei is very similar with the urban middle class in Beijing. However, the Taiwanese middle class has expressed a higher degree of crystallization in terms of lifestyle, with a significant class habitus and a more active civil society than urban Chinese middle class.

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