China’s “New Middle Class”: A Changing Society

The increasing economic and social changes in modern China have created a new definition of homeownership and standards of living. Li Zhang’s book “In Search of Paradise. Middle Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis” provides an inside look into the changing city Kunming where industrial and economic growth is booming. She explores the cause and effects of commodity housing and how the new middle class is redefining what it means to be well-off. Contrary to previous socialism beliefs, the “urban Chinese no longer shy away from status recognition and are eager to seek differentiated lifestyles and cultural orientations” (107). This new mindset explores the ramifications of commodity housing and consumerism as well as the following concepts: advertisement, privacy, self-worth, and consumption. These concepts have had both positive and negative effects on people who have risen to China’s “new middle class”. In accordance, the social issues they face have caused citizens to cope with these changes via protest.

Advertising is influential in boosting one’s image of the middle class. The rise in consumerism has likewise caused a spike in the advertising industry, which can be seen in the increase of companies and job positions. Zhang explains that real estate advertising did not cost much to start a company and the market both flourished and became increasingly aggressive (Zhang 66). This also created new job opportunities. For example, companies relied on the shoulou xiaojie to oversee sales and weed out potential buyers. These young women were required to be charming and beautiful, and while they could make a living, their positions were often short-lived as they aged out at around 30 years old (67). Ultimately these companies’ jobs were to present consumers with the middle-class housing of their dreams. To do so, they worked closely with housing developers to appeal to buyers’ different preferences, including lühua, xiandai, shentai, and vernacular-modern living. By offering these different models, from Western-style villas to nature-focused community areas, advertisement appealed to the middle class’s use of housing as a symbol for status. However, despite these idealistic ads, companies often did not fulfill their promises. This negatively affected the middle class by creating extra costs, for furnishing empty apartments and failing to adhere to their contracts. One example of this was in Zhang’s account of the Spring Garden and Riverside residential compounds’ protest. In both cases, the developers betrayed the trust of the community by constructing buildings that were not allowed as per their contracts. Specifically, in the case of the Riverside residents, advertisement played a key part in their purchases. Zhang notes that “One of the factors that attracted many buyers was the developer’s promise that nearly half of the development was committed to green communal space” (202). While advertising played a key role in influencing the middle class’s housing decisions, privacy also became another attractive characteristic of these gated communities.

The private life has become both a desired and unavoidable effect of belonging to the middle class. People sought privacy in their homes in order to escape from their social and work life outside. On a physical level, privacy was ensured in the form of gates and walls, surveillance cameras, and security guards. On a social level, people were able to be around people of similar status and escape into their highly personalized apartments. The commodity housing advertisements geared towards young people emphasized that through privacy one could gain independence. Personal freedom was attractive to many people; it represented moving away

from high socialism where privacy was practically nonexistent and control over oneself outside of the family (96-98). Yet, this overwhelming desire of the private life led to removing the sense of community among neighbors in gated communities. In Zhang's interviews at the Spring Fountain, many residents reported that they felt they had little in common with their neighbors. An elderly woman explained to her that "her son specifically warned her not to invite neighbors in or to say much about his business because strangers were not trustworthy" (121). The social distance created these sentiments has created a community based on materialistic possessions rather than deep social connections that once existed in traditional Chinese society. This priority of materialism over personal relations is also reflected in how self-worth is now defined.

Self-worth has changed drastically, from once encompassing one's personal cultivation depending on what xiaoqu one belongs to. As modern China moves away from the Maoist era, a time when "gender and sexual desires" (165) were erased in the name of the liberation project, the middle class has demonstrated a new claim to self-identity. Part of this comes from re-defining masculinity and femininity. Zhang states that "For men, self-worth is tied to a form of masculinity manifested in one's ability to make money, possess desirable material goods, or gain political power" and "For women, self-worth is deeply intertwined with the refeminization of their body, physical appearance, and conduct" (166). These modern ideas of self-worth are characterized by their monetary value. For instance, women pay extraordinary sums for foreign skincare products or cosmetic surgery to maintain their attractive youthfulness. For men, money plays an important role in their relationships, as marriage is unthinkable if a man cannot afford his own housing and other luxury items like cars or nannies. Some of these ideals can create unreasonable expectations, though, and are difficult to achieve. An example of this can be seen in relationships. Men, such as Chen Feng, feel that their self-worth and manhood is challenged when they are unable to provide for their spouses, In his case, he was forced to live with his wife in her parents'home until he finally was able to purchase his own home through a mortgage program. During this time, though, he felt inferior and awkward, which ended up putting much strain on his relationship with his wife. Because self-worth is largely determined by material possessions, consumption has also become a driving force of the middle class.

Consumption has skyrocketed due to consumerism being a source of self-worth and social identity. Consumption can provide a sense of security. One must spend money in order to maintain their middle-class status and blend into the crowd. Zhang explains that "The ability to consume properly is taken not only as the measure of one's prestige (zunrong) and face (mianzi) but also as an indication of whether one deserves membership in a particular community" (122). As such, how a person identifies themselves through consumption not only determines their self-worth but their value of being a responsible member of the middle class. An example of the importance of social identity can be seen in the narrative of Ms. Liang. She says that at one point they had enough money to live in a more upscale community than they chose. She explains that this was because her family was not ready to live like her "well-to-do neighbors" (123). In other words, they could not consume the same luxury items at the same rate as those in the community despite being able to afford the actual housing. As such, Ms. Liang decided that it was better to wait and save up more money than to risk her family's reputation. This example also points a drawback to middle-class consumption. The expectations of consumerism held in this social class alienate those who will cannot meet them. The social stratification this creates is made obvious by the private gates that loom over tightly-packed, poorly-constructed apartments and the private wealth they hold within.

The social problems that have arisen from the rise of the middle class include changes to

property rights and ownership and management disputes over housing. The effect of this has largely been residents protesting against developers. The issues with property rights and ownership mostly come from corruption among the developers, demolition companies, and local government. The first two are interested in keeping as much profit as possible by withholding compensation. Displaced homeowners struggle with this, as they usually have to fight individually for their rights and do not trust the legal system. In response to the threats they received from these companies, people protested by acting as “nail households”, “families that simply refuse to leave their homes due to compensation disputes or opposition to relocation” (150). Homeowners also protested in the streets, created petitions, and filed lawsuits. Housing management and wealthy homeowners were often in dispute as well over the fees paid and the quality of services. Zhan states that “Most homeowners believed they were exploited by the management agencies and accused them of demanding unreasonably large fees for poor services” (191). Homeowners eventually protested against this and attempted to create their own associations. This movement was empowered by the 2003 Property Regulation Rulings when they were revised in 2007.

China’s new middle class has evolved rapidly as industrialization and the displacement of lower-class individuals has paved the way for commodity housing. The middle class has created significant growth in advertisement and consumption while they strive for a new life of privacy and redefined self-worth. Each of these changes has seen both positive and negative effects on society. The greatest of these are the social problems that arose throughout all classes in which the people have responded actively to each conflict, despite the looming risk of protest that still exists in China’s political culture.