

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST
CHINA'S MIDDLE CLASS IN DYNAMIC SHANGHAI

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PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

U.S.-China relations seemed locked into a collision course that has already fomented a trade war, seems likely to become a new cold war, and could possibly result in military conflict. Mutual distrust clouds the relationship on both sides. In his new book, "Middle Class Shanghai: Reshaping U.S.-China Engagement," Brookings expert Cheng Li, who directs the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings, argues that American policymakers should not overlook the dynamism and diversity in present-day China, exemplified by the city of Shanghai and its expansive and cosmopolitan middle-class culture. Moreover, Li argues, Washington should neither underestimate the role or the strength of the Chinese middle class, nor alienate this force with policies that push it toward nationalism to the detriment of both countries and the global community.

On this episode, Brookings Institution Press director Bill Finan talks with Li about his book, a conversation in which Li takes us from his growing up in Shanghai during the Red Terror of the Cultural Revolution; to a Chinese middle class today that enjoys the markers of a middle-class lifestyle; and even to the avant-garde art scene in that city.

Also on this episode, Senior Fellow John McArthur, director of the Center for Sustainable Development, explains the "17 Rooms" initiative, an experiment launched by Brookings and The Rockefeller Foundation to stimulate new forms of discussion and action for the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

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First up, here's John McArthur with a new Sustainable Development Spotlight on "17 Rooms."

MCARTHUR: Hi, I'm John McArthur, senior fellow and director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings, here with the Sustainable Development Spotlight, a regular segment to highlight the work from the center.

Today I'm going to talk about 17 Rooms, a new approach to problem solving and convening that we've been working on over the past few years, in partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation, focused on spurring action for the world's 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

So why 17 Rooms? Well, have you ever wondered how to translate the big, audacious, long term global challenge of the UN Sustainable Development Goals into practical conversations and actions within your own community? This is exactly what the 17 Rooms initiative is trying to do. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, were agreed by all countries in 2015 to chart a better course for the world's economic, social, and environmental trajectories, anchored in a set of targets for 2030.

COVID-19 is only underscored one of the SDG's central themes: the underlying problems are both interconnected and urgent. The world needs to transition to a new path. Part of the transition will be generated through the long, hard, and often formal work of science, policymaking, and practice. But part of it will also come from getting disparate groups of people together in new and creative ways for informal conversations that can spark new collaborations and new types of answers.

This is where 17 Rooms comes in.

So what exactly is 17 Rooms? In practical terms, it consists of people from different SDG specialist communities each meeting in their own rooms or working groups, one for each of the 17 goals. Think of a convention center with all the SDG consistent constituencies with all the SDG constituencies gathering in the plenary hall before heading to goal specific breakout rooms and then reconvening to explore how their ideas might interconnect. Within any 17 Room process, each room is tasked with a common question: What are one to three cooperative actions they can take

over the subsequent 12 to 18 months? A time horizon beyond the pressures of today, but not so far off as to be impractical.

Emerging ideas from each of the rooms are then shared across the rooms to spot opportunities for collaboration.

In a February report on “17 Rooms: A new approach to spurring action for the Sustainable Development Goals,” we described three design principles that helped define the 17 Rooms approach. First, all SDGs get a seat at the table. The insights, participants, and priorities of all goals are valued equally across all rooms. Second, take a next step, not the perfect step. Participants focus and collaborate on actions that are big enough to matter, but small enough to get done. And third, focus on conversations, not presentations. Participants are asked to check their institutional agendas at the door and focus on what's best for an issue, not any individual organization.

We found that these three principles help advance concrete actions, form novel insights, and foster pragmatic communities to advance the SDGs.

A quick history of 17 Rooms? The first ever experiment was convened in September 2018 on the eve of the UN General Assembly in New York. But in the years since then, the initiative evolved into a two-pronged effort. One prong is an annual global flagship process focused on international scale policy challenges. The other prong is for bottom-up community level efforts. We call it 17 Rooms X where local actors are taking methods into their own hands to stimulate local cooperation for the SDGs. The highly curated flagship effort forms the tip of the arrow in driving the evolution of 17 Rooms methodologies so far.

In 2020, the pandemic sent everything virtual, 17 Zooms if you will.

You can read the flagships’ individual room documents, plus the overall insights report on our Center for Sustainable Development website.

Meanwhile, 17 Rooms X has been driven by local actors, initially in countries like Mexico, Spain, the United States, and Canada, but now also expanding to prospective efforts in places like Iceland and countries across Latin America and the Caribbean.

We've recently launched a 17 Rooms X community of practice with dozens of organizations joining to share insights on how 17 Rooms can help tackle local economic, social, and environmental problems on the ground. Many universities, cities, civil society organizations, and even businesses are looking to roll out their own 17 Room efforts soon.

This is exactly our ambition. To help bring the SDGs into communities' own hands, to promote problem solving in parallel and in concert across all the diverse constituencies that are crucial to tackling the challenges of sustainable development, and to promote practical next steps that help people keep driving forward even when the headwinds feel strong.

If you'd like to learn more about the 17 Rooms community of practice, or the initiative overall, please drop us a line at 17rooms@Brookings.edu. Thanks.

DEWS: You can learn more about “17 Rooms” and the Center for Sustainable Development on our website, brookings.edu. And now, here's Bill Finan with Cheng Li, author of “Middle Class Shanghai.”

FINAN: Fred, thank you and Cheng, glad to be able to talk to you again about your new book.

LI: Thank you for having me.

FINAN: The new book, “Middle Class Shanghai,” is an engrossing and detailed, yet wide angled immersion in a new China through the lens of Shanghai. Along the way, you help us understand the seismic socioeconomic jolt that has transformed the country. And also, and I think this is extremely important for this geopolitical moment, also helps us understand why what seems to be a new consensus that China and America are doomed to competition, possibly military, doesn't have to be the case. It's a big book. There's a lot in here that we can't even begin to explore in this short discussion. The really incredibly rich book, too. I'm really happy to be publishing this. But there so many central themes I'd like to pull out to ask you about today. First, I want to ask you about Shanghai. What is this city and why is it so important to understanding the new China?

LI: Well, Bill, I'm glad that you started with the essential question: Why Shanghai? There are four main reasons that I have focused on Shanghai. First, understanding Shanghai is vital to understanding modern China. There's a famous Chinese saying, actually I think it's quite revealing, it goes like this: To learn about 2,000-year Chinese history one should visit Xi'an; to understand the 500-year Middle Kingdom, one has to see Beijing; to grasp the past 100 years of changes in China, one must look at Shanghai.

Now, a distinguished American historian of Asia, Rhodes Murphy, wrote a book in 1953 I believe; the title is "Shanghai: Key to Modern China." That was the first reason.

The second, Shanghai is the cradle of both the middle class and the foreign-educated returnees, those Chinese who went abroad and studied and returned to China. The two groups I have examined. Now about ten years ago, 40 percent of the Chinese middle class lived in Shanghai and the three other major cities: Beijing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou. Twenty-five percent of foreign-educated returnees worked in Shanghai.

Thirdly, I'm intrigued with the multiple identities of Shanghai, namely local, national, and the cosmopolitan identities. They are all part of the dynamic, mutually reinforcing each other while also retaining independent value within a particular context. Shanghai's culture dynamics stress neither culture clash or culture convergence, but rather cultural coexistence and cultural diversity.

And, fourthly and finally, Shanghai is currently pacesetting in China's new search for global power, and its role will shape how China will act and how the outside world will respond to the emergence of a global China. There, I want to address my thesis that middle-class Shanghai actually reveals China's unsettled future because Shanghai embodies what I call two tales of a city.

FINAN: Before we come to those two tales, I would like to ask you a tale about yourself. You grew up in Shanghai. Can you tell us about that?

LI: Well, yes, there's a personal reason. I was born and raised in Shanghai. In that city, I experienced both the dark era of Red Terror during the Cultural Revolution as a young boy, and also the happier and the more promising time of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform and opening up

in the early 1980s as a college student. In the middle 1990s, I was privileged to live in Shanghai for two years as a research fellow with the support of the U.S.-based Institute of Current World Affairs, the same institute that sponsored, supported Doak Barnett, really the seasoned China hand who went to China to observe the Communist takeover in 1949.

During my two years in the middle 1990s, I wrote about my Rip Van Winkle-like experience in the city. Now, Ernest Hemingway once wrote that “if you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you.” For me, despite the horrible memories of the suffering and the torture for me and for my family during the Cultural Revolution, Shanghai, known in some quarters as the Paris of the East, remains close to my heart.

FINAN: Your book’s title is “Middle Class Shanghai,” but for many, the concept of a China that has a middle class is going to be difficult to grasp both those in the larger population and also within academia, too, because it’s a contested topic. So, I want to ask you to give us some definitions. What do you mean by “middle class” and how is Shanghai “middle class”?

LI: Excellent question, Bill. Now this book, “Middle Class Shanghai,” is not my first book on the subject, but actually the third book. In the middle 1990s, I wrote a book manuscript on the emergence of the Chinese middle class. But the book manuscript was rejected one after another by publishers, a total of six or seven. The reason was largely the same. Reviewers did not agree with the overarching concept of the Chinese middle class. They believed that the concept of a “middle class” should involve civil society and the core middle class values. Also, some reviewers commented that China consisted of only rich and the corrupt official class and the vast number of poor people with no such things called the Chinese middle class in between. Now, eventually, I changed the book title to “Rediscovering China: Dynamics and the Dilemmas of Reform,” and deleted most of the explicit references to the middle class. This book turned out to be a bestseller, widely used as a textbook in colleges in North America.

My second book on the Chinese middle class was an edited volume, “China’s Emerging Middle Class,” published by the Brookings Press in 2010, when the Western business community

was fascinated about the economic implications of the rise of the Chinese middle class. At that time over 20 percent of Chinese population could be considered as middle class. They were concentrated in Shanghai and other major cities, enjoying a middle class lifestyle with private property, personal automobiles, improved health care, accumulation of financial assets, and ability to afford overseas travel and foreign education for their children. They lived like middle class, consumed like middle class, feel like middle class, and they were middle class. They had already transformed China's socioeconomic structure and also the world economy.

But interestingly enough, academic communities and the policy circles in the United States and in the West were still hesitant to accept that concept. The 2010 edited book was one of the very few English books on the subject.

Now, I also want to say that the pervasive view in Washington today about middle class development in China, however, is no longer one of hope for positive change for peace and prosperity in the world, or mutual benefit for both countries. But rather one of fear that this development benefits only China and may undermine American supremacy and security.

Now to your question about the definition of the middle class. The middle class is an inherently flexible concept everywhere in the world, I believe. My study, like some other scholars in China and elsewhere, combines factors such as income, wealth, occupation, education, and social status—the combination of factors to define the socioeconomic group. Earlier, I mentioned that for many Western scholars, the concept of middle class should involve civil society and core middle class values. I actually agree with this conceptual notion. Despite the fact that the middle class is a diverse lot in China, I believe they more or less share the following core middle class values and attitudes. Let me just briefly mention these core values. Appreciate the middle class lifestyle, protect private property rights, support policies that promote education, advocate for measures that safeguard the environment, care deeply about food and drug safety, resent the government's "Great Firewall" online—middle class are very critical about this kind of media censorship—demand government accountability and transparency, and look favorably toward economic globalization

because China benefits from economic liberalization, and finally hold pride for China's rise on the world stage.

Now, as for the status of the Shanghai middle class, according to a 2018 study over 5 million households in Shanghai share this lifestyle and could be considered middle class families. They constitute 91 percent of the total registered households of the city. Now certainly not included are migrant workers and their families that could not afford even decent essential housing in the city. Talking about housing or property, according to a 2019 report by the People's Bank of China, almost all registered families in Shanghai own residential property. The average value of the household, the assets among Shanghai residents, was 1.2 million U.S. dollars. So, that tells you the really very impressive growth, but also some tensions between have and have nots. But that's Shanghai. That's certainly the Chinese middle class.

FINAN: What's interesting to me in your description is that it sounds like a middle class, it acts like a middle class, it looks like a middle class. I think it is a middle class, it would seem to be defined that way. You outlined two scenarios for the future of China in which the middle class plays a pivotal role. Can you briefly outline those two scenarios?

LI: Well, in the first scenario, which is more pessimistic, China becomes a superpower with its continuing economic growth and military modernization. China's middle class has grown to an unprecedented size, and this population's strongly nationalistic views comes to guide almost all state affairs. Tensions between China and United States have become increasingly acute, resulting from the demand of hundreds of millions of middle class consumers in China, global resource scarcity, environmental degradation, and the global concern about other negative impacts from the country's rapid industrialization and urbanization. I don't want to go into the details, U.S. media covers a lot about these challenges or problems.

To a great extent, the Chinese middle class can serve as an active and influential player in the country's pursuit of state capitalism and industrial policies overseas, including the Belt and Road Initiative. Now, in this scenario, the pessimistic scenario, ascendant China—still cognizant of

the so-called century of humiliation it endured at the hands of the Western imperialists—may easily choose to disregard international norms, disrupt global institutions, and even consider aggressive expansionism in the East and Southeast Asia, along with other parts of the region. Now, that's a negative, pessimistic scenario.

In a second, more optimistic scenario, China's middle class embraces more cosmopolitan values, having forged close economic and cultural bonds with countries in the West, especially the United States, as many of them study or their children study in the U.S. The growing consumption of the Chinese middle class helps reduce the U.S.-China trade imbalance, easing economic tensions as China's middle class lifestyle comes to mirror that of developed countries. The Chinese middle class consists of a large number of private entrepreneurs and private sector employees. So, again, they share similar values.

Now, in most nations there is an important link and an ultimate need for close ties between economic development and regime efficiency to mediate interests. So, China's middle class may help create and strengthen these ties by pushing for better governance in domestic affairs. Now, it may not happen at the moment, but sooner or later it will happen according to some scholars [in both China and abroad]. I actually belong to that group. Now, this group [the middle class] will also demand that China acts as a responsible stakeholder on the foreign policy front, building more constructive relations with the United States and the international community at large. So, these are the two scenarios.

FINAN: What's the likelihood that nationalism, which has been a great concern, especially in the West, nationalism in China, what is the likelihood that it could derail the second, more optimistic scenario?

LI: Well, that's a real danger, Bill. The actions and reaction between Beijing and Washington may lead in that direction if not carefully managed or corrected at the moment. Now, Beijing's increasingly assertive conduct both in the region and on the world stage, including the pressure campaign against Taiwan, economic coercion against Australia and other European

countries, and the retaliatory sanctions targeting individuals and institutions in North America and Europe, has caused serious concern in the U.S. and U.S. allies.

Now, from a Chinese perspective, many of the Biden administration's recent moves indicate that a new anti-China Cold War is imminent. These actions include restructuring global, industrial, and supply chains, initiating the so-called chip alliance or semiconducting industry alliance, joining like-minded countries to boycott Chinese products and China-sponsored events because of human rights issues, and also urging EU countries to reconsider the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, and finally, hosting the Democracy Summit at the White House. Now these, Chinese think that it's a coalition led by U.S. against China to curb China's rise.

Now, this naturally leads to some of the nationalist sentiment and also even anti-American sentiment. Now, when you look from Chinese perspective, Chinese government certainly take advantage of that. They use these public sentiments to try to unite the country. So nationalism, anti-American sentiment, is on the rise. Now, this Western policy moves certainly provide ammunition for the Chinese Communist Party. I think if you [want to find external causes, they include]: U.S. claims that Beijing is weaponizing Chinese students enrolled in U.S. universities, targeting Chinese and Chinese American scientists, consider termination of the U.S.-China education exchanges, employing phrases like "Chinese virus" or "kung flu," provoking Sinophobia and high Asian hate crime, and also restricting members of the Chinese Communist Party and their families, about 300 million people, from visiting the United States.

Now, it's important to see from Chinese perspective when you see this kind of policy move, that explains the growing nationalist sentiment. I'm not defending Chinese nationalism, but there's a reason from their perspective, there's some external causes. Of course, the reality is far more complicated, but that's part of the explanation.

FINAN: I want to move to another topic and we'll come back to the U.S. and Chinese relations in a moment. A section of your book is devoted to the Shanghai art scene. That's a first for a book like this. Well, it's a first to have a book about Shanghai and the middle class, but to have

this in a part of a political discussion and it's an absolutely absorbing discussion, too, of the Shanghai art scene. Why did you include it?

LI: Well, I believe we need to take a holistic view of China if we want to discuss the dynamic and the multilayered developments happening within China, within Shanghai. So, I actually started looking at Shanghai's avant-garde artists, a special cluster of middle class, almost 20 years ago because by definition, avant-garde art is ahead of our time. First, it was directed at a core audience and then gradually absorbed by other people and the society at large.

Now, when I started this research about 20 years ago, it surprised me early on to see the strong, critical views of these artists' work, not just the singling out of Chinese Communist Party, but also pointed to globalization and its side effects, economic and demographic disparities, environmental disasters, and the degradation caused by the rapid globalization and industrialization in China, and the single-minded profit-seeking Western hypocrisy and arrogance of Western hegemonic thinking. These are all the targets.

Now, I have come to see the general public absorbing three dominant critical perspectives first developed by avant-garde artists in the society. One is resentment of the Chinese Communist Party's authority. The number two is a resentment of certain super-rich entrepreneurs, Chinese entrepreneurs. And thirdly, a resentment of the United States. Each of these dominant powers in perspective gets criticized and challenged in some contexts while also being fabricated or supported in other contexts. This is a very intriguing development. And many of those reflections on China's post-colonial status, particularly Shanghai's post-colonial legacy, and also its globalized present and its complex societal negotiations first appear in avant-garde artists at work.

So, this is the reason I study avant-garde art. It's really very revealing for me. This critical discourse usually occurred a few years or even a couple of decades earlier than [among the] general public, whether it be critical of the Chinese Communist Party or critical of the West, or critical of the rich entrepreneurs. But it's very interesting to see how that unfolds.

FINAN: It's also interesting to, I think, those who are just casual observers of China, to have this entry point into how—I'm going to use this word, I don't mean in the condescending sense—how sophisticated Chinese aesthetic life is. I mean, the aesthetic is now, too. It's not ... those of us just see the Mao uniforms and the propaganda art from a long time ago. This is very new cutting edge and innovative work. What's also interesting to me, too, is that the state has allowed this the space for this to happen, too.

LI: James Fallows, our friend who previously worked for The Atlantic. He visited China, I think in 1988 or '89. He wrote an article published, I think, in The Atlantic, the title is "Shanghai Surprise." What surprised him was not about change, but no change by the middle or later '80s. So, all the changes occurred largely after 1990, when in particular Deng Xiaoping spent some time in Shanghai and the economic reform accelerated. So that's a fascinating change.

So again, early on I mentioned Shanghai is very much two tales of a city. In my view, Shanghai was, is, and will be paradoxical. Now, in history, Shanghai was the most westernized Chinese city, but it's also the birthplace of the CCP and the center of Maoist radicalism in the Cultural Revolution. I witnessed this kind of radicalism, it's really horrifying. Now, presently, Shanghai is a frontier city of market reforms, opening up, and cosmopolitanism. But it's also head of dragon, the Chinese term, it's China's industrial policy and state capitalism.

Now, in terms of the future, Shanghai, as many Chinese claim, is a vanguard of the middle class worldly voices, views, and values. I mentioned some of these things early on, including the avant-garde artist community, but also it's a showcase of China's growing state-led and aggressive global outreach. So my point here is that we should place Shanghai's future and China's future in an ever-changing domestic and international context. It's not predetermined, not stagnant, certainly not fixed.

FINAN: A central concern in your book, and one you write about at the very beginning, in fact, and also that overhangs nearly all the discussion, is the state of U.S.-China relations, which

we've touched on throughout this discussion. How would you summarize the relationship at this time?

LI: Well, the United States and China now appear to be locked in a collision course that has already caused a trade war, seems likely to produce a new Cold War, and if not wisely and carefully managed, could even result in a dangerous military conflict. The current deterioration in the bilateral relationship, as the book argues, is the culmination of years of dispute, disillusionment, disappointment, and distrust between the two countries. The U.S. actions and the resulting reaction from China or vice versa as I discussed earlier, have increasingly driven the world into two trade and investment systems, two IT and internet systems, potentially two financial and currency systems, and two political and military blocs. If that's the case, it's a Cold War.

Now, Dr. Kissinger recently pointed out that the United States and China are almost equally powerful and endless competition may lead to destructive confrontation. Either side cannot win a total war or destroy the other. This would be a war without a winner, and therefore it should never be fought. Both countries need to find an entirely new way to coexist by reshaping U.S.-China engagement. This is the subtitle of my book, "Reshaping U.S.-China Engagement."

My book is a humble effort to provide a different angle based on the cultural front, or from the perspective of people-to-people relations. The book argues that we should not underestimate the profound impact of cultural exchanges and enduring friendship between two peoples, between peoples in China and the United States, even at a time when the U.S.-China relationship has drastically deteriorated.

Now, this is evident in the Chinese people's admiration of Kobe Bryant and the widespread mourning throughout the country that followed his tragic passing. On January 27, 2020, the day after the helicopter crash that killed Bryant, there were more than one billion web searches for Bryant's name and the crash on Weibo, China's Twitter, more than double the number of a search for coronavirus. This is astonishing, given that China was really in the peak of the deadly epidemic.

Now, these kinds of cultural and educational exchanges between two countries with profoundly different ideology and political systems can promote mutual understanding, inspire fair competition, diffuse global norms, and therefore reduce the likelihood of destructive confrontation. Washington should neither underestimate the role or the strength of the Chinese middle class, nor alienate this force with policies that push it toward nationalism to the detriment of both countries and the global community. This is the central thesis of the book.

FINAN: And you've actually answered the last question I wanted to ask you is, what can be done to help Washington refocus and reframe the narrative that it is producing about China as a country and China on the international stage by what you just what ...

LI: I can elaborate if you want ...

FINAN: Sure. Yes.

LI: Well, if Washington makes one recurrent mistake assessing present day China, it is perceiving the world's most populous and rapidly changing country in monolithic terms. When considering China's current status and future trajectory, some American policymakers and opinion leaders fail to draw a distinction between China's ruling elite and the much broader Chinese society. As my book documents, China has become increasingly pluralistic, with many new social and political players, particularly from the middle class, making reductive generalizations about China more problematic than ever before. Now, if America disengages with Chinese society, especially with its dynamic middle class, what leverage and influence can the U.S. expect to have on China's future evolution? Washington's failure to distinguish among various perspectives of the leadership of Chinese Communist Party, of Chinese society, of China's middle class, will broadly risk undermining U.S. policy effectiveness on China.

FINAN: Cheng, thank you for coming by to talk about your new book, "Middle Class Shanghai: Rethinking U.S.-China Engagement."

LI: Okay, thank you.

DEWS: You can buy “Middle Class Shanghai: Reshaping U.S.-China Engagement,” by Cheng Li wherever you like to buy books, including from your local bookstore.

A team of amazing colleagues helps make the Brookings Cafeteria possible. My thanks to audio engineer Gaston Reboredo; to Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press who does the book interviews; to my communications colleagues Marie Wilken, Adrianna Pita, and Chris McKenna for their collaboration. And finally, to Camilo Ramirez and Andrea Risotto for their guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.