Middle-class anxiety and moderate prosperity: South Africa and China in comparative perspective

Ibrahim Abraham  
*Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, Canberra*  
ibrahim.abraham@anu.edu.au

Shuhan Liu  
*School of Philosophy and Sociology, Shanxi University, Taiyuan*  
susan.liu0723@aliyun.com

**Abstract**

This article presents the first comparative study of the middle class in Africa and China, drawing on published research from both regions, furnished with analysis of popular culture and ethnographic insights from research on South Africa’s new black middle class. This study explores four topics of theoretical and empirical significance. Firstly, definitional debates about the qualitative and quantitative classification of the middle class, including the appropriateness of the term in (South) Africa and China. Secondly, the appropriation of the Chinese concept of xiaokang (moderate prosperity) for the study of Africa. Thirdly, anxiety over social and economic status, related in particular to distinctions between strata within the middle class, building on a distinction between middle-class moderate prosperity and middle-class affluence. Fourthly, anxiety over contradictions between emerging individual desires and traditional familial commitments, impacting South Africa’s moderately prosperous in particular, with broader cultural implications for emerging African and Chinese modernities.

**Introduction**

This article presents the first comparative study of the middle class in Africa and China, two regions drawing together in a world
increasingly shaped by what has been called “globalization with Chinese characteristics” (Ziso, 2017, p. 3). Drawing on published studies of the middle class in South Africa and China, furnished with analysis of popular culture from both countries and ethnographic insights from South Africa, this article is concerned with theoretical questions about social stratification, and empirical studies of what we are calling middle-class anxiety. In particular, this article builds upon nascent work by largely Francophone Africanists applying the Chinese concept of xiaokang (moderate prosperity) to Africa. Applying the term to South Africa for the first time we draw a critical distinction between fragments of the new black middle class, the moderately prosperous middle class and the affluent middle class, who experience different material tensions and contradictions.

Focusing on the lives of the middle class in China and the new black middle class in South Africa, this article differs from the voluminous scholarship focussed on direct China-Africa economic ties (for example in this journal Hevron and Crowley 2019, complemented by Ziso 2017: 1-5). However, working through a comparative study of these middle classes reveals interesting parallels and connections, not least China’s manufacture of Africa’s middle-class material comforts. We are nevertheless aware of the many caveats that must be applied to a study such as this; South Africa and China are diverse countries and one can find infinitely more differences than similarities. Yet inclusive comparison has its place just as distinction does, and we feel that social science develops through broad-minded exploration of ideas from different disciplines and regions. We consider Bell and Metz’s (2012) comparison of Confucianism and Ubuntu a model for this kind of analysis, as well as the application of xiaokang to studies of Africa, analysed below. We are also intrigued by Mbembe’s (2012) suggestion of Africa “‘evolving’ toward China”, not least because both are wrestling, in a productive or dialectical manner, with tradition and hyper-modernity.

Below we make use of published studies on the Chinese and (South) African middle class, in addition to insights from ethnographic research on South Africa’s new black middle class carried out in 2017 and 2018. While there are many publications on the Chinese middle class, most focus on their contribution to economic development. We focus instead on sociological studies by Tsang (2014) and Rocca (2017) analysing middle-class lifestyles under the influence of Bourdieu’s (1984) study of class and cultural distinction. A similar approach is found in Southall’s (2016) landmark study of South Africa’s black middle class (in spite of its Marxian emphasis on power and production), and recent broader
collections on Africa’s middle class (Melber 2016; Kroeker, O’Kane and Scharrer 2018). We also analyse popular culture, a key measure of middle-class taste. It is notable in South Africa that the dominant consumer demographic is no longer the white middle class, but the new black middle class, whose values dominate the airwaves.

We begin with a critical overview of definitions of the middle class in (South) Africa and China. We exclude historical and heavily theoretical debates (see generally Tsang, 2014, pp. 18-54; Southall, 2016, pp. 1-40; Neubert 2019, pp. 85-123), but analyse underlying assumptions informing these definitions, and ask whether the concept of a “middle class” makes sense in Africa and China. We then analyse and develop Africanist appropriations of the concept of xiaokang (moderate prosperity) for the particular study of South Africa, distinguishing between moderately prosperous desires for comfort and affluent middle class preoccupations with luxury. Turning to empirical analysis, we examine status anxiety among (in particular) the affluent Chinese and South African middle class, focusing on consumerist acts of distinction aimed at demonstrating quality (suzhi). Finally, noting the similarities between Confucian and Ubuntu philosophies, we analyse the tension between desires for an independent and unique life and familial and social responsibilities, contributing to a contradiction between cultural values.

**Defining the middle class in Africa and China**

A basic quantitative approach to defining the middle class assumes that every unequal society logically has a middle. In these relativist approaches economists may take the middle 60 percent of income earners, or those earning between 75 percent and 125 percent of the median income, to constitute the middle class (Kharas 2010, p. 11). Although relativist studies inform us about social inequality, they are often incomparable internationally. In contrast, absolute approaches set specific income levels; if you earn between certain amounts (with various financial adjustments), you are part of the middle class (ibid.). Critical quantitative analysis of the middle class often requires both measures, combining awareness of where income-earners sit relative to the rest of their society, and awareness of the kind of lifestyle their absolute level of income allows them, relative to middle classes elsewhere. Studying the Chinese middle class in affluent Guangdong province, Tsang (2014, p. 10) set a minimum annual income of around 15,000 USD, with around 40,000 USD in the bank, but applied this absolute measure to that province only. Visagie (2015) similarly differentiates South Africa’s relatively affluent middle class from the median middle class earning
much less.

The common contemporary threshold in quantitative studies of the “global middle class”, a development concept that assumes similar lifestyles and aspirations around the world (Darbon, 2018, p. 36), is 10 USD per day adjusted for purchasing power at either 2005 or 2011 levels, up to either 50 or 100 USD per day, similarly adjusted (Kharas 2017, p. 3; Kochhar 2015, pp. 8-10). According to the narrower (10-50 USD) measure, 22 percent of the Chinese (about 300 million people) and 17 percent of South Africans (about 12 million people) were part of this global middle class in 2011 (Kharas 2017, p. 80).

Lower middle-class measures are also used, notably the African Development Bank’s (AfDB) (2011) Middle of the Pyramid report that set African middle class incomes between 2-20 USD per day, at 2005 levels. On this basis, the authors claimed a middle class of approximately 327 million, “roughly the size of the middle class in India or China” (ibid., p. 2). The study is nevertheless nuanced, distinguishing between the near-impoverished “floating class” (2-4 USD per day), the lower middle class (4-10 USD per day) and Africa’s upper middle class (10-20 USD per day). Admitting that most of Africa’s middle class are in the floating class, “facing the possibility of dropping back into the poor” (ibid, p. 4), the report acknowledged that a stricter definition (4-20 USD per day) shrinks Africa’s middle class from 34 percent (327 million) to just 13 percent (128 million); in South Africa it falls from 43 percent to 20 percent (ibid., pp. 3-5). This report is controversial as social scientists routinely criticise it, but use it (Neubert, 2019, p. 8), and it helped set “a new agenda” of Africa as continent of growth à la Asia, even if the aggregate incomes of sub-Saharan Africa’s middle class are 25 times less than Asia’s middle class (Darbon, 2018, pp. 41, 46).

Assessments of the Chinese middle class also vary greatly, using different definitions, data and measurements of individual and household income. Zhou (2018) offers the illustrative extremes of China’s National Bureau of Statistics which lists 400 million middle class individuals in households earning as little as 3,600 USD per year and UBS/PriceWaterhouseCoopers who include barely 100 million individuals in households earning as much as 500,000 USD per year. Thomas Piketty et al. (2019: 2484) estimate that in 2015 the middle 40 percent of income earners in China (428 million individuals) earned between approximately 5,500 USD and 18,500 USD per year—placing them within the narrower “global middle class” boundary, above—but they offer many caveats to these data. Rocca (2017: 58, 81-2) argues that because the cost of living radically differs across China, and so
much grey income from entrepreneurial activity and fringe benefits is not captured in conventional statistics, "using strict norms of income to classify people leads to confusing conclusions." Buttressing this argument, the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2019) reports net (disposable) income when dividing the population into the quintiles which form a familiar basis for quantitative class analysis, suggesting that consumption, not production, is key to understanding the middle class (Tsang, 2014, p. 88).

The most sophisticated definitions of the middle class combine quantitative measures and other status indicators. Lu Xueyi's (2002) schema has been most influential in China. He places around a quarter of the working population in the middle class, using six interrelated criteria that measure, in Bourdieu's (1984, pp. 114-5) terms, cultural, economic and social capital, creating a sense of quality (suzhu). The middle class: (1) are engaged in mental (not physical) work, (2) have expertise and some autonomy over their work, (3) receive formal, medium-level incomes, (4) have tertiary education or professional technical training, leading to high employability, (5) have the ability to afford a lifestyle meeting the sophisticated material and cultural needs of their family, (6) and display active citizenship and public moral awareness, including a sense of their own civil behaviour and social responsibility (Lu, 2002, pp. 253-4). In practice, members of China's middle class tend to be younger, to live in China's massive first and second-tier cities, to have tertiary education and professional skills leading to strong competitiveness in the labour market (which is itself highly competitive!), and they have usually achieved a moderate level of foreign language competence. They can gain high incomes in modern industries through their own abilities and they have personal savings to deal with unexpected situations.

It is hard to find schemas of this kind of sophistication in Africa, in part because the wave of "livelihood experimentation" taking place across the continent lacks "well-formed career expectations" (Bryceson, 2010, p. 6) observable in China, and partly because the "indirect" relationship to the economy many Africans have makes objective classification difficult (Alexander, et al. 2013, p. 3). South Africa is a partial exception because of the availability of good statistics. Burger, et al. (2015) analyse objective and subjective survey measures of middle-class status, without attempting multifaceted classification, but Seekings and Nattrass (2005) produced a more expansive map of South Africa's class system at the end of apartheid, carefully adapting Goldthorpe's (1987) schema to create a 9-level occupation and income-based table, adapted in turn by Southall (2016, p. 62) into a 12-part table. However, (South) African
studies have more often focused upon purely quantitative measures, such as the AfDB’s (2011) report; upon subjective measures via grounded theory, such as Alexander, et al.’s (2013) study of class in Soweto; upon the lifestyle of middle-income earners, such as James’s (2015) focused study of black South African indebtedness; or upon the political aspects of class as a measure of economic power, as in Southall’s (2016) wide-ranging study of South Africa’s black middle class.

Exploring different definitions of the middle class in this way is a reminder that every classification “holds a secret agenda” (Rocca 2017: 4, 86). The AfDB (2011) sought to “change the economic view of Africa” with its Middle of the Pyramid report (Neubert, 2019, p. 6) emphasising the progressive values of Africa’s middle class to depict a continent on the verge of embourgeoisement as well as economic development. A similar “agenda” can be found in bank reports on Africa’s middle class emphasising investment opportunities (Darbon 2018, pp. 46-7), or Unilever’s South African marketing team inventing the term “black diamond” to describe a cohort of conspicuous consumers among the new black middle class (Southall 2016, pp. 163-4). If “secret agenda” is too strong a term, approaches to social stratification certainly carry connotations. In China, the term “class” (jieji) carries the Marxist implication of class struggle, and class struggle gave way to economic development as the “principal contradiction” animating government policy under Deng Xiaoping forty years ago (Gregor, 2014, p. 216). So although the concept of (middle) class is used in Chinese publications, the more technical term “stratum” (jiceng) is also used to refer to either the “intermediate stratum” or “middle property stratum”, and does not connote conflict (Rocca, 2017, p. 72-4).

Approaches to the new middle class in Asia and Africa often have another “agenda”, the idea of middle class as collective agents of historical change. Thus, a common critique of studies of the middle class is that, lacking consciousness and unity, the middle-income stratum in Africa and China do not constitute a “class”. Representatively, for Darbon (2018, pp. 37) the African middle class is merely a “statistical clumping together” of “unrelated subcategories”, while for Hallsten (2016, p. 105) the South African middle class are united only in individualistic indifference to class solidarity. There is a conceptual distinction between a class “in itself” and a class “for itself”, paraphrased from some of Marx’s (1847; 1851-2) writings—which famously fail to offer precision about class—with the latter category implying collective action in the name of class solidarity. Critiquing some of these approaches, Wright (1985, pp. 243-4) observes how common variations upon it are, as
scholars and activists often measure how well a class achieves their purported political task. In this vein, Darbon (2018, p. 40) critiques the AfDB’s (2011) report for presenting the middle class as a “silver bullet transforming the whole of Africa.”

However, if we return to Marxian language, literature on the (South) African and Chinese middle class suggest that there is an approximation of a class “in itself” because of the objective set-apartness of their “mode of life” (Marx, 1851-2), their subjective set-apartness from the rich and poor (Darbon 2018, pp. 39-40), and because of the active distinctions they make in their lifestyles. Although, as Tsang (2014, p. 13) argues, “class’ in China is more of a cultural term than an economic one”, it is conceivable as a class nonetheless, formed through patterns of socio-cultural activities, and scholars such as Southall (2016, p. 60; 2018, p. 474) who are legitimately committed to analysing class from the perspective of production and power, will have to contend with “culture” co-existing with “structure” in class analysis. This is, in fact, the focus of Scharrer, et al. (2018, p. 8) advocate for studies of the African middle class, emphasising the way “the middle class’s social distinctiveness is expressed in cultural preferences and behaviours,” heavily influenced by Bourdieu (1984), and this is the approach we shall take in examining the comparative anxieties of the South African and Chinese middle class. Although we take seriously Neubert’s (2019) sophisticated lifestyle/milieu analysis of the African middle class emphasising differences in outlooks and behaviour, based on factors such as religiosity, we believe the possibilities for these different lifestyles are tethered to class status.

**Moderate prosperity (xiaokang) in Africa and China**

There is one final conceptual class issue we wish to examine, the alternative notion of xiaokang, translated into English as “moderate prosperity”, or via the French petite prospérité as “limited prosperity”, “small prosperity” or paraphrased by Rocca (2017) as “small comfort”. The notion of xiaokang became a significant feature of Chinese political discourse under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s through the policy of building a moderately prosperous society (xiaokang shehui), including an end to extreme poverty and class polarization (Gregor 2014, p. 221; Lu 2010, p. 110). The concept has its origins in classical Confucian literature, referring to a silver age, in contrast to a utopian golden age of universal harmony (Smith, 2019, pp. 63-5). In practical political usage the term refers to Chinese individuals, families and society enjoying the material benefits of decades of modernization; xiaokang society is an admittedly imperfect society, but it is nevertheless a society “in which all are adequately provided for” (ibid., pp. 65-6).
The term has been employed by a number of French Africanists who consider moderate prosperity a more accurate description of Africa’s middle class or strata (Darbon, 2012; 2018; Jacquemot 2012; Nallet 2012; Andrianampiarivo 2017; 2018). The objections of these scholars to the notion of an African middle class are those outlined in the paragraphs above, that middle-class identity and agency is missing, and above all that one must include people on very low incomes to clump together a middle class of significant size. The choice of xiaokang is highly significant. While it may be a postcolonial move uniting the “East” and the “South” (Mbembe 2012), the concept has its own cultural baggage, just as “middle class” does. Xiaokang is not only the “epitome of Chineseness”, with its roots in the Confucian notion of a past utopia and the Marxist notion of a future utopia, but its official use implies the inappropriateness of foreign concepts for interpreting Chinese experience (Smith, 2019, p. 66).

There are further conceptual challenges to the application of xiaokang to Africa. In China, the term is used to describe the consequences of modernization for the whole society, as well as for individuals or families, whereas in Africa the term is used exclusively, but inconsistently, to describe a small proportion of individuals and families enjoying a generally lower standard of living than China’s moderately prosperous. Translations of xiaokang are employed in part as a more sophisticated replacement for the AfDB’s “floating class” by Darbon (2012), although for Jacquemot (2012) and Nallet (2012) Africa’s moderately prosperous are a stratum above the floating class, enjoying higher status and consumer lifestyles. Andrianampiarivo’s (2017, pp. 31-2; 2018, pp. 297-8) application of the concept to Madagascar is the most nuanced; tracing xiaokang back to its ancient rural roots, he argues it is most appropriately applied to African farming families capable of meeting their basic material needs. There no sense that sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, or even one particular country, is conceivable as a moderately prosperous society, especially not according to Deng’s criterion of eliminating extreme poverty. The closest we may get are debatable pockets of “normality”, such as a well-governed city like Cape Town, with its comparatively lower unemployment rate and the moderating impact of South Africa’s limited welfare state (van Onselen 2015).

We nevertheless believe the concept of xiaokang is significant for understanding the (South) African middle class, and we will employ the concept (as moderate prosperity) to help in understanding the split between the lower and upper middle class. We make this distinction by returning to the notion of moderate prosperity as “small comfort”,

12 ARAS Vol. 41 No. 2 December 2020
the subtitle of Rocca’s (2017) excellent book on the Chinese middle class, for comfort is an important concept in studies of the middle class. In his literary history of the European bourgeoisie, Franco Moretti (2013, pp. 44-51) employs comfort as a key term for understanding the development of middle-class lifestyles. In contrast to the “glitter and ostentation” of the aristocracy, the comfortable middle-class home consists of “everyday necessities made pleasant” (Moretti, 2013, pp. 45, 48). “Comfortable living” is also a key measure for economists setting income thresholds for the global middle class (Kharas, 2011, p. 59).

The comfort of moderate prosperity is partly a question of convenience, made more possible today by the global proliferation of Chinese consumer goods, but it also has a protective or restorative quality; a middle-class home is a haven from the hustle-and-bustle of work without trying to be an escape from worldly responsibility. However, Moretti (2013, pp. 49-50) observes an historical tension between this middle-class comfort and middle-class affluence. The fraction of a middle class “that wants to go beyond itself” sets itself apart from the “down-to-earth” practicalities of middle-class comfort through its commitment to fashion and luxury. Echoing Boudieu’s (1984) emphasis on cultural distinction in class boundary-drawing, we think these historical distinctions between middle-class comfort and middle-class luxury are a good dividing line between moderate prosperity and middle-class affluence. Notably, as we will see in the next section, seeking middle-class affluence brings with it a different set of anxieties from the moderately prosperous seeking mere comfort.

**Status anxiety and middle-class distinction**

We wish to suggest that lifestyles, specifically patterns of consumption, are key features distinguishing the South African and Chinese middle classes from other groups in society, and partly from each other, as we note the distinction between affluence and moderate prosperity. Accompanying these lifestyles are certain anxieties. For the moderately prosperous, financial matters such as education and family obligations dominate. For the affluent middle class, anxiety around status is also a key concern as they seek cultural capital and worry about the debts incurred accumulating it.

We also suggest that, in spite of differences within the middle class, general anxieties around middle-class life are uniform enough to direct policies of the governments of China and South Africa. As both countries are governed by parties with mass middle-class membership, these common anxieties warrant high-level government attention. We suggest, below, reforms to student bursaries are evidence of the South African
government's awareness of anxieties among the moderately prosperous. More significantly, in 2017 Chinese President Xi Jinping identified the gap between people's material expectations and the reality of their lives to be the new "principal contradiction" in China: "What we now face is the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life" (Xinhua 2017). This "better life" is about more than the material and cultural needs of the past, however. China's rapid economic development undermined traditional inhibitions on consumerism and even hedonism, so the Chinese middle class not only pursue "hard needs" such as housing and education, but also lifestyles that meet their "soft needs" such as a subjective sense of satisfaction, excitement and happiness, allowing for nuances of lifestyle.

Consumer lifestyles produce observable differences; a "circle of class distinction" is created which only certain individuals and families can afford, typically those in similar social networks (Tsang, 2014, p. 87, 123). Under the influence of Bourdieu (1984), Tsang (2014, p. 85) and Rocca (2017, p. 119) consider these practices of consumeristic distinction as a form of "class struggle," albeit taking place in the field of lifestyle. Adapted to our distinction between the moderately prosperous and the affluent middle class, these are, firstly, competitions to demonstrate the superior behaviours and values of the affluent, and secondly, competitions within the affluent middle class to determine who best embodies the modernity and quality (suzhi) to which this group aspires. Within this culture of competition, the Chinese middle class are under constant social scrutiny from each other, not just over their success at work or study, but over their fashion and broader lifestyle. In fact, once the display of affluent taste becomes a field of competition, then anything can be made "the basis of sophisticated distinctions" between people, from the way one speaks to the way one cares for the environment, in a constant and conceivably "limitless" competition to demonstrate geren suzhi (personal quality) (ibid., pp. 121-2, 125-6).

Conspicuous consumerism of this kind can become an all-dominant lifestyle, as not only are there certain must-have attributes and products to enter the "circle of class distinction" (Tsang, 2014, p. 87)—encompassing cultural, economic and social capital as Lu's (2002) class schema illustrates—but one’s whole life must be organised to achieve and maintain this status, with work, finances (especially debt) and relationships functioning in a homologous way. This can lead to a vicious circle of excessive work to enter a world of luxury, at the cost to one’s health and peace of mind, which excessive work is then required to maintain, with the consequence of constant anxiety. If one cannot
maintain this lifestyle, one may fall out of this circle very quickly, a perceived problem in the lives of South Africa’s black diamonds, notorious for exorbitant spending. Debt is a significant problem facing South Africa’s broader black middle class (James 2015), as the costs of middle-class life—insurance, education, housing and car repayments as well as family support (see below)—can cancel out material benefits, leading to high rates of borrowing, including from informal high-interest lenders. After years of constant debate, the government passed a debt relief bill in 2019, but only for those earning below approximately 5,000 USD per year (Phakathi, 2019), not the heavily indebted middle class who had been most strongly agitating for debt relief.

Although the moderately prosperous and the affluent middle class are both active consumers, the affluent exercise very different consumer choices. The “six big things” of Chinese consumer focus in previous decades—including televisions, fridges and washing machines—are taken for granted, as in the West, and their consumer focus is increasingly immaterial and experiential; education, travel, financial services, entertainment, exercise and outdoors leisure and other forms of personal development (Rocca, 2017, p. 28, 135-6; Tsang, 2014, pp. 88-90; Zhu and Zhu, 2017). As sophisticated consumers, they look far beyond the mere use value of products to focus on their symbolic qualities, and they seek to demonstrate their individual style through this exercise of consumer tastes. This is one reason why the middle class appear difficult to conceive of as a unified class, whether in China or South Africa. While the affluent middle class does exhibit similar patterns of consumption, the precise content of middle-class lifestyles will differ because of this orientation toward the experience economy and individual self-creation. Global consumer culture is influential, as is national tradition, but neither are wholly determining of the individual lives of this modern, affluent middle class.

The moderately prosperous in South Africa and China can also increasingly take the comfort of household electronics for granted because of the widespread availability of Chinese products. The act of distinction is therefore an important feature of African middle-class life as well as Chinese middle class life. Taking a brief detour to West Africa is illustrative; in research on Chinese and African entrepreneurs in Cameroon, Rösenthaler and Soçpa (2017, p. 173) observe a hierarchy of consumers and consumer goods. The cheaper items are imported by Chinese hucksters for moderately prosperous consumers, but higher up the scale are quality products with authentic brand names appealing to the affluent middle class. These are imported from China by Cameroonians
themselves, and a consumer must “economise” in other aspects of their lifestyle to purchase them (ibid.). These quality products are therefore symbolic of the older middle-class virtue of prudence, calculated self-interest rather than exorbitance (McCloskey, 2006, pp. 253-62), as well as symbolic of the contemporary middle-class virtue of distinguishing taste.

A similar hierarchy exists in South Africa, especially since the influx of foreign products in the late-1990s to meet the country’s “first-ever boom based on a broad-based expansion of domestic consumption”, concentrated among the new black middle class (Hirsch, 2005, pp. 259-60). Poorly-made products entered the market, including counterfeit designer-branded products made in China, distinguished from quality products with the dismissive term “Fong Kong”, a term popularized in a kwaiito song by the Hunger Boyz (1999). Although kwaiito is an electronic dance music genre, focused on personal pleasure rather than politics, there is an element of realism and a sense of black ownership of the genre (Pietilä, 2017, p. 28), and the “Fong Kong” song said something serious about the limits of moderate prosperity after apartheid. As Southall (2016, p. 182) argues in regards to the black middle class in general, the freedom to spend does not yet match with freedom to buy—or at least to buy quality.

Even among South Africans who can purchase quality, there is anxiety that the luxury fashion they flaunt might be considered “Fong Kong” counterfeit. Discussing designer handbags, this kind of anxiety is described by a young middle-class Chinese woman as “a potential source of shame as my friends can identify whether or not they’re fakes. ... If we buy counterfeits there’s no difference between us and the blue-collar people” (Tsang, 2014, p. 93). The best guarantee of quality is to buy luxury fashion overseas (ibid.). Underpinning this anxiety in the (South) African context is not just anxiety about one’s own social status and self-worth—doubt about how successful one has been at “self-commodification” (ibid., p. 97)—but implicitly also anxiety about (South) Africa’s status in the global economy.

**Individuals, families and finance in the tension between tradition and modernity**

While anxieties around status are a significant feature of the lives of middle-class South Africans and Chinese, played out in public lifestyles, profound anxieties also exist in private homes around the relationship between the individual and their family. Although middle-class family tensions can be severe, we nevertheless consider these to be productive tensions that are constitutive of distinct African and Chinese modernities
in which neither national tradition, nor Western liberal individualism, will wholly dominate the other. It is worth noting that it is East Asia’s successful modernization that has produced these anxieties over tradition, and out-competing the West in the modern fields of economics and technology has also instilled confidence in non-Western traditions (King 2002). It is a similar confidence in collective African capacities and individual success—often mobilized in South Africa through middle-class discourse of “black excellence”—that frames moral anxieties over middle-class individual’s obligations to family. It is therefore significant that anxieties around individual and family or community commitments have philosophical implications, relating to Chinese Confucianism and southern African Ubuntu.

Without losing sight of their differences, Daniel Bell and Thaddeus Metz (2011, p. 78) draw out the similarities between “communitarian” Confucianism and Ubuntu which “have more in common than either has with the liberal tradition.” They identify three shared principles that we feel contribute to the tension between individual desires and familial responsibilities among the Chinese and African middle classes: (i) the centrality of community and relationships, (ii) ethical partiality towards family, and (iii) age-based hierarchy (ibid, p. 80). Western individualism is therefore problematic in Confucian and Ubuntu ethics, as both hold that “human flourishing is constituted by social relations”, particularly the “web of caring obligations that binds family” (ibid. pp. 82, 88). Age-based “moral hierarchies” exist in both family types, moreover, with filial piety the foundational Confucian value, and Ubuntu emphasizing the “moral wisdom” of the old (ibid., pp. 90-1).

In the Chinese context, Confucian values are most evident in family relationships, indeed, the Chinese middle class is largely made up of middle-class families, who control the wealth. As Martin Jacques (2012, p. 156) argues, socialization into Chinese Confucian culture “remains a highly disciplining process. … Children learn that everything has its place, including them. People learn about their role and duties as citizens as an extension of their familial responsibilities.” As such, as Tsang (2014, p. 53) argues, the “pleasure-seeking habits and self-consciousness” of younger, affluent middle-class Chinese can conflict with the “ascribed identities” learned in the home, and because an obedient child is a source of parental pride, these pleasure-seeking habits can create guilty feelings.

Rather than weakening Confucian family values, China’s development has somewhat strengthened them, in both practical and philosophical ways. Confucianism has become an important resource to “rebuild the
social and moral order” disrupted by rapid modernization, especially for the urban middle-class who have even embraced private “Confucian kindergartens” for their children (Pang, 2019, p. 27, 202). Similarly, the speeches of President Xi Jinping have “stressed family bonds, family values and family education on many occasions”, emphasizing that “Chinese traditions and virtues of family harmony and affection should not be forgotten so as to ensure that the young grow up healthily and senior citizens are taken care of” (An 2018). The “untying of the individual” from the limitations of the past is a foundational aspect of modern China, making the planning of a child’s education, career and marriage an increasingly complex but imperative parental concern as low birth-rates, and the absence of a thorough welfare system, mean that in later life they may be reliant on the filial piety of one child (Tsang, 2014, pp. 49-50, 106-15). These issues were dramatized in the television series Beijing Youth (2012), in which He Dong, a 27-year old civil servant rebels against the life his mother has planned for him, including his career and his upcoming marriage. With his three middle-class cousins, He Dong abandons his current life and relives his youth. The series caused cultural ripples, with some viewers describing it as the authentic voice of the young middle class and praising the series for presenting a fantasy of escape they lack the courage to attempt themselves. The economic pressure on the middle class, and fear of losing their job—let alone quitting their job—means life carries on the same; a truly independent lifestyle is out of their reach.

Although Ubuntu may appear “incredibly out of whack with empirical reality” given South Africa’s social dysfunctions (Jansen 2009, p. 177), it is a prominent aspect of black middle-class moral discourse. This discourse functions to distinguish the new black middle class from South Africa’s old white middle class, from the black working class and underclass, and also partly as a criterion for distinction among the black middle class itself, just as the Chinese middle class competes over civic virtues like environmentalism. Indeed, while the black middle class inherited little economic capital from their ancestors, they did inherit cultural capital, including ethical traditions (Southall 2016, p. 166). The relevance of Ubuntu is evident in the debate over the “black tax”, Africans’ obligation to support extended family. Niq Mhlongo’s (2019a) collection Black Tax: Burden or Ubuntu? contrasts middle-class approaches to the issue, with some contributors lamenting family members’ exploitation of their success and others celebrating African ethics and their own generous spirit. Mhlongo (2019, p. 85) summarizes the situation well:
“Black tax” seems to have its origins in the late 2000s, when the black middle class were among the hardest hit by the recession. They were repaying study loans … paying instalments on their cars, preparing for marriage. … Furthermore, these black professionals were expected to look after a brother and sister who were still in high school or their disadvantaged sister’s child. … Joburg life had begun to choke the black middle class. Like a hustler, they had to touch here and touch there in their struggle to survive.

Seeing the erosion of the moderate comfort or prosperity the black middle class had accumulated e—and noting one aspect of middle-class comfort is an end to hustling and the struggle to survive—financially supporting one’s extended family became impossibly burdensome.

As the black tax debate illustrates, modern capitalist culture can exacerbate the demands of traditional communitarian culture, such that the costs of middle-class success may exceed its benefits. Marriages also illustrate the tension between individual success and familial obligation. In China, “phoenix boys” who have risen from rural poverty to achieve middle-class status often delay marriage because of their financial obligations to their rural family, while highly-educated and successful Chinese women often struggle to find a husband. Among South Africa’s new black middle class, prospective husbands face financial pressure from the cultural obligation to honour their future in-laws through gifts and money, as well as financially supporting their own family (James, 2015, p. 48). The wealthier a prospective husband is, or claims to be about to become, and the better educated a prospective bride is, the higher the bride price (lobolo) his future in-laws may claim from him (Southall, 2016, p. 181). A commercial for King Power insurance, making use of a common South African joke about interracial miscommunication, features a white man presenting his future black father-in-law with fifty electric kettles as lobolo, because he misheard “cattle” as “kettle”.

Even at the end of the life cycle, the expectation of a large funeral and the “after tears” party following the funeral, presents its own financial burdens. South African television is saturated with commercials for funeral insurance, many covering the after tears party, and some of South Africa’s black middle class suggested, rather sheepishly, that the cost of funerals, even those covered by insurance plans, could be better invested in education. Attending funerals nevertheless remains culturally obligatory in many African cultures, even if Jacquemot (2012) observes these familial obligations as burdensome to the middle class, expending capital in ways that reinforce traditional (often rural) networks.
Illustratively, a commercial for Clientèle’s “Ultimate Dignity” funeral insurance plan, broadcast in South Africa in 2018, provides 200 ZAR (approximately 15 USD) daily phone credit to contact family. Claiming to attend a rural funeral is one of the most common excuses for begging money on South African streets, and whether this is legitimate or not it is a chance for both parties to demonstrate Ubuntu.

It is not only middle-class youth anxious over supporting their parents without excessively sacrificing their own finances. Middle-class parents also face financial difficulties regarding their children’s education. In addition to overly indebted “house slaves” and “car slaves”, Chinese parents can become “children’s slaves”, weighed down by the cost of education. This anxiety impacts moderately prosperous middle-class parents particularly, as illustrated by reforms to South Africa’s student bursary scheme in late 2017. At the time, bursaries were limited to university students from families earning a maximum of 122,000 ZAR per year (approximately 9,000 USD), the approximate income of a junior police officer or teacher. By entering the lower middle class, millions of black South African public sector workers found their children excluded from financial support at university. As older members of South Africa’s black middle class generally benefited from their own parents financially supporting their education (James, 2015, p 40), the possibility of their own children suffering downward mobility was deeply concerning.

The announcement in late 2017 by former South African Jacob Zuma that bursaries would be extended to students from families earning a maximum of 350,000 ZAR per year (approximately 26,000 USD), was quite revealing about the state of the black middle class. On the basis of this policy shift, we can suggest a moderately prosperous family in South Africa is earning somewhere between approximately 9,000 and 26,000 USD per year, albeit more likely on the lower end of the continuum; able to live with some comfort, but little luxury. Curiously, the term used in Zuma’s announcement was “fully subsidised free higher education and training for poor and working class South Africans” (South African Presidency, 2017). The phrase “poor and working class” is repeated eighteen times in the policy announcement, but the problem the policy sought to resolve was middle-class anxiety, specifically, as Tsang (2014, pp. 110-11) observes in the Chinese context, how to use education to reproduce their class status. Rather than a policy for the “poor and working class”, this was a policy for the middle class to avoid becoming working class, evidence of a status anxiety foundational to theorisations of the middle class ever since Marx and Engels’ (1848) described a petty bourgeoisie anxious about being “hurled down into the proletariat.”
Conclusion

This article has made theoretical and empirical advances in the study of the new middle class in (South) Africa and China, in particular, by continuing to adapt the Chinese concept of xiaokang (moderate prosperity) to the study of Africa. Beginning with a critical overview of qualitative and quantitative measures of the middle class, it was argued that, notwithstanding legitimate empirical critiques of the discourse of the African middle class, an approximate middle class “in itself” is observable through lifestyle practices. In developing adaptations of xiaokang, it was argued that notable acts of distinction between the moderately prosperous and the affluent middle class are evident. This article drew on Franco Moretti’s literary history to emphasize comfort as the key material value of the moderately prosperous, in contrast to the affluent middle class emphasizing luxury, also appreciable through Chinese notions of quality (suzhi) which the middle class considers itself to embody.

Through empirical analysis, with a focus on the cultural sphere, this article has explored the anxieties and tensions, amounting to productive contradictions, between cultural values among the Chinese and South African middle class, notably between the desire for individual prosperity and self-creation, on the one hand, and familial and social obligation, on the other hand. It is arguable that these productive contradictions reflect, at a deeper level, tensions between individualism and tradition expressed in Chinese Confucianism and southern African Ubuntu constitutive of emerging Chinese and African modernities. This article has also explored empirical examples of class-based distinction articulated in consumerist lifestyles, and more problematically, economic anxieties over maintaining and reproducing middle-class status were also analysed, focusing on education and the “black tax” in South Africa. It was nevertheless noted that both South Africa and China are governed by parties with massive middle-class membership, with concerns expressed at the highest level over the anxieties each country’s middle class experiences, and alleviatory measures introduced.

Acknowledgements:

Abraham’s research in South Africa was funded by the Academy of Finland through the research grant The Morality of Success among the Emerging Black Middle Class in South Africa (Chief Investigator: Tuulikki Pietilä); Liu’s period as a Visitor at ANU’s Humanities Research Centre was funded by Shanxi University’s School of Philosophy and Sociology.
References


Kharas, Homi (2010). *The emerging middle class in developing countries.* Paris: OECD.


Lu, Hanlong (2010). The Chinese middle class and xiaokang society. In Li Cheng (Ed.) *China’s emerging middle class: Beyond

ed


