

## **Is China on the Cusp of a Middle-Class Revolt?**

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On June 24, as the world reeled from the news that British citizens had voted to withdraw from the European Union, China's state-run news service Xinhua published comments citing the outcome of the June 23 referendum as evidence that the West's vaunted democratic system was powerless to defend against the rising influence of nationalism and right-wing extremism.

There is no arguing with the proposition that democracy has its shortcomings. But surely another key factor behind the growing influence of nationalism and right-wing extremism in Britain is the economic inequity that has squeezed the working and middle class, fomenting political instability and undermining democracy. Viewed from this standpoint, China is scarcely immune to the forces that are challenging political leaders in Britain and elsewhere.

Commenting on the Brexit vote, Hokkaido University Professor Ken Endo writes, "The European Union lacks the legitimacy to overturn the holy trinity of nationalism, democracy, and state sovereignty. Even though the European Council is directly elected by popular vote, its democratic legitimacy is extremely tenuous, given that voter turnout has fallen as the council's powers have grown." The EU is not a state but a regional federation of states, Endo stresses. When a majority of the people in its member states reject the federation and express their will through the democratic process, there is no way to stem the tide. This is what happened in Britain's referendum.

Of course, China differs from the EU in many respects, most notably its form of government. Nonetheless, I believe Endo's basic assessment could also be applied to the central government of the People's Republic of China. Does this government have any more legitimacy in the eyes of the average Chinese citizen than the European Council does for the average British voter? Even though the international community recognizes the People's Republic of China as a unified sovereign state, it seems to me that Endo's characterization of the EU as a regional federation lacking the legitimacy of a democratic state also describes the situation in the People's Republic of China.

The lack of a unified social security system in China exacerbates the economic disparities between the prosperous provinces and the less advantaged regions. Moreover, under the *hukou* system, which has remained largely impervious to reform, one's residence is fixed and passed down to one's children. This means that the social services one is eligible to receive, as well as the educational opportunities on which social and economic betterment depend, are essentially determined at birth. While some people succeed in changing their *hukou* to a locale that offers better services and opportunities thanks to academic or career achievements, their numbers are extremely limited. These inequities are fostering a situation in which residents of Beijing or Shanghai value their local identity over their national identity, just as British citizens recently decided they valued their national identity over their identity as Europeans.

When I first undertook fieldwork in rural China in the mid-1990s, the villagers I spoke to frequently described themselves as "backward" in comparison to "a well-educated city dweller" like myself. They seemed all too aware of their educational disadvantages, yet at that time they seemed undaunted. They still bought into the notion that the New China held almost limitless opportunities for advancement for those that were willing to study hard. Now these people feel they have been deceived, and their frustration is turning into resentment toward the government.

In contrast, the urban middle class has flourished. But as the economy contracts and the government moves to adjust its social policies, members of this class are becoming keenly aware of real and imagined threats to their vested interests. It remains to be seen how an increasingly divided China responds to these socioeconomic challenges.