Preface

Discussion of China’s middle class is almost ubiquitous, yet the idea is both poorly conceptualized and for the most part empirically untested. Within China there is a tendency to operationalize the notion of the middle class as though it were a Marxist class concept. Outside China there is a tendency to describe all changes of China’s Reform Era as leading to the development of that country’s middle class, and with it the inevitability of market capitalism and liberal democracy. Reform has certainly increased the size of China’s middle class since 1978. At the same time, there is really no single middle class but a series of middle classes. These different middle classes clearly represent a variety of examples of social stratification with different identities and behavioural characteristics. There is, however, little in their behaviour to suggest a propensity for radical socio-political change, let alone a predisposition to either market capitalism or liberal democracy.

This volume concentrates on the behaviour and identity of different elements of China’s middle classes in order to analyse the dynamic processes of socio-political change of which they are part. It follows Chinese practice in including entrepreneurs alongside managers, professionals, administrators, intellectuals and teachers as part of the growing middle class. It also follows the practices of analysis outside China in identifying the middle class as much by its consumption – notably of housing, education and lifestyle – as by its place in the class structure. The picture of China’s middle class that emerges is one that is inherently complex, but it is one that places the middle class at the centre of the social and political establishment.

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