Poor Attitudes towards the Poor

The Little Match Girl.

Conceptions of Poverty among the Rich and Powerful in China

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Besides being increasingly unequal, Chinese society is saturated with status-consciousness. In such a context, what kinds of attitudes do people situated on the top rung of the social ladder hold towards people on the bottom rung? Through a series of interviews with individuals belonging to the top 1 percent of the Chinese population in financial terms, this essay considers how rich people around the country view the poorer segments of society and perceive their responsibility towards them.

In primary school, nearly every Chinese child reads Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Match Girl', a short story that is supposed to foster empathy for the poor. Chinese children also read Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk*, a novel that explains that poor people are noble, kind, and compassionate, always willing to help others despite their tremendous difficulties in life. While these stories are meant to teach the Chinese youth to be empathetic, respectful, and kind to the less fortunate, in practice these ideas have frequently remained secondary to social status and one's position in the social hierarchy.

Chinese society is no doubt saturated with status-consciousness. In such a context, what kinds of attitudes do people situated on the top rung of the social ladder hold toward people on the bottom rung? After all, 'poverty

alleviation' is one of the government's chief policy priorities and charity work is also taking place on a large scale in the public sphere (see Snape's op-ed in the present issue).

With this question in mind, in 2018 I conducted a series of interviews with a couple dozen rich people around the country, asking about their views of, and perceived responsibility for, the poorer segments of society. The latest Hurun report on Chinese wealth, released in November 2018, provides a relatively clear definition of the rich in mainland China. In it, the 'rich or high-net-worth families' (高净值家庭) are described as those with investable assets of more than six million yuan. In 2018, China had about 3.2 million such high-net-worth families, with an average of three members each. This means that, in total, there were nearly ten million rich people in China, less than 1 percent of the population. With this frame of reference in mind, those people I interviewed belonged to the top 1 percent, and were involved in businesses as diverse as restaurants, investment companies, and real estate.

Voices from the New Rich

The ways in which the rich discussed the poor was shocking. Of particular surprise was the way the rich repeated themes found in the Party propaganda. Many of my questions focussed on the draconian campaigns of mass evictions of migrant workers in Beijing in late 2017 (Li et al. 2019). Some of them knew about the eviction campaign, and some had heard about it for the first time from me.

One of my interviewees was a so-called *fu'erdai* (富二代)—a second-generation rich person—who was educated for several years in the United States and is now running a restaurant and several investment companies at the same time. Well informed about the eviction campaign, he thought that the official media should not have called these migrant

workers 'low-end population' (低端人口), but rather 'low-end employees' (低端产业从业人员). He believed that the government should not have evicted the migrant workers in the middle of winter, but he did agree that it was necessary to drive them away. In his opinion, Beijing had now reached a developmental stage in which this type of worker would no longer be needed. From his point of view, this kind of eviction campaign was an unavoidable side effect of city development, and some changes were necessary to secure further progress. From this perspective the impoverishment of the migrant workers was a natural, and unsolvable, side effect of development.

Another *fu'erdai* I spoke with had taken over his father's business after coming back from Canada, where he had stayed for nearly ten years. He saw himself as a an 'inter-disciplinary talent' (复合型人才) belonging to the elite class (精英阶层). He was fiercely class conscious and believed that the elite class consisted of people possessing a sense of responsibility for making transformative changes in today's Chinese society. In commenting on the evictions in Beijing, he compared the poor to a tumour on society: 'It does not help to treat a tumour by taking medicine only. It takes surgery to take out the tumour and then heal it. What is unbearable for the society is that some people become like "rice bugs" (米虫) [a much-hated pest in China].' This man told me that the poor are people 'who have no social responsibility and sacrificial spirit, and that they are lazy hedonists (吃喝玩乐), acting like destructive pests and taking away profit from the society.'

Another respondent—a self-made successful businessman in his early fifties—also commented on the 'low-end population'. He thought the evictions were legitimate since Beijing did not need these migrants any longer. He was very much in line with the decision of evicting the migrants even in the middle of winter, assuming that they must have been lazing around without doing any proper work and having a negative impact on society.

Two propaganda cartoons. On the left, a fat lazy poor farmer is thinking about the poverty alleviation policy of the government. On the right, the government spoon—carrying the characters for ‘aiding the poor’ (扶贫) is feeding another fat lazy poor person.

A fourth interviewee—a rugs-to-riches businessman in his mid-fifties—thought eviction meant progress. He did not deem the evictions as an extreme campaign, but as a necessary way of pushing through good policies. In his words: ‘It is of no use to discuss things: only extreme methods will get things done because the population of China is too huge.’ This comment made me think of Robert Moses (1888–1981), an American city planner and official regulator famous for his brutal plans for transforming New York City, especially the Bronx area. One of the most polarising figures in the history of urban development in the United States, he is described vividly in Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. One of Moses’s favourite slogans was: ‘You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs.’

On a related note, one young and successful businessman in his early thirties showed the least interest in charity among all the interviewees. He did not have any feeling for charity work and he told me that to help ‘the handicapped’ (残疾人) was illusory and disconnected from reality (虚无缥缈). Asked to comment on the ‘low-end population’, he answered: ‘I have my own logical understanding them. As a Chinese idiom says: “Those who are pitiful must be hateful” (可怜之人必有可恨之处). You reap what you sow. If you don’t

work hard, poverty will naturally come down on you.’ In the end, he told me that he always voluntarily filtered information about the poor, as he did not like reading this kind of news.

One interviewee used to practice as a dentist, but had now turned to business, running several companies. He had a very positive take on the poverty reduction programme promoted by the government. He pointed out what he thought to be the central problem of poverty: ‘Poverty usually is a matter of having the wrong mindset. The poor cannot be helped unless they strive to change their mindset.’ He basically believed that financial poverty is a less serious problem than a ‘poverty of the mind’. Throughout my interviews I found this tendency to emphasise mind over reality as a widespread pattern among the rich in today’s China.

Parrot Party Propaganda

Why do many rich people in contemporary China see the issue of poverty as a problem of mindset? Are they in denial so as to maintain their privileged position? Or are they just short of proper education on social issues? It is hard to say, but an analysis of Party propaganda

Two more propaganda cartoons. The one on the left mocks the idea of the burden of the poor by transforming the poor man's heavy bundle into a comfortable sofa. The second shows once again a fat poor worker with his shirt rolled up sitting in a sun-chair with a bottle of alcohol at this side.

provides some preliminary insights. Since at least 2005, official propaganda has systematically depicted the poor as 'sluggards' or 'lazybones' (懒汉). The *People's Daily* and *Xinhua* popularised this concept, making ugly caricatures about the poor peasants who just feed on government funds without making the slightest effort to lift themselves out of poverty. Following their lead, local newspapers across China scrambled to jump on the bandwagon, in what has clearly become an overwhelming, undeclared campaign from above to shape popular opinions of the poor.

Inequality in a society is generally measured by the Gini coefficient—a statistical measure of income/wealth distribution. China has travelled from the most equal—albeit very poor—society in the world in 1978 with a Gini of 0.18, to one of the most unequal societies today, with official statistics showing an income Gini of just under 0.5 and a wealth Gini of 0.73. World Bank estimates place China among the two or three most unequal societies in the world (AFP 2012). In such a context, the rich are powerful not only financially, but also normatively, acting as norm-setters and influencing how people from other social classes behave and react to social issues. In this light, the victim-blaming attitudes common among the financial elite seem to have effectively blinded a significant segment of Chinese society from seeing the

root causes of poverty. This has resulted in the demonisation of those people situated at the bottom of the social pyramid.

China is not alone in fostering this kind of anti-poor discourse. To cite an example, in 1965 Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan from the American Department of Labor published a report entitled 'The Negro Family'—a document that has come to be seen as a blatant attack on poor African Americans, giving birth to the expression 'blaming the poor'. Whether it is in the United States or China, the real problem is that blaming the 'lazy poor' allows the structural causes of poverty to be systematically neglected. Today it seems that the 'Chinese Dream' has become strangely entangled in some of the worst ideological biases of the old 'American Dream'. This is ironic considering 'common prosperity' (共同繁荣) is one of the most important 'core values' of the Socialist Core Values Campaign (社会主义核心价值观), which lies at the centre of the 'Chinese Dream'. In a significant departure from socialist values, the politics of poverty meant to achieve common prosperity described in this campaign centres on the idea of 'cultivating the lazy man' (养懒汉). With the legacy of the Moynihan report now paradoxically living on as a 'socialist core value' in China, the poor have simply been rebranded as 'lazy', and Andersen and Dostoevsky's stories have once again been reduced to fairy tales. ■