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UK’s Social Cleavage—Class Cleavage

In the heavily industrialized and purportedly democratic UK, there is a surprisingly large economic and social gap between the elite who lead the country and the regular citizen. The average parliament member has an average annual income of £135,600 while the average annual pay for a normal British citizen is just £26,500 (“Guide”). Also, studies show that half of the current cabinet and a third of the members of parliament were educated in selective and expensive private schools versus only 7% of the country (“Does”). The people who are part of the political machine in UK seem to belong to a completely different social and economic stratum compared to the rest of the citizens of UK. They were born into relatively well off families, went to “posh” old-school places of education, and go on to earn a lot more than the average person in Britain. More people from the upper middle class and above social tiers enter the political world than is proportional to their numbers within the entire UK population. In other words, social class significantly affects political participation in Britain.

In a similar manner, class is affecting political participation in China. There are three ways one can gain power and become a part of the decision making process in China. Becoming very rich is certainly the first way. As of currently, the top earning 20% of the Chinese population have incomes 18 times that of those in the lowest income group (Zhang). As in the UK, becoming a government or party official of any importance requires a solid financial background, but for different reasons. Bribery has become part of the culture in China, and those who cannot afford to pay to bribes will have a much harder time rising through the ranks. Besides that, money is also an essential part of Chinese politics because officials are expected to drive expensive cars, use products from famous international brands, and be able to foot the bill to lavish feasts when entertaining guests. The second way is to be a part of the old politically-influential families such as those of Mao’s and Mao’s old generals’. These old and established political families in China often see fathers pass their positions off to sons. For example, the current chairman of China, Xi Jinping, had a father who was once the Prime Minister of China. The father of Bo Xilai, who was recently charged with bribery, possessed the same level of political eminence as Xi’s. Both of these prominent Chinese politicians came from families that have established themselves within the political world in China. Last but not least, the only way for most ordinary people to become politically-influential is having “relationships” with the ones who are in charge, meaning the old political families. Thus, much like in Britain, the majority of the major players in Chinese politics come from a different social and economic class compared to the average Chinese citizen.

Compare to each other, we believe that China has more issues in terms of class cleavages. Since China has a much larger population and a relatively small representative’s number, the chance of an average citizen to get involved in high level of government decision making process is much less than that in United Kingdom. After all, there is still a small proportional of average citizens from average backgrounds who got into the parliament or government in UK.