

INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGENCE OF THE ASIAN MIDDLE CLASSES AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

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I. PERSPECTIVES, RESEARCH AGENDA, AND FOCUS

WHEN it was recognized that the latecomer countries of Asia successfully began their economic development in the 1970s and later, a debate began to take place as to who were the prime movers of economic growth. In connection with this discussion, attention began to be focused on the questions of how the “middle class”¹ emerged, and what characteristics it displayed. Subsequently, when the Asian countries with successful economic growth records became “democratized” in the 1980s and after, a new hypothesis suddenly gained wide circulation. Proponents of this hypothesis have claimed that the newly emerged “middle class” was the main thrust of the democratization movement. Identifying a unilinear chain of causal relationships among social developments, the hypothesis asserts that the intention to pursue modernization led to economic growth, giving rise in turn to the *middle class*, which spearheaded the democratization movement (Nakamura 1993; Huntington 1991).

This view, which tries to understand the rise of the “new middle class” in Asia in a unilinear way, is becoming an influential one (Sonoda 1998). In this special issue, however, we challenge this interpretation. Empirical data of the middle classes are presented here that make rough cross-national comparisons possible, allowing us to reexamine the characteristics of the Asian middle classes as well as the sociocultural backgrounds of economic development in Asia. This special issue approaches this task from the perspective of area studies, and rests on an awareness of the similarities and differences in the preconditions for economic growth and the emergence of middle classes in different countries of Asia. We realize that the Asian middle

¹ In this special issue, “middle class” and its plural form, “middle classes,” are used deliberately with a clear distinction in meaning between the two terms. The former is used when the social stratum in question is reminiscent of the existing middle class in Western society, while the latter is employed to connote the distinctive complex or compound social classes that are emerging in Asian countries. Furthermore, when the term “middle class” is italicized, it refers to the Western ideal type of the concept “middle class.”

classes hold basic similarities in common: they have risen out of very rapid economic development, and they share features that distinguish them from their Western counterparts. At the same time, we recognize that the characteristics of the Asian middle classes vary significantly from country to country, reflecting differences in the conditions of development.

Each of the following papers examines whether the unilinear view of historical development (with its single-minded contention that a chain of causal relationships ran directly from modernization to economic growth, then to the emergence of the *middle class*, and finally to democratization) holds true in a specific country or region of Asia. Together, the papers demonstrate how the Asian middle classes acquired diverse characteristics during the process of their emergence, by way of complex interactions among factors such as: the preconditions for development (i.e., social and political structures during the colonial period and at the time of independence); the way in which each pursued economic development and implemented social mobilization during its nation-state building process; and the pattern of rural-urban migration that accompanied economic development. The countries and regions dealt with in this special issue can be grouped into several types: Hong Kong and Singapore that are virtually without a rural hinterland; the Republic of Korea and Malaysia which have rural sectors and have experienced rapid rural-urban migration in the process of economic growth; and Thailand and the Philippines where rural-urban migration has proceeded rather slowly.

Taking into account our key concerns, this special issue does not deal with China, India, and Indonesia, the three most populous countries of Asia. China and India have been excluded because, as real latecomers that began to industrialize much more recently than the other countries of East and Southeast Asia, not much time has passed since their rapid economic development began. Thus, it seems premature to definitively discuss the social features of the middle classes in these two countries.² No discussion on the Indonesian middle classes is included because, owing to the persistent effects of the violent political and economic changes following the collapse of the Suharto regime, it seems too early to discuss the middle classes, whose social and political roles are still unstable.³

In recognition of the diversity of the Asian middle classes, the special issue refrains from hastily drawing an all-encompassing conclusion to the effect that the Asian middle classes can be characterized by any specific factor. Some of the indi-

² Furthermore, in discussing the middle classes in China and India, it is necessary to take into account the peculiar social institutions (the socialist regime and the caste system) that had a direct influence on the class structures prior to their industrialization. Thus, it may be more appropriate to deal with the new classes being formed in the two countries from the perspectives of studies on leaders and elites. It should be noted, however, that at least on China, some reliable empirical studies have begun to be published. For further details, see, for example, Sonoda (2001).

³ For an analysis of various aspects of the Indonesian middle classes during the days of the Suharto regime, see Tanter and Young (1990).

vidual papers examine whether the Western model of development, that relates the formation of the *middle class* to democratization, holds true in the countries concerned. However, the question is left untouched in this Introduction and in Hattori and Funatsu's paper, because we believe that an exhaustive discussion of the question would require another special issue. In the present special issue, put together employing the basic perspectives explained above, attention is focused on clarifying how the middle classes in various countries of Asia arose, and what characteristics they possess.

II. PREVIOUS STUDIES

In introducing this special issue, it is first necessary to critically review the existing studies that have been important in helping us to form our own views about the Asian middle classes.

Among previous studies of the topic, two main streams emerge. One consists of studies based on theories propounded by sociologists and political scientists of the West. The other consists of analysis based on the experiences of Asian countries. The former can be further broken down into modernization theory on social mobility and stratification, and theory influenced by Marxist class analysis. The middle class in emerging countries has attracted the attention of Seymour Lipset, Reinhard Bendix, Samuel P. Huntington, and some other proponents of modernization theory, all of whom have emphasized the relationship between modernization and political democratization. These authorities contend that along with an increase in a society's income level, improvements also occur in the educational level, rates of social mobility, and levels of political democratization. It is understood that the rising *middle class* universally embodies these improvements (Lipset 1960; Lipset and Bendix 1959; Huntington 1991; Glassman 1997). This view can be regarded as strongly supporting the schematic, unilinear chains of causal relationship mentioned above. In contrast, the theory influenced by Marxist class analysis emphasizes inter-class conflicts of interests, and asserts that the exploited, in the process of emerging as key agents of historical change, give rise to political changes, or create an intermediate space that opposes the state (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992). These two theories, both of Western origin, might seem to be mutually antagonistic, but they are predicated on a common assumption. Despite their disagreement on whether the middle class should be regarded as one that is stratified in the distribution structure of positional resources, or as one that is incorporated into a class by linkages of economic interests, the two theories share the assumption that a stratum or class of people, having attained economic homogeneity, begin to be united by similar political aspirations, and establish themselves as the agent of a collective political action (Hara and Seiyama 1999).

The other stream of previous studies consists of criticisms of these theories of

Western origin, raised by researchers of Asian political economies (Robison 1990; Fujiwara 1994; Tsunekawa 2000), or by researchers specializing in area studies (Robison and Goodman 1996; Rodan 1996b; Abdul Rahman Embong 2001). These critics point out that it is impossible to say, a priori, that a rise in the income level of a society leads to the creation of a force critical of the government, or of a "new middle class" heavily dependent on the government. They suggest, instead, that the Asian middle classes, even if they demand policies which would not harm their interests as "consumers," can become politically ambiguous or changeable when it comes to the question of "democratization" (Fujiwara 1994; Rodan 1996a; Abdul Rahman Embong 2001). These preexisting studies were concerned primarily with discussing the roles of the middle classes and the propriety of their roles at an abstract level. They showed little interest in empirically analyzing and comparing the characteristics of the Asian middle classes.

The most important existing study for our project has been the empirical research project carried out in Asian countries by the Academia Sinica, Taiwan, during the 1990s. In the early phase of the Academia Sinica's project, questionnaire surveys were conducted in Taipei, Seoul, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and the findings of the surveys were published in the form of a number of papers including Hsiao (1993, 1999). Subsequently, the survey areas were expanded to include urban districts of the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. As the first large-scale empirical research project on the middle classes ever conducted in the area concerned, it has given us a number of useful suggestions. Particularly inspiring were its conclusions, which we basically share: that the Asian middle classes, consisting mostly of the first-generation middle class, retain the values of their classes of origin, namely, farmers and workers; and that people belonging to the same income group do not necessarily harbor the same political consciousness.

However, the findings of the research project undertaken by the Academia Sinica, though full of useful suggestions, do not go farther than listing distinguishing features of the Asian middle classes. Thus, they fall short of probing into some of the important questions that we have addressed in this special issue, namely, how the process of emergence of and the characteristics of the middle classes in a country were affected by the pattern of compressed economic development, and by the preconditions for development in each of the countries concerned.

Subsequently, researchers including participants in the Academia Sinica's project published research findings that focused on the relationship between the role of the state and the middle classes (see, for instance, Abdul Rahman Embong 2001). However, many of these studies, too, fail to explain in concrete terms how the nature of the middle classes that emerged in a country was affected by the role of the state, or by the state-led developmental process. Consequently, they seem to have fallen short of presenting the kind of synthetic and comprehensive explanations about the emergence and characteristics of the middle classes that we have pursued in this spe-

cial issue. What we are attempting to accomplish is to explain more synthetically than hitherto the processes through which the diversities of the middle classes emerged.

Moreover, in view of the fact that the Asian middle classes began to be viewed somewhat skeptically or negatively in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, it is all the more important to gain a comprehensive understanding along the lines explained above. The crisis dealt severe blows in particular to the middle classes of Thailand and Korea, throwing many middle class people out of work and laying bare their vulnerability. This situation has been interpreted in two different ways. The mainstream interpretation has been that the Asian middle classes, which were still immature (Bell 1995), and too shaky and weak to sustain democratic institutions, allowed the crisis to take place because of their inability to control the government and force it to make political and economic management more transparent (Teranishi 1999). On the other hand, it has been pointed out as a counterargument, that evaluating whether the Asian middle classes are mature or immature according to Western standards is an irrational argument that overlooks the fact that they emerged through processes and from social backgrounds radically different from those of their Western counterpart and neglects the peculiar circumstances of each Asian society. However, this argument neither explains the peculiarities of Asian society in a sufficiently detailed way, nor logically examines the characteristics of the Asian middle classes.⁴

Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the emergence and characteristics of the Asian middle classes is necessary not only for understanding what they were like before the Asian financial crisis, but also for explaining why they proved to be so vulnerable to the impacts of the crisis and how the subsequent process of social reorganization has unfolded.

III. ANALYTICAL CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

While aiming to attain the objectives explained above, all the papers collected in this special issue use the common analytical method of looking at the middle classes from the perspective of status attainment, thereby ensuring rough comparability. Our approach is to focus attention on the fact that industrialization activates social mobility and status change in stratification structures. We define the middle classes as those which emerge as a result of such social mobility and status attainment (Tumin 1967; Treiman 1977). Moreover, these papers take into account the fact that the prestige and role image assigned to the middle classes vary from one Asian society to another, reflecting the different ways in which various societies have been modernized.

⁴ The book edited by Abdul Rahman Embong (2001) is one of the few treatises on the Asian middle classes published after the Asian financial crisis.

Some analyses have been made on the assumption that several different categories of the middle classes exist (Hsiao 1999, pp. 41–45; Abdul Rahman Embong 2001). More specifically, the middle classes can be broken down into several sub-categories: the “new middle class” (consisting of salaried professional, technical, administrative, and managerial white-collar workers who have special skills and expertise), the “old middle class” (consisting of small proprietors and the self-employed), and the “marginal middle class” (consisting of salaried, nonmanual routine clerical workers and personal service workers). The extent of status reproduction for each subcategory, the degree of its coherence as a class/stratum, and whether or not it has its own class culture varies from one society to the next. In many cases the “new middle class” is assigned with a distinct status, and is highly coherent among the middle classes, while the “old and the marginal middle classes” consist of the strata with more ordinary nonmanual status.

Consequently, the operational definition of the middle classes in this special issue is essentially based on a revised class scheme by the Academia Sinica on East Asia (a modified version of the class scheme proposed by John Goldthorpe, the standard scheme in the West), with minor additional adjustments made to suit the situations of the countries under study (Table I).

TABLE I
CLASS SCHEME USED IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The Original Scheme as Proposed by Goldthorpe		Revised Asian Class Scheme by the Academia Sinica	
I	Higher-grade professionals, administrators, and officials	I	Capitalist
II	Lower-grade professionals, administrators, and officials	II	New middle class
IIIa	Routine nonmanual employees	IIIa+b	Marginal middle class
IIIb	Personal service workers		
IVa	Small proprietors, artisans, etc., with employees	IVa+b	Old middle class
IVb	Small proprietors, artisans, etc., without employees		
IVc	Farmers and small holders, etc.	IVc+VIIb	Farmers/agricultural workers
VIIb	Agricultural workers		
V	Lower-grade technicians and supervisors of manual workers	V+VI+VIIa	Working class
VI	Skilled manual workers		
VIIa	Semiskilled and unskilled manual workers		

Sources: Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992, pp. 38–39) and Hsiao (1999, pp. 6–9).

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

For details on how the following conclusions were reached, we would like to refer the readers to Hattori and Funatsu's paper, and to the papers of other individual contributors. In this introductory paper, we will briefly summarize the conclusions and the arguments of each paper contained in the issue.

As mentioned above, one theme that runs through this special issue is the question involving the processes through which the Asian middle classes emerged, and the characteristics they possess. The entire volume is united in the belief that without understanding such characteristics, it would be difficult to discuss the social and political roles of the middle classes.

It should be pointed out at the outset that the process of modernization and economic growth in Asia has shown distinctly different characteristics from those followed by Western societies, which are supposed to serve as a reference point. The difference has derived from the fact that the modernization of Asia, unlike that of the West which took place gradually over several centuries, began at later points in time and took place in a much shorter span of time in the form of "compressed industrialization." Furthermore, with the exceptions of Japan and Thailand, the countries under study experienced colonial rule by the great powers of the West. Colonial rule had a sort of modernizing effect, to be sure, but it was not until after World War II that most of the newly independent nation-states, convinced that economic growth could be their own *raison d'être*, began to modernize in earnest. In their efforts to attain growth targets, they often instituted within their borders what can be called authoritarian, developmentalist regimes. The international environment was also conducive to the establishment of such regimes. This was particularly the case during the cold war period, when the superpowers competed in providing aid to these countries.

These countries (or regions) have experienced economic growth for only thirty or forty years, or for one generation or two at most, and have grown at a very rapid pace. It should be noted that Japan's experience is distinctly different from those of other Asian countries, in the sense that it boasts a relatively longer history of modernization and economic growth, spanning well over a hundred years, and that its state structure was reshaped almost completely following its defeat in World War II.⁵

⁵ There was a major discontinuity in the Japanese process of class formation between the prewar and the postwar eras. The theories of the "new middle masses" and the "middle strata," the most influential theories of the middle class in Japan, often make much of the facts that a large percentage of Japanese share a sense of equality and that the differential in lifetime income among people of different strata is relatively small. However, these facts are applicable only to the period of rapid economic growth and after in the postwar era. Another factor of importance that accounts for the

In Asia, as a result of compressed industrialization, some people from the rural areas migrated to the cities either to find jobs or to receive education, while many remained where they were. As a result of this rural-urban migration, the middle classes in the cities first became “mergers of different social origins,” as pointed out by the research findings of the Academia Sinica. Moreover, urban residents of a particular generation, having migrated to the cities and having left their parents in the countryside, still strongly retain their rural values. It is too early to determine whether they will evolve into an urban-based class through “intra-class marriages,” but at present they have neither a class consciousness nor a class culture of their own.

The Asian middle classes studied in this special issue cannot, at present, be characterized as similar to the class presented in the Western model, which is distinct from other strata in terms of culture and consciousness (Giddens 1973), nor as similar to the “new middle masses” of the Japanese model, which are without any distinct status or symbol of their own (Murakami 1984). In this respect, the Asian middle classes can only be portrayed, at least for the time being, as “intermediate strata” situated between the lower and upper strata.

The Asian middle classes share these features to a significant extent, but the actual form of the middle classes in one country clearly differs from the form of those in another, depending on a number of factors. These include the preconditions for modernization, the process of economic growth (and, in particular, the pace of development and the way in which rural-urban labor migration takes place), policy programs pursued by the government, and environmental conditions. Thus, by way of brief outlines of the articles that make up the issue, let us demonstrate how these differences underlie the diversity of the Asian middle classes.

Arita’s paper on the Republic of Korea presents a case study of the rise of the middle class in a country where a combination of massive rural-urban labor migration that took place amidst a compressed industrialization process, and rapid diffusion of education, gave rise to a process of social mobility that was strongly characterized by mergers among people of different social origins. These mergers produced a peculiar stratification structure, peculiar because important paths for upward mobility encompass not only mobility from the old middle class to the new middle class, but also from the workers and farmers to the old middle class (in the form of intra-generational mobility as well as inter-generational mobility). Furthermore, the low barriers to upward mobility seem to be part of the explanation for why the middle class in Korea finds it difficult to nurture a culture of its own.

discontinuity between the prewar and the postwar eras is the existence in the prewar era of an elitist middle class with a distinct social status, as typically portrayed by the theory of the uptown middle class (Murakami 1984). Given these factors, it is not easy to compare the middle classes of Japan and Asia using the same taxonomical criteria. The question of how to compare these middle classes needs to be considered more carefully, by looking into the possibility of comparing them with those of the West.

Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia differ sharply from Korea in the sense that an understanding of the middle classes of these countries must take into account the preconditions for their modernization, including their independence and subsequent political changes, as well as their characteristics as nation-states and former colonial cities.

First, Lui's paper on Hong Kong elucidates how the preconditions for the emergence of the new middle class (namely, the history of Hong Kong from its days as a colonial city to its return to China) were instrumental in shaping the Hong Kong middle class's reluctance to act politically on its own initiative. In Hong Kong, where there is no agricultural hinterland, the new middle class came into existence when immigrant workers rapidly moved upward. The paper portrays Hong Kong's new middle class as people who, while being very eager to pursue economic interests, are so politically inactive that they even take recourse to the strategy of "exit" from Hong Kong.

Tamura's paper on Singapore also emphasizes the political inactivity of the middle class in a city-state which, like Hong Kong, does not have a hinterland. In the case of Singapore, the government-dominated political system and its policies for the nurturing of the elite middle class are identified as the main reasons for the political alienation of the middle class. So as to safeguard the existence and political stability of a small city-state, the political regime led by the ruling People's Action Party has actively pursued policies for human resource development as well as educational policies aimed at nurturing a new middle class and treating it favorably. Having come into existence with strong government backing, the Singaporean middle class is willing to support the government insofar as it maintains rapid economic growth and ensures material wealth, but is very skeptical about the possibility of democratizing the country.

Torii's paper shows that in the multiethnic state of Malaysia, the most salient feature of the middle classes stems from the government's strong initiative in nurturing one particular ethnic group, the Malays. In devising its economic policies, the government has regarded middle-class Malays as the main agents of economic growth, even though the definition of the middle classes and the contents of the policies for nurturing them have changed with time. Recognizing that the Malaysian middle classes have been nurtured primarily by the government, the paper makes it clear that at least until 1999, they remained politically conservative.

Funatsu and Kagoya's paper on Thailand focuses on a peculiar feature of development of Thailand. In the context of a relatively large rural sector, rural-urban migration has remained circulative, in the sense that migrants from the rural areas have found it difficult to settle in the city and have returned to their home villages. The paper probes into the characteristics of the middle classes which emerged under such an environment. More specifically, it points out that, having emerged in a situation in which there was a strong concentration of opportunities for upward mobil-

ity (such as educational opportunities) in the cities, and in particular in the capital, the middle classes are characterized above all by having risen from the lower urban social strata. At the same time, the Thai middle classes, though having experienced extensive mergers among different social origins, are essentially homogeneous in terms of educational credentials.

Finally, Kimura's paper on the Philippines discusses how the country's developmental process, characterized by slow industrialization and by a rate of growth in the modern sector that was not sufficient to absorb an abundant pool of labor, has affected the characteristics of the country's middle classes and their political roles. Having emerged from this slow industrialization process, the middle classes are relatively small and exhibit a low degree of coherence. These features affect the political roles they play. Despite being in a position to challenge traditional politics by presenting a new pattern of political participation, their low degree of class coherence has led them constantly to play games of alignment and realignment, as a result of which they have failed to wield strong enough political influence.

As is evident from these summaries, differences among Asian countries with regard to the preconditions for development, development policies, and the preexisting social structures, have far-reaching effects on the characteristics of their middle classes, and even affect their political attitudes.

It is only recently that comprehensive and comparative studies on the Asian middle classes have been launched. It will require considerable effort to understand both the common characteristics as well as the diversity of the Asian middle classes from multiple perspectives. Such a task will require understanding the realities of Asia so that the middle classes can be placed in their specific regional context without applying the experiences and the models of the West simply-mindedly. This special issue represents a humble first step toward that goal.

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