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THE MIDDLE CLASS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: DIVERSITIES, IDENTITIES, COMPARISONS AND THE VIETNAMESE CASE

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ABSTRACT

Much interest has been devoted since the 1980s to the new urban, educated middle class in Southeast Asia which has emerged primarily as a result of state-led modernization and capitalist transformation. These processes have also been occurring recently in the former centralized socialist economies of Southeast Asia mainland. However, there has not been a great deal of comparative region-wide research on the new middle class and we still know very little about such countries as Vietnam. As Lui proposes we must explore the "richness of class analysis….by probing people's values, outlook, lifestyles, moral perspectives, perceptions of social change and political choices" (2006: 47). As part of a research project which examines the diversities and changing identities of the new middle class in the region, this paper presents some initial thoughts on the problems of defining and delimiting the middle orders of society and some preliminary findings on the young educated middle class in the hitherto neglected case of Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

The Educated and Consuming Class?

During the last two decades, academic interest has increasingly been expressed in the **new urban middle class** in Southeast Asia as an important component of 'the new rich' (Robison & Goodman 1996a, 1996b; Abdul Rahman Embong 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d, 2002, 2006a, 2006b; Earl 2004; Hattori, Funatsu & Torii 2003; Hsiao 1993, 1999, 2001, 2006; Hsiao & Wang 2001; Mulder 1979, 1983, 1989, 1990, 1998, 2004; Ockey 1999; Pinches 1996, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 1999d; Rodan 1996; Sen & Stivens 1998; Thompson 2007). This paper presents some preliminary thoughts and findings arising from a social research programme in which I am currently engaged which comprises a comparative study of Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, focusing on the provincial middle classes in Malaysia (Sarawak and Sabah) and Thailand, whilst gathering some basic data on Vietnam with

a view to expanding the study to embrace provincial communities there. The Vietnamese case is especially interesting because of the opening up of the country to market relations following *doi moi* (renovation) and the emergence of a new middle class since the 1980s. It is important to establish whether or not the middle class there demonstrates significant differences from the more developed and established market economies of the region.

Following a discussion of the main characteristics and definitional problems of the middle class in Southeast Asia, there is an examination of some significant aspects of the young professional middle class in Vietnam, which has not figured in comparative discussions of middle class issues in the region to any extent (King, Nguyen & Nguyen 2008). Defined primarily by the acquisition and deployment of an advanced level of education and specialist knowledge, the emergence of a new middle class is the product of rapid transformations in the organization of developing societies and the demand for people with new skills and expertise in fast-changing market-oriented economies (Hewison 1996: 142–145; Rodan et al. 2001, 2006). In Asia, it has also been largely a state-generated phenomenon primarily from the 1970s. This focus on education and knowledge does not exhaust the criteria which have been used to locate and define the middle class, as we shall discuss in a moment.

Mulder in his important comparative cultural studies of Indonesia (Java), Thailand and the Philippines, notes that since the 1970s the emergence of "a quantitatively impressive, new middle stratum...whose members are the product of novel conditions that shape their lives and outlook, their culture and political demands" (1998: 99). He draws attention to the important difference between this new stratum and earlier educated generations in Southeast Asia who went to university and college 'as a matter of privilege' and often because of the advantages provided by an already established position within colonial and early post-independent society. He argues that more recently those who acquire higher education do so primarily for 'professional and career considerations' and they are consumers par excellence in pursuit of new lifestyles; they 'consume' media products, housing, cars, electrical and electronic ware, fashion and luxury goods, cuisine, entertainment, tourism and educational services (Ibid: 100–101; Robison & Goodman 1996b: 1; Abdul Rahman Embong 2006a: 160, 2001a).

Education and buying power are closely linked. But more than this modernity is increasingly about consumption practices, and consumption is a vital element of status, image construction, identity and the everyday experience of class (Rappa 2002: 2, 38, 196; Kahn 1991, 1992). Chua refers to the consumer as an 'active creator' of cultural meanings and involved in

processes of identity formation (2000a, 2000b). Consumption also has political consequences and objectives in the context of what we increasingly refer to as 'cultural politics' or 'identity politics' (see Heryanto 1999: 178–179; Young 1999: 57). With specific reference to Singapore, where the middle class, though of mainly recent origin, is well established, Tamura issues a word of warning to the effect that "perhaps more pressing for both the middle class and the government is the dilemma posed by the paramountcy of materialism that has become the preoccupation of the middle class" (2003: 198). The emergence of the middle class is also a profoundly gendered process, and in the construction of lifestyles, women, with their important role in consumption decisions and as socialization agents, are crucial actors (Stivens 1998a: 2–9, 13–17, 1998b; Earl 2004).

PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

We therefore have a primary focus on education levels and styles of consumption which feed into considerations of status difference, but even so defining the middle class is no easy matter (King 2008: 95–106). It is complicated by attempts to translate Western-derived concepts of social structure to non-Western contexts (Stivens 1998a: 15–17; 1998b: 94–95). However, Max Weber's tripartite classification of class, status and power seems to be the most flexible analytical framework and the one most amenable to translation (Béteille 1969; Bottomore 1965; Dahrendorf 1969; Ossowski 1963, 1969; Runciman 1969; Schmidt et al. 1998a, 1998b; Turner 1978). Nevertheless, Dhakidae, who is not alone in his conclusions about the middle class in Southeast Asia, has stated that, specifically in the Indonesian context, the issue of its conceptualization is 'confusing' and 'complex' (2001: 476–485; but see Dick 1985; Barnes 2004). Hattori et al. propose even more strongly that "the Asian middle classes….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" (2003: 136).

The New Rich

In my view, the problems of delineating the middle class for Robison and Goodman are not resolved by lumping them together with the bourgeoisie (or capitalists) in an even more indeterminate category (which is clearly not a class) of 'the new rich'—"a diverse and fractured social force" (Robison & Goodman 1996b: 3, 5–7). Although superficially attractive as a concept

since it captures some aspects of the consequences of the rapid rates of economic growth in Asia along with increasing consumerism and the spread of certain global cultural values, practices and lifestyles, it seems to pose more difficulties than offering solutions. Indeed, within this partly wealth-defined and income-defined category, Robison and Goodman indicate that there is a significant distinction between the bourgeoisie, as owners of capital, and the 'professional middle classes' as 'possessors of managerial and technical skills' (Ibid: 5; Torii, 2003: 230–231, 234–235, 240). Their concept of the middle class, unlike that of the bourgeoisie as owners of capital, is also defined more in terms of Weberian notions of market capacity (and of occupation, housing, lifestyle and education) and not in terms of the ownership and non-ownership of the means of production (Hsiao & Wang 2001: 5–8; Pinches 1996: 123; Hutchinson 2001: 54–55; 1993). In any case, in the Robison and Goodman edited volume (1996a), one gets the impression of a relatively high degree of indeterminateness, diversity and fluidity of the 'new rich', which may not be helpful in analysis.

Furthermore, Pinches, in his latest edited book on the 'cultural construction' of the Asian new rich, explicitly draws attention both to the problematical nature of the 'new rich' conceptually and analytically, and also to the need to embellish and reposition the political economy analyses of Robison and Goodman with Weberian considerations of self-identity, status and class experiences (1999b: 6–7). It is essential to examine the inte-rconnections between values, meanings, lifestyles and interpersonal conduct on the one hand with political and economic processes on the other (see Young 1999: 56). We therefore need to sharpen our analytical categories rather than simply expand them.

Boundaries and Subdivisions: One Class or Many?

In situations of considerable upward and downward social mobility, there is not only a problem in deciding where the boundaries of the middle class reside (and see Funatsu & Kagoya 2003: 260; Koo 2006: 9–10) but also what subdivisions might be located within the middle orders of society. Robison, for example, perhaps with a note of despair in his desire to pursue a political economy and class analysis, refers to the middle class as 'a vast and internally undifferentiated social category with differing sets of interests and relationships with other social and political forces' (1998: 61; Hewison 1996: 143; Saravanamuttu & Loh 2004: 355–358). Indeed some observers like Kahn prefer the plural form 'middle classes' to reflect this considerable diversity and internal differentiation (1991: 50–56, 1996: 71–72). Torii proposes that the term 'middle classes' should be used 'to connote the

distinctive complex or compound social classes that are emerging in Asian countries', as distinct from the apparently more solidary middle class of the West (2003: 221). Others, often of a Marxist and political economy persuasion, talk of 'fractions' of the middle class in relation to differences in consumption and leisure practices, and in income and occupation (Paritta 2002: 237). These, to some degree, map onto Kahn's multiple middle classes (Higgott & Robison 1985a, 1985b; Rodan et al. 2001). Evers, on the other hand, has attempted to overcome this problem of the complexity and the rapidity with which new class formations have been emerging in Southeast Asia from the 1970s by developing the concept of 'strategic groups'; some of the similarities between 'strategic groups', the 'class fractions' of neo-Marxist political economists and Kahn's middle classes should be noted (Evers 1980: 247–261).

Cross-country Diversity

When we turn to examine the differences and similarities across countries in the region, then the situation becomes even more complicated. In some cases, like Singapore, it would seem that for some observers, almost everyone is considered to be middle class, and, in others, like Brunei, it would appear that no one is. Again this is the result not just of the complexity of the category and the differences in experiences across the region, but also of variations in definition and emphasis on political, economic, social or cultural criteria. For example, despite claims that Singapore is a relatively homogeneous 'middle class society', Tan discerns at least four classes, which, in terms of such criteria as income and occupation, he refers to as 'upper', 'middle', 'working' and 'lower' or 'poor', though he accepts that the majority of Singaporeans, both objectively and subjectively can be categorized as 'middle class', on the basis of low unemployment, and high rates of literacy and social mobility (2004: 1–19). Again mainly using income and occupation, Chua differentiates the Singapore population into a 'techno-bureaucratic elite', 'middle management' and 'independent operators in the private sector', 'production and labouring workers' and 'those who continue to live in poverty' (1997: 95). In this scheme, Chua (1997) discerns two categories, namely middle management and independent operators in the private sector, which are often included in the middle class. On the other hand, Gunn (1993, 1997), in his study of Brunei society, where the level of income and education in well-funded public sector employment suggest a situation, in some respects similar to Singapore, Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia, manages to conclude that, though 'a new consuming class' has emerged there, it does not

constitute a middle class. He reaches this conclusion because he questions whether this new class of higher earners and consumers in Brunei 'is supported by the integuments of civil society matched by the emergence of truly autonomous institutions', and he then responds to his own question in the negative (1993, 1997: 228). His criteria therefore are based not merely on education, income, occupation and lifestyle, but on political considerations and evidence of processes of democratization. He concludes that in Brunei there is 'an underdeveloped civil society characterized by low political inputs, low political participation, and seemingly low political consciousness' (1997: xxii). Therefore, by his definition there is no middle class.

There is a further complication where through economic exigencies members of the middle class undertake jobs which are not customarily associated with that class. For example, in the case of the Philippines, large numbers of educated, middle class Filipinos are working in manual occupations overseas because of the lack of opportunities at home and the better remuneration, often in richer countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei, where migrant workers can still release funds to repatriate to the Philippines (Bautista 2006a: 178–180, 2006b: 192–193).

With regard to the development and the origins of the new middle class from the 1970s, there are also variations between countries (Hsiao 1999, 2001). It has been discovered that the parents of over half of the new Malaysian middle class were 'mostly farmers, workers or lower-rung white collar employees' (Abdul Rahman Embong 2006b: 133). However, the percentage from this background was much lower in Thailand, with only about a fifth from lower class households; in addition the new middle class were heavily concentrated in Bangkok (a similar situation was found in the Philippines with a concentration in Manila), with the majority from various segments of the middle class itself, particularly the old middle class. In Indonesia, the overwhelming majority of the current middle class are apparently themselves from middle class backgrounds (Hsiao & Wang 2001: 8–12). These different origins may well have a significant influence on the attitudes and values of the different members of the middle class.

One of the reasons for the results of Hsiao's research also appears to arise from the concentration of the research on major urban centres (Bangkok, Manila and Jakarta), where there would be a greater likelihood of the established middle class, especially those from the old urban middle class, reproducing themselves in the same or other segments of the middle class. Dhakidae suggests that because Jakarta has been 'the very centre of the process of [Indonesian] industrialization', this 'has given rise to a specific kind of Indonesian middle class' (2001: 509).

Finally, there has been considerable variation in the extent of recent growth of the 'new middle class' which has been at its greatest in Malaysia, with much lower levels in Indonesia and the Philippines. Furthermore, in the Philippines there was an early development of the middle class in the 1950s with the growth of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI), and even before that with the introduction of a system of mass public education by the Americans, but a much slower rate of growth subsequently (Bautista 2001a: 44–48; Kimura 2003: 266–267, 283; Rivera 2001: 209–210). The survey, which focused on Metropolitan Manila, revealed that about 70% of the informants had grown up in the capital; a significant number also claimed their origins in middle rather than lower class families (Bautista 2001b: 110–113). Kimura says that the Philippine middle class has 'a relatively small population' and they 'have developed through reproduction characteristics distinct from the agrarian population and working class' (2003: 283).

Political Diversity

The political orientations of the middle class also demonstrate considerable diversity. There is a noticeable ambivalence in middle class political attitudes in the region: It is this dimension which generates some of the most difficult problems of debate and definition. On the one hand, there has been a tendency for middle class elements to support the political status quo in order to maintain their material benefits, but on the other hand certain members of the middle class have at times seen themselves as supporters of democracy, playing a role in civil society and in social movements. The interesting issue which Ockey (2001) raises with regard to the Thai middle class (but it applies more generally in Southeast Asia) is the strong tendency 'to distrust the masses and to disparage their ability to function democratically' (1992, 2001: 330). Thus, the role of the lower classes in pro-democracy movements is erased or marginalized in middle class representations of these events and democracy becomes 'an elitist middle-class ideology' (Ibid.: 332; Funatsu & Kagoya 2003: 249–250).

These middle class political views and activities have been examined by Robison and Goodman's (1996a). They, and several of the contributors, draw attention to the participation of 'elements' of the middle class, along with members of other classes, in anti-government movements and protests to depose dictators and authoritarian rule. Members of the middle class may also develop interest group activities; they have lobbied governments on particular issues (the environment, heritage, social welfare), although they may not mount a serious and direct political challenge to a regime (Rodan

1993; Saravanamuttu 2001a: 107–108, 2001b; Saravana-muttu & Loh 2004: 371–373; Jones & Brown 1994, 1997; Rivera 2001: 210). However, the precise specification of these 'elements' is sometimes difficult to establish, though in the case of middle class activism in Thailand, Funatsu and Kagoya single out 'the intellectuals' (2003: 244).

Examples of middle class involvement in protest include that which contributed to Sukarno's demise in Indonesia in 1965–1966; the overthrow of Thanom Kittikachorn's military rule in Thailand in 1973 and the experimentation with democracy until 1976; popular protest or 'people power' against Marcos's dictatorship in the Philippines in 1985–1986; a resurgence of protest and street rallies against the Thai military regime and Suchinda Krapayoon's attempt to restore military rule in 1992, as well as the most recent actions against the elected, though corrupt government of Thaksin Shinawatra; the *reformasi* movement in Jakarta and the removal of Suharto in 1998; the demonstrations and protests associated with the *reformasi* movement against the Mahathir government in Malaysia in the late 1990s and into the 2000s; and the ouster of Joseph Estrada's corrupt regime in the Philippines in 2000. On the other hand, observers also point to occasions when middle class people have sided with or at least acquiesced in political authoritarianism, more in the interest of political competence and stability and material self-interest than in any firm commitment to democracy, as exemplified in Singapore (Robison & Goodman 1996b: 7–8; Dhakidae 2001: 505–508; Hedman 2001: 921–951; Hewison 1996: 154–155; Oehlers 2001: 203–205; Pinches 1996: 123; Prudhisan & Chantana 2001a: 381–396, 2001b: 262–291; Rivera 2001: 251; Rodan 1992, 1993: 52–71; Robison 1998; Tamura 2003; Tanter & Young 1992; Thompson 2007: 10–11). If we accept that there is also a middle class in Brunei, *contra* to Gunn, then it too has remained passive in the desire to ensure material self-interest and stability (1993, 1997).

Hedman (2001: 921–951) in an interesting comparative paper, has drawn attention to the considerable variations in the strength and character of civil society and political mobilization between Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines in relation to differences in colonial legacies, class structures, ethnic composition and political and religious institutions (and see, for example, Rodan 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1997; Abdul Rahman Embong 2001a; Chua 1997, 2005; Crouch 2001; Girling 1985: 120–121, 144–147, 177–178; Lee 2005; Rivera 2001; Saravanamuttu 2001; Koh 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Loh Kok Wah & Öjendal 2005a, 2005b; Torii 2003). Furthermore, Hsiao's research tends to confirm Hedman's findings. 'On political activity, the middle classes of the four Southeast Asian countries (Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines) had an extremely high

rate of participation in voting, but their participation in other political activities was rather low, and furthermore did not display any clear differences to other classes' (Hsiao & Wang 2001: 36). With specific reference to Malaysia, it seems that whilst those members of the new middle class supported democracy, they were also oriented to the maintenance of law and order and therefore did 'not necessarily oppose state authoritarianism' (Abdul Rahman Embong 2001b: 372). Furthermore, although some of the Malaysian middle class were active in civil society, they were constrained by their lack of autonomy in relation to the state, specifically with regard to human rights policy (Ibid; Torii 2003).

In sum, it would seems that in political terms the middle class cannot really be defined as a class at all, it is a differentiated category whose constituents may not and frequently do not identify with one another on particular political issues, though, as we shall see in the next section, they may broadly share other orientations and interests (Prudhisan & Chantana 2001b: 289). Pinches with reference to the Philippines refers to 'middle forces' characterized by ambiguity and 'a political orientation that lies somewhere between the right and the left' (1996: 123); Rivera too notes that middle class involvement in Philippines politics has ranged from 'conservative to moderate and radical projects' (2001: 209–220). Thompson alerts us to the same issue in comparing Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines (2007: 9–20). These experiences give some weight to contrasting images of the middle class as on the one hand 'well-educated, rational, democratically minded and generally liberal' or on the other 'security-oriented, anxiety-laden, state-dependent and generally conservative' (Koo 2006: 15). Especially following the experiences of the financial crisis of the late 1990s, Kessler too sees the Southeast Asian middle classes as displaying 'a dual consciousness, a divided politics, a split personality' (2001: 41). It seems that we need much more precise specifications of which 'elements' within the middle class espouse certain political orientations and whether or not these attitudes change over time.

A WAY FORWARD?

In my view, Hsiao and his colleagues, who have pioneered much of the comparative study of the middle class in East and Southeast Asia do provide us with a degree of precision in their three-fold sub-categorization of the middle class, though it still does not solve all our definitional problems. Rather than using the plural form 'middle classes', they see the Southeast Asian 'middle class' as 'a class in the making' (though presumably this

applies to a segment or segments of it and not all of it). For them it comprises three main segments: The 'new middle class' (salary-earning professionals and administrators), the 'old middle class' (small proprietors, the self-employed), which was often referred to in the Marxist tradition as the *petit bourgeoisie* (see van der Kroef 1953), and the 'marginal middle class' (lower grade white collar clerical and sales and service workers and small proprietors who deal with more routine tasks), sometimes referred to as a 'lower middle strata' (Girling 1985: 178). These latter usually overlap with, and, in some respects, are indistinguishable from elements of what we might term the upper working class, often of skilled and semi-skilled manual workers (Hsiao 2001: 5–8, 35–36; Hewison 1996: 143; Robison & Goodman 1996b: 9). Although Hsiao's is a useful heuristic device, we should still not underestimate the difficulties of differentiating segments of the middle class. Torii in his examination of the Malaysian middle classes, considers the problems of differentiating the 'new' and the 'old' middle class, at least in the 1970s, and on the basis of Malaysian government data also appears not to distinguish the 'old' from the 'marginal' middle class (2003: 225, 226). Instead he coins the term 'ambiguous middle classes' (Ibid: 223). Similarly Funatsu and Kagoya, whilst modelling their work on Hsiao, divide the middle class into 'upper' (or 'new') and 'lower' (combining 'old' and 'marginal') (2003: 245).

Evers's designation of some elements of the middle class as 'strategic groups' also helps us arrive at some level of clarity in what are murky waters (1978a, 1978b, 1980). He generally defines these 'strategic groups' in occupational terms and suggests that in some cases they are beginning to develop a political consciousness, promote their political interests and secure an increasing share of societal resources, but they still tend to be divided by ethnic, kinship, patronage and community loyalties. They include, among several others, 'civil servants', 'teachers', and 'independent professionals' (Evers 1980: 250; and see Abdul Rahman Embong 2002: 1; Hewison 1996: 143; Pinches 1999c: 41–43), these occupations are commonly included under the umbrella of a middle class, but they do not map precisely on to Hsiao's three sub-categories. Many of these in Hsiao's terms would be members of the new middle class, particularly independent professionals, but some clearly are occupations which have been identified as middle class for a very long time.

What is clear is that if we wish to employ statistical materials, usually derived from government data, and conduct broader surveys ourselves we shall very probably depend, in part at least, on categorizations according to occupation, and possibly income level (these comprise for example, people employed in the professional and technical, administrative and managerial,

clerical, sales and services sectors). In turn, we should note that these categories do intersect, though not straightforwardly with Hsiao's and Evers' classifications above, and we need to investigate the everyday lived experiences of class as well as the broader occupational and income dimensions (see, for example, Kessler 2001, 2002).

Common Issues and Interests?

Let us return to consider the criteria which we might use to define middle classness, whilst recognizing that some of these might not embrace all those who are considered to be or consider themselves to be middle class. Abdul Rahman Embong suggests that members of the middle class are differentiated from others 'because of their relatively superior cultural and organizational assets not possessed by those from the working class', though this is much more appropriate to the new middle class rather than the marginal middle class. In other words, they 'enjoy a special position because they exercise some autonomy' and they have 'greater market capacity in performing their tasks' (2002: 10). There are also broadly common issues which tend to be of concern to members of the middle class—law and order; respectability and status expressions; ambitions; expectations about the political competence and integrity of government; educational provision and merit; the rights of citizenship; and the desire for private property and the establishment of a personal domain (Robison & Goodman 1996b: 2; Hsiao & Wang 2001: 3–38; Hsiao 2001, 2006). Specifically in Malaysia, Abdul Rahman Embong found on the whole, that the second-generation middle class which had followed on from the emergence of the New Economic Policy's first generation new middle class, had a strong commitment to family values, a pluralist acceptance of other ethnic communities and their religion, a preference to be less dependent on the state, and, in approaching the future, a resilience and optimism (2006b: 150–153). The middle class, as in Gunn's perspective, has also been associated, although sporadically and patchily, with the emergence of civil society (of 'new social forces') and with demands for more representative institutions (Girling 1985, 1988; Hewison 1996: 137–138; Saravanamuttu 2001a, 2001b: 93–111).

RESEARCH AGENDA

I propose to continue to use the term 'middle class' in my current research, though I accept that there is good reason for using the plural form. However, I prefer to think in terms of subdivisions of the middle class, as

well as acknowledge that, given considerable social mobility and that with the compressed time frame in which social classes have emerged in Southeast Asia, the boundaries between and within classes are fuzzy and fluid. My main focus is on those educated people in what are identified as middle class occupations who have emerged since the 1970s. In this respect issues which need to be addressed are, of course, those of class identity and the self-perceptions of individuals and groups across the various countries of Southeast Asia. The matter of whether or not first generation (new) middle class people can ensure that their class position and status can be secured for succeeding generations, through educational provision, financial support, the maintenance of particular lifestyles, social networking and intermarriage, and political representation and organization also requires further investigation. An interesting study of this process of reproducing a middle class lifestyle with its attendant tensions and contradictions is that of Singaporean women, and their 'fear of falling' in the context of the preoccupation with the 'production of upward mobility' (PuruShotam 1998: 127–133).

The main focus of research on the middle class (or elements of it) to date has also been devoted to the new Southeast Asian middle class primarily in the capital cities and associated conurbations—Kuala Lumpur and the Klang Valley, greater Bangkok, greater Jakarta, Metro Manila, and the city state of Singapore. So far as I am aware, very little research has been undertaken on the middle class in the provinces and smaller urban centres (although see Barnes on 'the margins of the middle class' in rural eastern Indonesia [2004]). In Malaysia, there are references to the expanding urban middle class in such states as Sarawak and Sabah, but not much systematic research (Boulanger 1999, 2008; Hew 2001: 153–154, 156–157). Having said this, there has been recent interest in urban middle class women in such towns as Miri and the ways in which they attempt to resolve the demands of paid work with child-rearing and domestic responsibilities (Wee Ling Ming et al. 2004).

Nor has there been much research on the middle class in the countries of mainland Southeast Asia, with the exception of Thailand. Since the opening of the economies of the former Indochina to the world market, particularly Vietnam, the urban middle class has grown relatively rapidly, as has the desire for modern consumer goods and other elements of modernity, yet very little is known about these matters (understandably the middle class is still rather small in Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar). More generally Alvin (2006: 25) observes that 'Despite the existence of many journalistic accounts on Asian middle classes, very few systematic inquiries have been carried

out on them in an Asian country, let alone any cross-country comparative studies' (see also Pinches 1999c: 46; Kahn 1991).

Therefore, to inject some specificity into the research I have decided to deconstruct the category 'middle class' and focus on the new educated middle class in both the public and private sectors of professionals (including teachers, managers, lawyers, accountants, technicians) and administrators/civil servants, along with students and intellectuals (Thompson 2007: 3) rather than attempt to cover the old and the marginal middle class as well. Even this selection is fraught with difficulties if one uses such criteria as income levels to provide a survey sample and investigates circumstances in the provinces (Barnes 2004: 39, 47). Let me finally turn to some preliminary work on Vietnam to demonstrate some of the similarities and differences between the middle classes in different Southeast Asian countries and some of the issues and perspectives with which I am concerned.

VIETNAM CASE

The Young Middle Class in Vietnam

The literature on the middle class, and particularly urban middle class youth in Vietnam is sparse. Despite the importance of educated youth in post-reform Vietnam, there has been very little research on young people in general and educated youth in particular (but see Marr 1997; Sakellariou & Patrinos 2000; Nguyen 2002, 2003, 2005). The new Vietnamese middle class can be defined in much the same way as the middle class in other parts of Southeast Asia, and it is primarily the product of economic growth, though in the Vietnamese case the opening up of the country to the market has accelerated the development of a young middle class. Its members define themselves as such; they espouse the importance of education and achievement; and they have aspirations to do better and succeed and a high level of confidence in their abilities. They can exercise market capacity with their command of knowledge, expertise and skills. They express their middle classness by adopting a particular consumerist lifestyle and by accessing news and information, especially through the internet. Although their level of earnings is generally lower than among the middle class in other parts of Southeast Asia, in relative terms in Vietnam they are well-to-do. They are found in professional, technical and administrative positions both in the public and private sector, although the presence and influence of the state is still of considerable importance in Vietnam. The research

findings indicate, however, a significant level of continuity between the old pre-*doi moi* middle class and the new young middle class that has emerged during the period of renovation. The senior generations have therefore managed generally to pass on the advantages that they enjoyed in the centralized socialist state system to their children in the more open market system. This is also a feature of the middle class in certain of the more market-oriented economies of Southeast Asia like Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines where there is also considerable continuity between the old and the new middle class, though it is not so evident in Malaysia. In spite of different political systems, the crucial importance of the state in several Southeast Asian countries has enabled those who enjoyed advantaged positions and education in relation to the state in the period before rapid economic growth and industrialization from the 1970s have usually managed to pass these on to their offspring. Nevertheless, unlike the situation in such countries as Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines where elements of the middle class have been politically active and important contributors to civil society, this is not, as we might anticipate, in evidence to any extent in Vietnam where the state is still pre-eminent and its present position unassailable.

The Research Data

The data employed in this analysis were collected between October 2003 and January 2004 as part of a larger research project on Vietnamese youth, namely the Survey Assessment of Vietnamese Youth (SAVY), undertaken by the Vietnamese Ministry of Health and the General Statistics Office, the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund. Out of the 7,584 youths (in the age group of 14–25) surveyed a sample of 226 men and women between 19 and 25 years of age was selected; they hailed from and resided mainly in urban areas from birth up to the time of the survey and identified themselves as professionals, middle-level and senior-level technicians. These occupations fall within what is usually considered to be the new urban middle class. A hundred and forty-three individuals in the sample lived and worked in four large cities (Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hai Phong and Da Nang), the remaining 83 were found in smaller urban centres. The survey did not focus specifically on middle class issues but provides insights into some characteristics of the young urban middle class.

Data were also taken from a doctoral study which I was privileged to supervise by Phuong An Nguyen of 75 young, unmarried university graduates in Hanoi in 1999–2002 focusing on their life choices, values, behaviour and attitudes in relation to such themes as work and careers,

interpersonal relations, family life and marriage, in the context of changing market conditions (2003). From these data, some of the significant issues surrounding the identities and lifestyles of young middle class people in modernizing Vietnam can be examined (King, Nguyen & Nguyen 2008). Of particular importance in the Vietnam case is that many members of the middle class in a changing yet still centralized socialist system owe their position to state provision of such benefits as education and employment (Gainsborough 2002: 701, 707; 2005a, 2005b). Additionally, positions of political and administrative power in the local and central political apparatus frequently enable Vietnamese state officials and entrepreneurs who have links with senior bureaucrats and politicians to accumulate wealth (Koh 2001b; Taylor 2004b: 15). State-led modernization in Vietnam has created a middle class, the majority of whose members currently share a set of interests and political commitments, which are closely associated with the government. Nevertheless, interestingly this relationship with the state is also characteristic of other countries in Southeast Asia, although the tensions between dependence on the state, and also, at times, the adoption of critical attitudes towards it, are more acute in such countries as Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines, and even Indonesia since 1998, than others, like Singapore and Brunei (Abdul Rahman Embong 2001c; Kessler 2001).

Vietnam and Doi Moi

Since the mid-1970s, following reunification, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) has remained firmly in control. From the second half of the 1980s the Party began a programme of economic renovation (*doi moi*), to create a market economy within the socialist state and allowing for de-collectivization, private ownership, and liberalized foreign trade and investment (Beresford2006; Drummond & Thomas 2003). Although *doi moi* was introduced in 1986, it was not until the early 1990s when a combination of internal and external factors (for example, the promulgation of a new Law on Foreign Investment in 1987, the termination of aid and trade flows from the Eastern European bloc in 1989, and the conclusion of the Peace Accord with Cambodia in 1991), resulted in the acceleration of economic and structural reforms. Since then *doi moi* has brought about not only fundamental transformations of the economy, but also profound social, cultural, and, to a much less extent, political changes (Kolko 1997; World Bank 1999; Luong 2006; Gainsborough 2005a, 2005b).

One of the consequences of *doi moi* in Vietnam has been increasing social inequality and particularly the widening gap between rich and poor, and urban and rural communities (World Bank 1995, 1999, 2000; Beresford

& McFarlane 1995; Luong & Unger 1998; Taylor 2004b). As the state abolished the subsidy system (*bao cap*), which used to provide for everything from education and employment to healthcare, housing, holidays and other social benefits, unemployment and poverty have risen significantly. Meanwhile, there is ample evidence of dynamic groups and individuals who possess knowledge, skills, experience, and social connections, seizing opportunities offered by economic development to become affluent, causing a widening disparity between rich and poor (Kim 2004).

Therefore, there has emerged 'the new urban rich' comprising people in positions of political power and administrative influence, those who control economic capital, and people with education, experience, and skills (Trinh Duy Luan 1993; Bresnan 1997: 77). These groupings can often overlap, as Koh, for example, observes in that most government officials have sources of income other than their official salary and many have subsequently accumulated economic capital (2001b: 283). It is the educated grouping which is most relevant to the study of middle classes. Increasingly urban professionals see themselves as successful in utilizing human capital instead of political power; and in so doing, bringing to Vietnam a 'new ethos of transnational modernity' (Taylor 2004b: 16). Jørgensen (2005: 318) has also noted that economic renovation has 'had a tremendous effect on social development and an urban middle class [has] emerged with a lifestyle closer to the global urban middle class than to their fellow citizens in the countryside' (see also Earl 2004; Taylor 2004a, 2004b: 31–32). In particular, there has been a substantial increase in the desire for modern consumer goods (Thomas & Drummond 2003: 1–3).

In this connection, the characterization of a communist party cadre in big cities such as Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, the middle class are referred to as 'those who are well-educated and have a big monthly income, … they have property, know at least one foreign language and can use the Internet. They may have a house or villa in the suburbs or neighboring provinces. As they have a car, their house must have a garage' (quoted in Escobar 2003). More generally, not only consumer items have become much more freely available, but they are 'being taken up as markers of success' (Thomas & Drummond 2003: 2). It is also very markedly a 'more affluent [urban] youth market… hungry for products…' (Ibid.: 3).

Immediately after *doi moi* was introduced and throughout the 1990s, there was a relatively large movement of personnel from the state to the non-state sector (Fforde 1996: 40–41, 2003: 41, 46; Boothroyd & Pham 2000: 23). It is estimated that more than 70% of those who left the state sector either created their own enterprises or were employed by business

owners (Le & Rondinelli 1993: 9). However, growth in the private sector has been heavily concentrated in large cities, with Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City providing home to 40% of all Vietnamese private companies (Tenev et al. 2003; Hansen et al. 2004; Steer & Taussig 2002). In addition, in spite of this increase, the state is still a major employer, providing a greater number of jobs than any other single sector (Nguyen 2002). Private sector businesses are also 'still very reliant on the state for licenses, contracts, access to capital and land, and very often, protection' (Gainsborough 2002: 700; Fforde 2003: 37). At the provincial level 'not only are state institutions at the heart of regulating economic activity but also they are active participants in economic activity through the running of state and private firms' (Gainsborough 2005a: 11). Furthermore, 'relations between the equitised firm and the state continued to be close, with the state maintaining considerable inspection and control rights' (Gainsborough 2005b: 33).

In his discussion of the potential political role of social classes in processes of democratization, Gainsborough delimited five main classes in post-reform Vietnam: Large landowners; the peasantry and rural workers; the urban working class; the bourgeoisie or entrepreneurs; and the salaried and middle classes (comprising state employees and those in foreign companies) (2002: 694–707). His main conclusion, borne out by the SAVY and Nguyen's data, is that the middle class is still closely connected to and dependent on the state and is not a force for political change, although there are some signs that elements of the middle class in large cities are exercising a degree of discretion outside government (Kerkvliet 2001: 263–269; Thomas 2003: 170–188; Nguyen 2005; Loh Kok Wah 2005: 37).

Given this close connection between the middle class and the state, Fforde suggests that a typical middle class household profile in the 1990s was for the father to work in the state bureaucracy, the mother probably in trade but moving into other areas of work as market opportunities became available, and their children in both public and private sector employment. Emphasis is placed on consumption and the acquisition of status goods rather than on involvement in political activities. In Hanoi, for example, there has been 'a high stress upon perceived high-quality consumer durables' (Fforde 2003: 36, 50). But because of the economic growth has been a very recent phenomenon and Vietnam is still moving out of the period of economic constraint from the 1970s and 1980s, the general level of incomes of the Vietnamese middle class is considerably lower than that in such neighbouring countries as Thailand and Malaysia and the size of the middle class are smaller (Fforde 2003: 51). This is balanced to some extent by the more modest costs of domestic help, which is becoming a significant

element of middle class lifestyles, and basic household expenses such as food and clothing.

The Survey Data

In the SAVY data those selected were given a face-to-face interview and a self-administered anonymous questionnaire containing sensitive questions which were completed in private. Young interviewees (aged 14–25) in sample were selected nationwide from a sub-sample of 45,000 households in 42 provinces in the 2002 Vietnam Living Standards Survey. They were invited to a central location, away from their homes, for interview. A total of 150 interviewers were trained for data collection (Survey [SAVY] Report 2005: 19–22).

Family and Educational Background

The young people in the survey were born in the late 1970s and early 1980s just prior to the introduction of *doi moi*. They were therefore coming of age when the country was undergoing 'renovation' and the economy was expanding. Most of their parents' generation, however, would have been born and brought up in the turbulent pre-reform period when the modern Vietnamese nation was in process of formation and state socialism, the public sector and centralized planning and development were particularly strong in the northern part of the country.

Interestingly, and in contrast to other countries like Malaysia, the Vietnamese sample demonstrates a more marked continuity in the educational and socio-economic backgrounds of young professional respondents and their parents. However, while the emphasis on education is a long-established tradition in Vietnam, the continuity in educational background between the senior and junior generations of the middle class is a relatively recent phenomenon that emerged only after the introduction of economic reform. Under socialism (1954–1986), many young men and women, who passed university entrance examinations with high results and had the right political credentials, were sent to universities across the communist world, and many of them returning from study in Eastern Europe and other socialist countries went on to hold key government positions. During this period one's class standing was ascertained by the class background of parents and grandparents, and to have a 'pure' (*trong sach*) class standing frequently meant that one's parents were poor peasants or workers and belonged to the proletariat. It was still largely through

education and study that many people achieved positions of political power and status.

The survey data indicate relative success in the efforts to sustain class position and to pass on to children the advantages enjoyed by parents—advantages provided principally by the state through education and employment. Clearly education is still a route to social mobility for some, but it is also increasingly a means to consolidate one's position in the middle class. As many as 72% of the interviewees reported that their father had been educated to post-secondary school level, whilst 59% stated that their mothers had attained this level. In the four large cities, the per centage of youths with educated parents is even higher: 76% of fathers and 66%of mothers with post-secondary educational qualifications as against 65% and 49% respectively in smaller urban centres. In line with Gainsborough's observation that many members of the business elite are serving or former state officials, or are the children of the political elite (2002: 700), we should note that the making of the middle class in post-reform Vietnam is characterized by marked inter-generational educational and occupational continuity as well as by a strong linkage with the state.

Underlining this post-*doi moi* continuity in the educational and socio-economic backgrounds of the young professional respondents and their parents, an overwhelming majority of interviewees (81%) reported that their fathers (85% in the four large cities and 76% in smaller urban centres) and 67% indicated that their mothers (70% in the large cities and 64% in smaller urban centres) worked as either professionals or highly skilled technicians. Interviewees also came from stable family backgrounds; only 1 per cent in the smaller urban centres and 3% in the large cities reported that their parents had divorced.

In the sample none of the interviewees were from a poor household and only 8% of all respondents lived in households with average income (level of prosperity was determined by size of household dwelling, possession of certain status commodities such as electrical equipment and white goods, motorbikes, telephones and computers, and facilities including electricity and piped water). As many as 96% of young interviewees from the four large cities lived in high income households while this figure was 10% lower in smaller urban centres.

Employment and Occupational Status

Other interesting characteristics are not only the noticeable shift in employment patterns from the state to the private sector, but also a continuing close relationship between parental occupation, educational

attainment and state sector employment. 44% of all interviewees worked in the state sector whilst 56% worked in the non-state sector. The proportion of private sector employees was obviously very low among the parental generation. However, from the survey data, young people tended to work in the state sector if their fathers were salaried professionals: 51%, while only 44% of those whose fathers were technicians and one third of those whose fathers were unskilled workers worked in the state sector. The same tendency was found for mothers: 59%, 41% and 32%, respectively.

This continuity in state employment between the generations is in part of the consequence of the strong tendency for young people to remain under parental influence. Interviewees from the qualitative study undertaken between 1999 and 2002 cited the expectations of their senior relatives, and most directly of their parents, as an important reason for their choice of employment in the state sector (Nguyen 2003). For many parents the notion of employment conformed to a pre-*doi moi* socialist ideal of work for the state which was the avenue for status, job security, social benefits, a predictable career path and a firm foothold in the government patronage system.

There is also a link between the father's level of educational attainment and the likelihood of a child working in the state sector: 48% of interviewees whose fathers were graduates worked in the state sector; this percentage is lower for interviewees whose fathers attained higher secondary education (40%) and lower secondary education (38.5%). The same linkage holds for the mother's level of educational attainment: 55%, 41% and 44%, respectively.

There is also a significant difference in the level of educational attainment between interviewees working in the state and the private sector. 50% of interviewees who worked in the state sector were graduates or postgraduates, while only 30% in the private sector had attended university. Of those with secondary education, only 37% of interviewees worked in the state sector while the remaining 63% worked in the non-state sector. At the same time, among interviewees with university or higher education, 57.5% worked in the state sector.

The qualitative data further substantiate the survey findings that the state sector is attractive to young graduates, who often aspire to pursue further education, particularly overseas postgraduate training, precisely because it offers opportunities to gain scholarships (Nguyen 2003). There is a general consensus in Vietnam that overseas qualifications are passports to successful and well paid careers. However, high tuition fees and the general cost of living overseas have made this a dream hard to realize for many young people. For them, one of the few options is to secure state

employment and then apply for the scholarship schemes available. The open-door policy has enhanced and broadened cooperative relations between Vietnamese government institutions and many other countries. In this context, as part of foreign cooperative programmes and aid agreements, an increasing numbers of scholarships have been given to students from Vietnam to follow training courses overseas in addition to government-funded scholarships.

In the SAVY data the majority (88%) of interviewees stated that they were happy with their employment. However, there is a modest difference in levels of job satisfaction in comparing the state (91%) with the non-state sector (86%). Nevertheless, the middle class is characterized by significant job mobility and 23% of all interviewees reported that they were looking for new employment with a rather higher percentage in the large cities (27%) looking for a different job as compared to those in the smaller urban centres (14.5%). In line with the higher level of job satisfaction for interviewees working in the state sector, as many as 34% of interviewees working in the private sector were looking to change jobs as compared with only 8%in the state sector.

Leisure Pursuits and Behaviour

The educated middle classes are cultural consumers, they have resources to spend on leisure activities and they are usually interested in current affairs and securing information. In general, most young people, from whatever social background, watch television. In the survey, 83% of interviewees reported watching television every day or nearly every day during the month preceding the survey. Interviewees stated that they were most interested in news programmes (41.6%), then movies (22%) and finally music programmes (19%). Interestingly, fewer interviewees in the large cities (37%) watched news programmes in comparison to 49% in smaller urban centres. On the other hand, interviewees in the large cities tended to watch movies and music programmes more often than interviewees in smaller urban centres (26% as against 16% for movies and 21% as against 14.5% for music programmes).

In total, 78% of all interviewees reported reading newspapers and magazines every day or nearly every day during the month preceding the survey. As one would expect in the large cities, more people read newspapers and magazines regularly (82% as against 72% in smaller urban centres). With no significant difference between the large cities and the smaller urban centres, favourite reading materials were reported to be the weekly *Phu Nu Viet Nam* [The Vietnamese Woman] (26%), the daily *Tuoi*

Tre [Youth Newspaper] (11.5%), *The Thao* [Sports] (10.6%), and *Tap Chi An Ninh The Gioi* [World Security Magazine] (9%). Although Vietnamese news media are state-owned, often viewed as propaganda tools as well as being subject to censorship, these publications are more popular among young readers than, for example, the daily *Nhan Dan* [The People] and the *Tap Chi Cong San* [The Communist Magazine] in that they report both local and international news, sports, and celebrity gossip, enabling the reader to connect to the outside world, as well as often testing the limits of censorship by carrying out press investigations and reporting sensitive social and political issues. Newspapers and magazines are both a means of entertainment and status identity and a source of news and information for young urban professionals.

Just over half of all interviewees said that they had watched a video or a DVD and 29% reported going to a movie theatre during the month preceding the survey. In the large cities, a significantly higher number of interviewees went to a movie theatre as compared to those from the smaller urban centres (39% as against 14.5%), and nearly 2% of interviewees in the large cities went to a movie theatre more than three times during the month while none did so in smaller urban centres.

A majority of urban interviewees (71%) used the Internet. In the large cities the numbers are significantly higher (78%) than in the smaller urban centres (58%). The amount of time spent on the Internet also differs between the large cities and smaller urban centres. Up to 55% of interviewees in the four large cities had used the Internet for more than eleven hours during the month preceding the survey while only 37.5% of interviewees in smaller urban centres did so. These figures partly reflect differences in the availability of communication infrastructures between different urban centres, and partly the difference in economic status between the large cities and smaller urban centres, since the Internet is relatively costly. Data from in-depth interviews revealed that in large cities such as Hanoi, interviewees see the frequent use of the Internet as a marker of status and educational attainment. Some university-educated interviewees in Hanoi chose to make friends, socialize, and date over the Internet, because they see themselves as belonging to an 'exclusive club' of educated, computer-literate people, who can afford the high cost of electronic communications and can 'hang out' both globally and locally (Nguyen 2003).

Although the survey findings do not describe the full range of leisure pursuits, they indicate media consumption trends among middle class youth, the popularity of the 'new' media, and its use for entertainment and status purposes. Most of the customers at the roughly 5,000 Internet cafes in

Vietnam are students. When the Internet was first introduced in Vietnam in 1997 the number of users has risen from under 200,000 to 1.9 million in 2002, making the country's telecommunications industry the second-fastest-growing in the world after China (Economist Intelligence Unit 2003: 23).

Self-perceptions and Future Expectations

In general, Vietnamese people enjoy a high level of happiness and life satisfaction. In the 2001 World Value Survey, as many as 91% of Vietnamese respondents said they were very happy or quite happy with their situation, with about two-thirds considering themselves satisfied with life overall. These statistics place the Vietnamese far above most of Eastern Europe and on a par with China, Mexico, Chile and Spain (Dalton and Ong, 2001). They also reflect a correlation with the country's overall economic development. Twenty-nine per cent of all urban interviewees also reported going to a movie theatre Reflecting this general high level of life satisfaction, the SAVY data indicate that educated young middle class people, with good jobs, relatively high income and generally sound prospects are even more likely to have a more positive attitude about themselves and their abilities than those struggling to make ends meet. In the SAVY there was a set of questions about self-perceptions, particularly about levels of self-confidence and optimism. Nearly 97% of all urban interviewees stated 'I believe I can do what others don't.' In the family, young people tended to be confident. Up to 98% of all interviewees agreed totally or partially with the statement 'I think I am valuable to my family' (in economic terms and as an asset). A majority of interviewees (86.5%) were of the view that economic conditions would be better in Vietnam in the next three years; 11% thought that they would remain the same. A staggering 99% agreed (totally: 86%, or partially: 13%) with the statement that they would have a happy family in the future, agreed completely or partially that they would have a job they liked, and that they would have an opportunity to do what they wanted to do. Ninety-eight per cent agreed (completely: 67%, or partially: 31%) with the statement that they would have a good income with a comfortable living standard.

Interviewees' aspirations for the future were very specific and directly related to their individual lifestyle and career. At the top of the list was their aspirations for 'employment and career' (47%), followed by 'stable income' (26%), 'happiness in general' (13%), and 'having a family/becoming parents' (10%). Interestingly a greater number of people in the large cities aspired to having a family or happiness in general while a greater number in smaller cities and towns wanted appropriate employment or a successful career. All

interviewees said that their life would improve, 25 significantly so while 68% said that it would be better.

CONCLUSIONS

We have very few studies which combine the preoccupations of government in Southeast Asia with the interests and behaviour of young people generally and the growing importance of young, consumer-oriented middle class people. Vietnam, given its recent emergence from a centralized planning regime to one which is embracing the market, is an especially interesting case, and, in my proposed comparative, cross-national study, should enable me to consider issues of identity formation and the relationships between consumption in different socio-cultural, historical, political and economic contexts. The SAVY data, though imperfect, begins to paint a social portrait of the expanding young middle class in Vietnam and to confirm that it displays some of the characteristics of the middle class elsewhere in Southeast Asia—a firm commitment to education, an orientation to consumption and to accessing news and information, aspirations to improve and develop in personal and career terms, and a more general self-confidence.

From these data, I am unable to offer any comment on young middle class political attitudes. Impressionistically, the political dimension of middle classness in Vietnam seems currently to be very modest. The available evidence suggests a greater interest in consumption, leisure activities, and the maintenance and achievement of social status. These elements along with educational qualifications, income level, occupation and aspirations seem to be what mark out middle class identities in Vietnam. At the moment, and given, the close relationships between salaried professionals and the state, there does not seem to be either a significant political identity emerging among middle class Vietnamese or an interest in mobilizing political resources, although there is some evidence of involvement in topical issues which could lead to criticism of government policy (Kerkvliet 2001; Thomas 2001).

To date, this has not led to the development of a robust civil society. In his study of two Vietnamese border provinces, Gainsborough concludes that 'there is even less evidence of nascent civil society-type activity compared with what one observes in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City' (2005a: 25; Fforde 2004). Kerkvliet too suggests that, although there has been some withdrawal of the state, particularly from the economy, its institutions 'still, despite pressures from within and outside them, allow citizens only a little

room to establish their own organizations in order to speak and act publicly on important issues. Hence, Vietnamese NGOs and other signs of civil society have only recently begun to emerge' (2001: 269). Therefore, it seems that salaried professionals in Vietnam are developing an identity in economic and lifestyle terms, but not in political terms.

This focus on education and consumption and the lack of interest in the political dimension of class identity contrast markedly with a considerable amount of the literature on the various segments of the Thai middle class and the evaluation of their political attitudes and their propensity to participate in political protest in the interest of promoting democratization (see, for example, Prudhisan & Chantana 2001b; Funatsu & Kagoya 2003: 245–246, 261; Girling 1996). Even so, much of this work on Thailand demonstrates the variations in middle class politics and that whilst some elements may support democracy and solidarity with members of other classes, particularly the working classes, others do not (Ibid.: 289). Preoccupations with middle class politics and activism can also be seen more firmly in the Philippines literature (see, for example, Rivera 2001; Bautista 2006a; Kimura 2003). However, the literature on Malaysia has tended to be more oriented to middle class lifestyles and identities (Abdul Rahman Embong 2002; Talib 2000).

To return to the Vietnam case, one very significant finding in the study was the continuity in employment and education between the current generation and its predecessor in relation to the state. This suggests, not unsurprisingly, that the state in Vietnam still plays an inordinately important role in moulding the social class structure. It does this because of its role in educational provision and as a provider of scholarships for further study abroad, as an employer of salaried professionals, and as a significant player and arbiter in the private sector. The influence of parents on their children and the continuing respect which children show to their parents and to the senior generation in general, also help explain the strong connection between the current employment of professionals and their educational background, and that of their parents. Even in a time of rapid social and economic transformation, the state, in its ability to offer security of employment and career paths and enhance job satisfaction, has managed to maintain a relatively firm grip on the ways in which young people plan their futures and make decisions about their economic affairs. However, this situation is likely to change in the future, and the evidence of a shift, from the late 1990s, towards private sector employment, suggests that the influence of the state on economic activities, though currently strong, may well loosen and the range of choices open to young people thereby widen. If this is the case then the character of the middle class may well change and

its contribution to civil society increase. Although the available data do not enable me to make detailed observations on middle class identities, the proposed future research will pay close attention to the variations in employment between the state and the private sector and the implications of this for identity formation and aspirations, as well as the relationships between consumption, lifestyles and political participation. In certain respects the relations between the middle class and the state in Vietnam, are replicated, though obviously not in exactly the same fashion or to the same degree, in such countries as Malaysia, whilst acquiescence in the power of the state and the benefits which it provides is also a feature of the middle class in Singapore and Brunei.

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