

# The Rise of the Middle Classes in East Asia and the Formation of an “Asian” Identity

By Shiraishi Takashi

OVER the past 15 to 20 years, middle class societies have developed in the East Asian region. This is evident in urban shopping centers in Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta, as well as in the new suburban towns. For example, the new town of Lippo Karawaci is located about an hour to the west of downtown Jakarta along the east-west expressway that runs through the city. Here, in a wide-open space separated from the outside world by gates and walls, are neatly placed rows of houses with gardens and garages. There is a university, a shopping mall and a golf course in the center of the area, and the people who live here can spend most of their time, aside from their hours working in the city or the nearby industrial complexes, within the confines of this neighborhood.

This middle class society first began to emerge amidst the regional economic development of the 1980s and 1990s, and the process by which it occurred is

well known. First, Japan experienced high growth and industrialization. As Japan lost its comparative advantage in certain industries, they were shifted to the East Asian NIEs<sup>1</sup> through direct investment and technology transfers, propelling those countries toward industrialization. Then, as investment and technology transfers began to be directed from both Japan and the East Asian NIEs into the Association of South-East Asian Nations, those nations were then able to industrialize. This dynamic international division of labor facilitated the advancement of East Asian industrialization, the expansion of trade and the formation of an integrated regional economic zone. The middle classes in East Asia grew steadily and widely against the backdrop of this regional economic development. This process occurred first in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s, then in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s, and then later in Thailand,

Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia in the 1980s and 1990s. Today there is yet another wave taking place, with the development of the middle classes in large Chinese cities like Shanghai and Guangdong.

As a result, people in cities like Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai, Taipei, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Manila, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Jakarta have a great deal more in common in terms of their lifestyles, leisure activities, childrearing practices, fashion and education than the people in those cities did a generation ago. The reason Japanese cultural products like comics, cartoons, music and fashion are selling so well in East Asia is because the people there (and their children) are buying them. And the reason East Asia is winning so much attention as a consumption market is because of the growth of middle class society. How can this class be socially and culturally characterized?

According to *Only Yesterday* (in Japanese: Chikuma Shobo Publishing Co.), the classic book about American social history by Frederick L. Allen, the emergence of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century middle class distinct from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century European middle class (bourgeoisie) coincided with the arrival of the mass consumer society in 1920s America. This was when people began to own washing machines and refrigerators and most people owned radios and automobiles. It coincided, in other words, with the establishment of 20<sup>th</sup> century Americanism. Furuya Jun defines “Americanization” as the “process of turning diverse immigrants with divergent histories, ethnicities, languages and religious beliefs into people who identify themselves as American citizens” (*Americanism*, University of Tokyo Press, 2002). In 20<sup>th</sup> century Americanism, however, creating middle classes by unbinding people from the spell of history meant the same thing as creating good Americans, or more

Photo: Shiraishi Takashi



Neatly placed rows of houses with gardens and garages in Lippo Karawaci, Jakarta

Note: 1) NIEs (Newly Industrializing Economies) include South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore

Photo: AP / WWP



*The emergence of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century middle class coincided with the arrival of the mass consumer society in America*

importantly, good citizens. But what did these people, unbound by history, have in common as American citizens? The answer was the emergence of the “standard package.” A standard of living “like everyone else’s” became the goal of social consumption, and leading a lifestyle like everyone else, in other words, being part of the middle classes, became a source of self-affirmation for Americans. Middle-class lifestyles that went beyond differences in age, gender, region and social status won everyone’s attention, and owning the “standard package,” which included certain elements of interior decor, a television and a refrigerator, as well as name-brand foods, clothing and cosmetics, became the very definition of Americanization.

Japan’s post-war high growth was driven by an infatuation with American lifestyles. Of crucial importance in this phenomenon was the widespread availability of televisions. Through television, the Japanese were able to see the abundance of American lifestyles and learn about suburban homes with lawns, cars, breakfasts comprised of toast and milk, system kitchens, and other aspects of American life. The impact of the nuclear family was also important. With the rise of nuclear families, the demand for durable consumer goods increased. This had a significant effect on Japan’s economic growth. Also, Japanese concepts of housing were altered by urbanization. In the early 1970s, “being like the neighbors” was the goal of consumption. As everyone began to reach similar levels of income, the middle classes emerged. However, in Japan, people can easily recognize the Japanese because of their homogeneity. Therefore, once everyone reached similar levels of income, the standard package no longer held the same appeal. Lifestyles different from the typical American one began to be presented in the form of creating various product packages. This occurred in the 1970s.

A similar kind of process played out in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s, then in Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, it is also taking place in China. It is important to note, however, that the emerging middle classes in these regions are adopting the lifestyles already developed in the United States and Japan, and then in Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore, and creating hybrid lifestyles that suit their own tastes and circumstances. This has important implications.

I would like to point out here that in the regional formation of East Asia, unlike Western Europe, a common Asian identity and an ideology of regionalism (Asianism) grounded in that identity were not important. However, as the East Asian middle classes have emerged, providing a market for Japanese comics and cartoons, South Korean television drama series, Taiwanese pop music, movies from Hong Kong, and Singaporean lifestyle magazines, a new “Asian” identity has begun to develop. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a connection between national identity and “national” products, such as batik in Indonesia and barong in the Philippines. But with the regional economic development of East Asia, the growth of middle class societies

and the establishment of mass consumerism, wearing an Italian suit with French shoes while driving a Japanese car to an American style steak house is no longer considered a contradiction for a person’s identity as a Thai or an Indonesian. Along these lines, the cultural products and advertisements being marketed to the East Asian middle classes are using young, attractive single men and women who are neither distinctly Thai nor Indonesian, but who are clearly “of Asian ethnicity” to symbolize the “Asian” individual. And what kind of person is that, exactly? This individual might best be thought of as a character in one of the trendy Japanese or South Korean drama series being sold in Southeast Asia, namely, a good-looking “Asian” professional who wears name-brand fashions and eats at fashionable restaurants in fashionable cities. In other words, the middle classes that have emerged in East Asia since the 1970s have come to represent, in very broad and generic terms, the “Asian” individual. In this way, a regional “Asian” identity is now in the making. **JS**

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