

**New Middle Class in Confucian Asia:  
Its Socio-cultural Background and Socio-political Orientations  
in Comparative Perspective**

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**Shigeto Sonoda**

Professor, Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies

Waseda University

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Shigeto Sonoda<sup>2</sup>

**Introduction**

Rapid economic growth and social change have produced a large volume of urban new middle class in East Asia.

From *kohdo keizai seicho* (rapid economic growth) in 1960s onwards, Japan produced a large volume of middle classes. In accordance with the growth of new middle class, a lot of sociologists have come to pay attention to these emerging new classes in Japan.

Though the concept of “middle classes”, or “class” itself, is not in fashion in contemporary Japan due to her affluence and standardized way of life (Hara and Seiyama, 1999: 214; Hara, 2000: 35), other East Asian countries still use the concept of “urban middle classes” in describing their changing societies.

In case of Korea, for example, political roles and ideological traits of middle classes have been paid attention to since late 80s when they have accomplished democratization and political reform (Yang, 2005:158). Taiwanese sociologists also used a lot of energy in grasping socio-political traits of emerging middle classes from 1980s (Hsiao, 1999) as well as Hong Kongnese and Singaporean counterparts (Lui and Wang, 2003; Tan, 2004)

It is probably in China now that the analysis of middle classes is most popular among sociologists in East Asian countries. Drastic marketization and rapid economic development under socialist regime is now producing unique middle classes, sometimes called *bailing* (white-collar), and many sociologists have been trying to measure their volume or characterize their socio-political orientations through empirical studies (Xu, 2000; Lu, 2002; Zhou, 2005).

In spite of, or because of, “localization” of middle class research in each country, comparative analysis of middle classes has been very rare in East Asia except several cases

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<sup>2</sup> Professor of Sociology, Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University  
E-mail: shigetosonoda@waseda.jp

(Sonoda, 2005). Hsiao's (1999, 2001) extensive research of middle classes in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia is a pioneering project which produced many breakthroughs of the research in these regions, but these two projects were conducted independently and no paper was published dealing with middle classes in both Northeast and Southeast Asian countries. Hattori's (2002) project is trying to cover middle class issues in Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, and Sonoda's (2005) research covers Korea, China and Hong Kong, but no common framework or data is used in these projects.

Such lack of extensive East Asia-wide research is primarily due to lack of good data archive on social stratification in this region. In other words, East Asia is a place where "data accumulation and service have long remained until recently improved" (Inoguchi, 2006: 19), which makes it difficult to formulate hypotheses on East Asian middle classes by using empirical data.

In this paper, the author explores some hypotheses on new middle class in contrast with working class to draw a rough picture of their characteristics by using the data of AsiaBarometer survey in 2006<sup>3</sup>.

## Data

AsiaBarometer was initiated and promoted by Prof. Inoguchi, a political scientist in Japan (Inoguchi, 2005; 2006). This large scale survey started from 2003, and the survey has been conducted annually whose covering countries differ from year to year<sup>4</sup>.

Because AsiaBarometer was originally deigned to measure mainly political orientations and attitudes in Asian countries from Japan to Afghanistan, such sociologically important items as respondent's occupational prestige or class identification, respondent's parents' educational background and occupation, are excluded from the questionnaire. It is, therefore, impossible to measure inter-generational mobility by using AsiaBarometer 2006 data, but some items included in the questionnaire might illustrate urban middle classes' socio-cultural background and socio-political orientations.

AsiaBarometer 2006 contains roughly 1000 samples in Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, and 2000 samples in mainland China. Quota sampling method is adopted due to the difficulty of conducting random sampling in these

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<sup>3</sup> It is a well-known fact that middle classes are composed of new middle class and old middle class and they show some different traits. It is desirable, therefore, to distinguish them so that our observation will be more meaningful. Because sample size of old middle class is small, however, we could not help excluding it from our analysis.

<sup>4</sup> 2003 survey's data is already open for free use, but 2004 survey's data is available only by research members.

areas, and all the data are collected from cities in different areas because of the budget constraints.

In this paper, we categorized those who are 1) senior manager (company director, no lower in rank than a manager of a company section in a company with 300 or more employees, or a manager of a department in a company with less than 300 employees), 2) employed professional or specialist (hospital doctors, employed lawyers, engineers, etc.), 3) clerical worker as “new middle class” and those who are 1) manual workers (including skilled and semi-skilled), 2) drivers, 3) sales workers, or 4) other workers as “working class” (Konno, 2006: 189) and try to make their comparison.

Table 1 shows the volume of new middle class and working class in our samples.

**Table 1: Volume of New Middle Class and Working Class in Confucian Asia**

	<b>New Middle Class</b>	<b>Working Class</b>	<b>Total</b>
China	458	366	824
Hong Kong	269	331	600
Japan	174	374	548
Korea	151	188	339
Singapore	307	345	652
Taiwan	176	330	506
Vietnam	150	449	599
<b>Total</b>	<b>1685</b>	<b>2383</b>	<b>4068</b>

## **Hypotheses**

What are the distinctive features of new middle class in comparison with working class in East Asia? In order to grasp their general traits, we prepared ten hypotheses tentatively, five of which deal with their socio-cultural background and the rest of which is concerned with their socio-political orientations.

### *Socio-cultural Background*

According to Hsiao (1999: 4), large part of new middle class in Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore belongs to first generation whose parents were industrial workers or farmers before 1970s. It is certain that such newly developing countries like China are having more and more young employees who are working in modern offices or subsidiaries of multinational companies. If this is the case, we can expect that

*Hypothesis 1a:* Those who belong to new middle class are younger than those who belong to working class.

With the expansion of commercial and service sector, large proportion of female workers finds their job in these sectors. According to Seiyama (2000:22), “growing number of professional occupations especially in educational or medical sectors allowed married female workers to continue their career because of their ‘femininity,’ while increasing number of clerical works created job opportunities for women” in Japan, but if this logic can be applied to industrialization in all over East Asia , we can say that

*Hypothesis 1b:* New middle class has larger proportion of female than working class.

As is often pointed out, emergence of new middle class goes hand in hand with the spread of higher education. As the spread of meritocracy, people from lower class also come to take part in competition of entrance examination for university to attain much better social status as “white collar” (Takeuchi, 1995: 86-88). If so,

*Hypothesis 1c:* New middle class has more university graduates than working class.

Globalization and urban middle classes are two keywords of hybridization or homogenization of cultures in East Asia. According to Aoki (2005), “In those (East Asian) countries or regions which attained economic development to some extent, urban middle classes are on the rise. Those who belong to these classes are highly educated, share lifestyles, knowledge or tastes. They are free from narrow-sighted nationalism or religious fundamentalism because their daily life is exposed to globalization.” If what Aoki says is right,

*Hypothesis 1d:* New middle class’ daily life is more exposed to globalization than that of working class.

It is frequently reported that newly emerging middle class family respects education for their children and sometimes they send their children abroad to study foreign languages, especially English, with their mother. In case of Korea, for example, those who stay in Korea to send money for their children and wife abroad are call *kirogi appa* (father of wild goose) as a “social disease” of middle classes which puts too much emphasis on educational attainment through studying abroad (Cha, 2005: 59). If so is the case with other East Asian countries,

*Hypothesis 1e:* New middle class has more fluent English-speaking population than working class.

#### *Socio-Political Orientations*

Needless to say, new middle class is the product of industrialization and modernization. It is natural to assume that people who belong to new middle class shows those socio-political orientations which are related with “modernity.” In fact, Zhang (2005: 191) discusses that one of the social functions of new middle class is to establish modern values or norms in China.

In AsiaBarometer, two questions have to do with “traditional-modern” nexus. One is about nepotism, which shows “particularistic” value, and the other is about secularization of religious behavior.

*Hypothesis 2a:* New middle class is more prone to support anti-nepotism than working class.

*Hypothesis 2b:* New middle class is more secularized than working class.

New middle class in East Asia used to be regarded as a promising actor of social movement through which we can attain more gender-equal, environmental-oriented, democratic society (Rodin, 1996). Hsiao (1995: 71) points out new middle class in Taipei is concerned with quality of life including environmental issues or social welfare issues, and major players of consumer movements, environmental protection movements, women’s movements, and democratic movements are those who belong to new middle class. If so, we can say that

*Hypothesis 2c:* New middle class is more supportive of gender-equality policy than working class.

*Hypothesis 2d:* New middle class is more concerned about environmental issues than working class.

*Hypothesis 2e:* New middle class has more pro-democratic attitude than working class.

## *Diversity among Societies*

It is a sensitive issue how much we can deal with seven societies' data as one unit. Area study specialists are apt to put an emphasis on the "uniqueness" of the each society they are studying and some of their observations are worthy of consideration. Sonoda (2005, 2006b), for example, points out that income discrepancy and gap of social status between middle class and working class is larger in China than in Japan, and many scholars point out cultural diversity of middle class among East Asian countries (Hsiao, 1999: 45-47; Hattori, 2002: 20). If so,

*Hypothesis 3:* Gap between urban new middle class and working class or characteristics of urban middle classes per se shows different patterns among societies.

## **Results of Analysis**

### *Test of Ten Hypotheses*

In order to verify ten hypotheses above, it is necessary to make operation definition of some concepts.

As to the exposure to globalization, we prepared six questions in Q3 whether 1) respondent's family member or relative lives in another country, 2) respondent has traveled abroad at least three times in the past three years, 3) respondent has friends who are from other countries, 4) respondent watches foreign-produced programs on TV, 5) respondent has communication with people in other countries via the Internet or email, and 6) respondent has contact with organizations or people in other countries in job, and we scored "globalization score" ranging from six points to zero point by adding the number of items that respondent says "yes."

As to "anti-nepotism", we prepared such question as "In the company's employment examinations, a relative of yours got the second highest grade, scoring only marginally less than the candidate with the highest grade. In such a case, which person would you employ?" in Q15.

Secularization, or religiosity, was measured by the question in Q23, "How often do you pray or meditate?" and the score was got from 1 point (Never) to 5 points (Daily).

Support of gender-equality policy (Q32j) and environmental policy (Q32a) were measured by the answers to the question how much government should spend in improvement of the social status of women or the environment, whose scores range from

1 point (spend much less) to 5 points (spend much more).

Finally, pro-democratic attitude was scaled by the answer to the question in Q38d whether the respondent thinks democratic political system is very good (3 points), fairly good (2 points), or bad (1 point) for his or her country.

Because age, exposure to globalization, religiosity, support of gender-equality policy and environmental policy, pro-democratic attitude is numerical data, we used t-test to check whether new middle class and working class show statistically significant difference in terms of their average score, and cross-tabulation analysis was used in other variables. The results of analysis are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Results of Test of Ten Hypotheses**

	<b>New Middle Class</b>	<b>Working Class</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>Units (Variables)</b>
1a	36.35	39.53	++	Years Old(Age)
1b	47.8	64.5	++	% of Male (Sex)
1c	59.4	16.3	++	% of College/University Graduate (Academic Career)
1d	1.47	0.98	++	6 Point Scale (Exposure to Globalization)
1e	18.9	6.5	++	% of Fluent Speaker of English (Fluency of English)
2a	68.2	65.6		% of "The person with the highest grade" (Anti-Nepotism)
2b	2.06	2.14		5 Point Scale (Religiosity)
2c	3.49	3.40	++	5 Point Scale (Support of Gender-equality Policy)
2d	3.82	3.67	++	5 Point Scale (Support of Environmental Policy)
2e	2.32	2.25	++	3 Point Scale (Pro-Democracy)

Note) ++ Significant at .01 level

It is evident that variables on socio-cultural background are more effective in dividing new middle class and working class than socio-political variables in Confucian Asia. In other words, it is possible to characterize new middle class by age, sex, academic career, exposure to globalization, or English-speaking population easily, but it's difficult to distinguish Confucian Asian new middle class from working class by their socio-political orientations, especially their anti-nepotism attitude or religiosity.

*Hypothesis-testing of Diversity among Societies*

Then, how much diversity of the gap between new middle class and working class can be



seen in Confucian Asian societies? Table 3 shows the result of t-test and cross-tabulation analysis about ten hypotheses mentioned above in each society.

**Table 3: Diversity among Societies**

	China	Hong Kong	Japan	Korea	Singapore	Taiwan	Vietnam	Among Societies
1a	△	○	×	○	○	○	○	○
1b	○	○	△	×	○	○	×	○
1c	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
1d	○	○	△	○	○	○	○	○
1e	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2a	×	△	×	×	×	×	×	○
2b	×	▲	×	×	×	×	○	○
2c	△	△	△	×	×	△	×	○
2d	△	×	×	△	×	×	△	○
2e	△	×	×	×	×	×	--	---

Note) ○ Verified at .01 Level; △ Verified at .05 Level; × Not Significant;

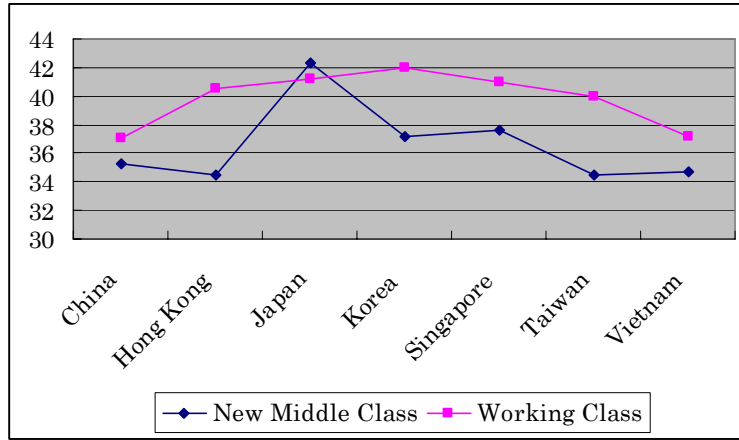
▲ Countered at .05 Level; -- No Data Available

Interestingly, academic career, exposure to globalization, and fluency of English are three statistically significant factors which distinguish between new middle class and working class in every society. On the other hand, however, the rest eight hypotheses were verified in some, not all, countries, and the characteristics of new middle class in each society differs from each other, which supports hypothesis 3 on diversity among societies.

Japan is the only country where average age of new middle class (42.33 years old) is similar to that of working class (41.24 years old), probably because Japan has the longest history of having new middle class. In other societies, however, new middle class is relatively younger than the working class probably due to recent development of new middle class in these societies (see Figure 1).

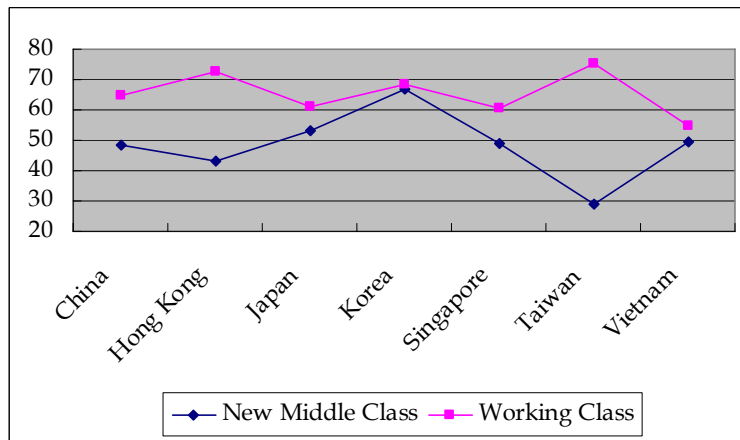
As to sex composition, Korea and Vietnam are the exceptions in the sense that they have equal percentage of male employees in new middle class and working class. The reason, however, seems to be different between Korea and Vietnam. Korea is still

**Figure 1: Average Age of New Middle Class and Working Class (Unit: Years Old)**



“male dominant society” where male employees dominate not only working class but also new middle class, while Vietnam inherits the legacy of egalitarian regime where equal participation in the workplace by both sex has been advocated for a long time under socialist rule (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Sex Composition of New Middle Class and Working Class (Unit: %)**



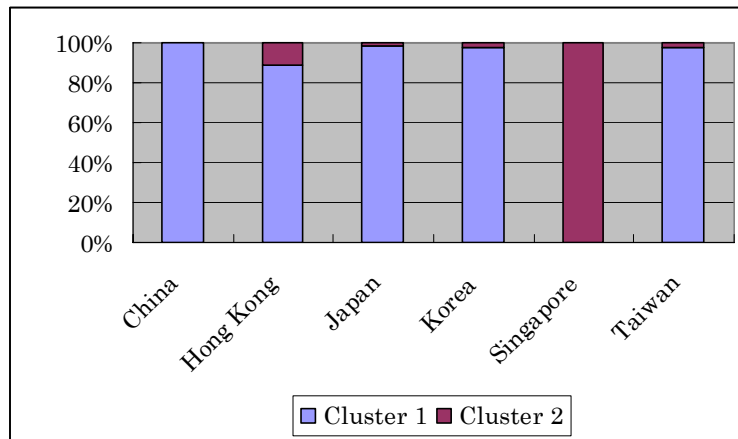
*Two Clusters of New Middle Class*

Big diversity among countries makes it worth while to categorize Confucian Asian new middle class into several types.

Figure 3 shows composition of two clusters of new middle class which were got by two-step cluster analysis by using ten variables in each society; one can be called “English-speaking type” (Singaporean and some part of Hong Kongese; n=307) and the other can be called “non-English speaking type” or just “Confucian type” (Japanese, South

Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, and some part of Hong Kongnese; n=1117)<sup>5</sup> because of the following reasons<sup>6</sup>.

**Figure 3: Composition of Two Clusters of Middle Classes in Confucian Asia**



Firstly, Cluster 1 is outstandingly fluent in English and more exposed to globalization than Cluster 2 (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). It is easily understood that fluency of English makes it possible for Cluster 1 to enjoy their globalized life, but it doesn't mean that they are free from religious beliefs. On the contrary, new middle class of Cluster 2 is more educated and secularized than that of Cluster 1 (see Figure 5 and Figure 6), which is another reason why Cluster 2 can be called "Confucian type<sup>7</sup>."

Last, but not least, difference between Cluster 1 and Cluster 2 is that the former is more generous to nepotism (see Figure 7). In other words, those who answered "my relative" when asked whether they employ a person with highest grade or their relative can be seen more in Cluster 1 than in Cluster 2. This is the last reason why Cluster 1 can be named "Confucian type" which puts more emphasis on such particularistic ties as blood relationship<sup>8</sup>.

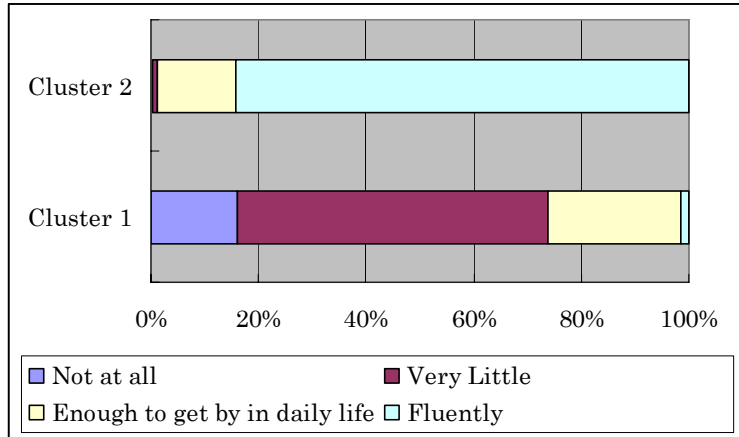
<sup>5</sup> Because we were not allowed to ask informants' ideas on politics in Vietnam, Vietnamese samples are excluded from cluster analysis.

<sup>6</sup> This finding is basically similar to the one that the author got through the analysis of ASEAN+3 data in 2004 (Sonoda, 2006a).

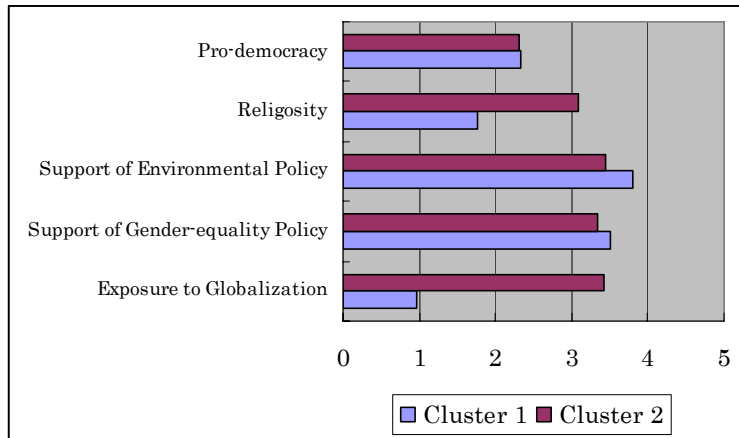
<sup>7</sup> Confucianism is sometimes called "education-oriented" and "secularized" ethics, but Kaji (1990:226) maintains that essence of Confucianism is not in rituality but in religiosity in the sense that those who live in Confucian cultures still worship ancestors and have strong filial piety. Our analysis reveals, however, that new middle class in Confucian cultures pray or mediate in their daily life only on special occasions, which doesn't support Kaji's observations.

<sup>8</sup> There are many documents which point out Confucian society's preference for blood relation ties. As to comparative study of Japan and China from this angle, see Sonoda (2001).

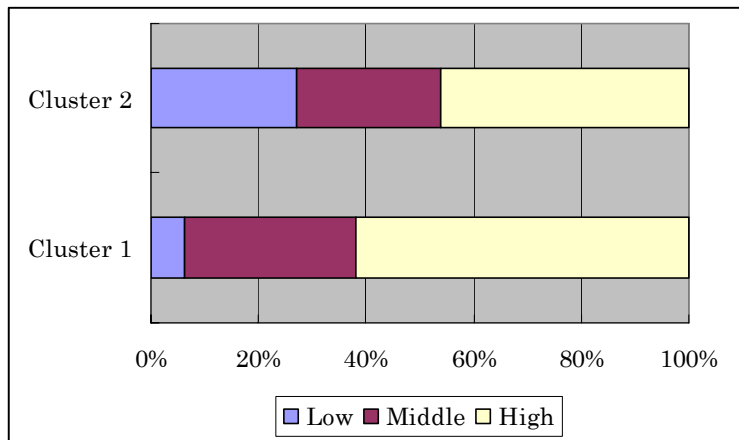
**Figure 4: Fluency of English in Two Clusters**



**Figure 5: Socio-cultural Background and Socio-political Orientations in Two Clusters (Unit: Points)**

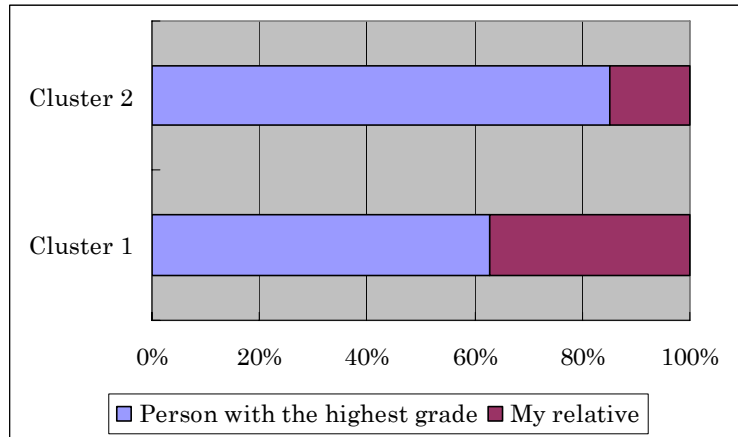


**Figure 6: Academic Career of Two Clusters**



Note) "Low" is junior high graduate level, "Middle" is high school graduate level, and "High" is college/ university graduate level.

**Figure 7: Anti-Nepotism Attitudes of Two Clusters**



### Summary and Discussion

Data of AsiaBarometer survey in 2006 collected in seven Confucian Asian societies revealed the following findings.

New middle class is much better educated, more exposed to globalization, and more fluent speaker of English than working class in every country in Confucian Asia. They are younger except in Japan and have more female employees except in Korea and Vietnam than working class.

As to Socio-political orientations, however, new middle class doesn't show any clear and distinctive characteristics in every society. They are more supportive of gender-equality policy and environmental protection and pro-democratic than working class, but we cannot see any clear distinction between them in some societies like Singapore.

According to the result of our cluster analysis, there are two types of new middle class in East Asia: one is "English-speaking type" and the other is "Confucian type." The latter is huge in volume, and they are much educated but less exposed to globalization probably due to their lacking in fluency of English. They are more secularized and particularistic than "English-speaking type" in nature.

All in all, new middle class in Singapore shows different traits than its counterparts in other Confucian societies in the sense that their life is very globalized on the one hand and their socio-political orientations do not show any distinctiveness which has been identified with new middle classes in advanced societies on the other.

Interestingly, only about 10% of new middle class in Hong Kong, which has a long tradition of English education under British rule just like Singapore does, belong to

“English-speaking type,” which might have something to do with the handover of Hong Kong to China. In order to verify it, however, we need to trace historical change over time.

Socio-cultural background and socio-political orientations of new middle class in Confucian Asia have been formed in their historical contexts. They might include, length of time after the birth of new middle class, influence of socialist regime, tradition of English-learning education, cultural legacy of Confucianism, and so on. These factors have been contributing to form unique characteristics of new middle class in some way or other.

One of the contributions of AsiaBarometer is that we can get a rough picture of new middle class in each society on empirical basis. In order to draw much fine picture, however, we need to organize international research team composed of specialists in each society. It is not too much to say that the analysis of AsiaBarometer’s data is just a starting point for our further exploration of new middle class issues in Confucian Asia.

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