

**Reconsidering the East Asian Middle Class:
Research Issues, Data Validation and Future Prospects**

Based on Survey Data Analysis of AsiaBarometer for Japan, China, and South Korea in 2006¹

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Abstract

In recent Asian studies, the discussion about East Asian middle class can be roughly classified into the following three aspects: 1) as far as politics is concerned, political scientists hold that East Asian middle class functions as promoting the democratization around East Asia; 2) in economics, economists place emphasis on certain common consumption features and life style of the East Asian middle class which contributes to the formation of a uniform market in East Asia; and 3) in culture studies, by analyzing the phenomenon of mass culture such as “Japanese craze”, “South Korean fad”, and “Chinese fad”, cultural scholars point out the common cultural features shared by East Asian middle class. Currently, most experts and scholars engaged in East Asian researches believe that East Asian middle class is the base of East Asia Community and its formation will promote the construction of the latter. However, prior to academic discussion, what is East Asian middle class on earth? This fundamental issue always seems to be neglected.

To search for the answer, upon reviewing previous researches related to East Asian middle class, this paper focuses on Japanese, Chinese, and South Korean middle classes, adopting the survey data of AsiaBarometer in 2006. Firstly, the “middle class of occupation”, “middle class of income”, and “middle class of education” of the aforesaid three East Asian countries are identified in accordance with the three objective criteria of occupation, income, and education, to work out the “objective middle class” of the three countries who simultaneously comply with the three criteria. Then, the question on understanding of “living standard” which is closely associated with the class identification is employed, to indirectly investigate the subjective identification of East Asian middle class and calculate the “subjective middle class” respectively in the three East Asian countries. Discovering the inconsistency between the middle classes with subjective and objective indicators, this paper refers to various previous representative statements in East Asian middle class consciousness research, and discusses such researches. In this process, this research pays attention to the importance of such factor as “media” which has been mentioned before by scholars but not researched yet. Therefore, by reviewing the studies on the relationship between media and the middle class, this paper appeals that, on the basis of previous researches, the research method of media studies shall be introduced into future East Asian middle class research, attempting to carry out new interdisciplinary researches, answer the fundamental question of “what is East Asian middle class on earth”, and grasp the real meaning of East Asian middle class.

Keywords:

East Asian middle class; objective indicator; subjective identification; inconsistency; media influence

I. Research background: Vague definition of East Asian middle class

The discussion about the middle class has never ceased in Asia after WWII, regardless of in Japan in middle 1950s, in South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong in middle 1980s, or in China and India in around 2000. In spite of intervals of discussion about the middle class in various countries and regions, as well as the different social environments and objective conditions, all countries and regions take the formation and growth of the middle class as a critical factor influencing the evolution trend of social stratification and development direction of social politics transformation. In late 1990s, with the proposal of East Asia Community, researches on East Asian middle class attract more and more scholars among whom political scientists hold that the middle class can bring democratization to East Asian politics, economists advocate that the uniform consumption form and living style of the middle class contribute to the formation of a uniform market in East Asia, and cultural researchers, by analyzing the pop cultural drift such as “Japanese craze”, “South Korean fad”, and “Chinese fad” in these years, prove that East Asian middle class share common cultural traits. Most scholars believe that the emergence of the middle class will accelerate the formation of East Asia Community. However, the essential issue is always neglected in the academic argument, that is, what on earth is East Asian middle class?

In the study of sociology, “middle class” is always a concept with permanent charm and numerous debates. Although a number of researches have been carried out on the middle class from various layers, including occupation, income, education, reputation, consumption, gender, race, taste, identification, and social political attitude, these research results always put forward new challenges without unified understanding (Bulter and Savage, 1995). The difficult point for researches on the middle class lies in the definition of the middle class. Different concepts of the middle class have been defined by scholars for their respective research objective up to the present. For instance, economists usually define the middle class by the indicator of income; in other words, they put the group with income within certain range under the category of middle class (Kacapyr, Francese, and Crispell, 1996); while sociologists incline to put the group with certain occupational types, namely, mainly those social labors who have separate themselves from physical work and possess certain special technique, under the category of middle class (Mills, 1951; Goldthorpe, 1990; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993; Wright, 1997). Although both the middle class with income and that with occupation can satisfy different interpretations by economists and sociologists, integration of various representative and operable concepts begin to prevail in defining the middle class in present academic research. For example, in U.S., Thompson and Hickey combine income, education, and occupation to investigate the constituting group of the middle class (Thompson and Hickey, 2005). In China, Prof. Chunling Li and Prof. Yi Liu has ever researched the constitution of the middle class from the perspective of income, occupation, and consumption (陆学艺, 2002; 李春玲, 2005; 刘毅, 2006).

Reviewing existing researches on the middle class, the indicators defining can be roughly divided into two types: subjective indicator and objective indicator, among which the former can be further divided into others’ evaluation and self-identification. Others’ evaluation originates from others’ identification about whether a specific person belongs to the middle class, and self-identification pertains to a specific person’s identification about whether he/she belongs to the middle class. As for objective indicators, occupational status, income level, property occupation, educational capital, social reputation, consumption level, race, and blood line are included. Nevertheless, previous empirical

studies have shown that inconsistency usually exists in the middle classes respectively classified with subjective and objective indicators (直井, 1975; 間々田, 1989; 盛山, 1990; 李春玲, 2009, etc.), which gives rise to that the real beingness the middle class is always doubted no matter how many efforts its definer has made.

Among existing researches on Asian middle class, the following three issues are in hot debate: 1) Social profile – what social features do Asian middle class have in their family background, marriage mode, and homogeneity? 2) Living style and class identification – what is the living style of Asian middle class like, and do the members identify themselves as the middle class or other classes? 3) Class politics – what is the attitude of Asian middle class toward the country, social justice, and democratic revolution, and how active are the middle class in political actions and elections? Different definitions of Asian middle class are produced in various researches, even in the same country. Furthermore, most previous researches on Asian middle class are restricted to analysis and discussion in one country, transnational comparisons relatively insufficient. Although Academia Sinica in Taiwan has initiated East Asian Middle Class (EAMC) Project to carry out comparative studies on East Asian middle class in early 1990s and has made remarkable contributions, it has already been executed for nearly 20 years so far in which significant changes has occurred in East Asian and even the world, especially the financial crisis in Asia and the rise of China in 1990s, thus new comparative studies on Asian middle class suitable for the requirements of the time is demanded. For the past few years, we delightedly find that more and more comparative researches on Asian middle class are carried out, such as those by Prof. Shigeto Sonoda and Prof. Sang-jin Han. However, definition of middle class in various comparative researches is still a weak part.

In such a background, the author decides to explore a new way to reconsider East Asian “middle class” with existing research approaches as the basis. Focusing the middle class in Japan, China, and South Korea in the same era³, this research attempts to provide a new viewpoint for future researches on Asian middle class. Analysis strategies adopted in this research are as follows:

1. Based on AsiaBarometer data in 2006 and following the practices of many sociologists, multi-dimensional indicators, including income, occupation and education, are selected, for they have great influence on people’s economic and social status. And middle classes from Japan, China, and South Korea are sampled respectively. Meanwhile, integrate the three objective indicators, to determine the middle class of the three countries that simultaneously comply.
2. By analyzing the number percentage of the people replying as “average” concerning the living standard in AsiaBarometer survey in 2006, indirectly research the self-identification of the interviewed middle classes from Japan, China, and South Korea⁴, and compare the differences among East Asian middle classes by subjective and objective indicators.

³ Choosing the middle classes of Japan, China, and South Korea in the same era background (2006) is out of an attempt to discuss East Asian middle class as a synchronic space issue rather than interpret the differences among the three countries in space and system in a diachronic evolution frame (e.g. forward/backward or mature/immature). Surely, it shall not be deemed as that this research will avoid or neglect the essential factor of historical development when considering the significance of Asian middle class. In addition, in spite of powerful spread of the neoliberalism and enlarged gap of wealth in countries of East Asia after 2000, the number of people who regard themselves positioning in the social middle class does not decrease in Japan, China, and South Korea. Therefore, this research focuses on the middle class of the three East Asian countries in 2006 and researches the influencing factors of their subjective identification, which will contribute to discovering the features of East Asian middle class in a general sense.

⁴ Although, in a strict sense, people’s evaluation of his/her own living standard fails to stand for awareness of his/her social stratum, the two concepts are of strong correlation and high repeatability (盛山, 1990:70).

- Based on relevant literature investigations, discuss such inconsistency of East Asian middle class with subjective and objective indicators, to search for new research concerns and propose suggestions for future researches on East Asian middle class.

II. Data introduction

AsiaBarometer is launched and motivated by Prof Takashi Inoguchi, a Japanese political scientist (Inoguchi et al., 2005; 2006). This large-scale survey began in 2003 and is conducted every year, covering different countries in each year⁵. Initially, AsiaBarometer serves as statistics of political inclination and attitude in such Asian countries as Japan and Afghanistan, some important sociological issue, for instance, the interviewees' occupational reputation, class identification, and their parents' education background and education, are not included in the questionnaire. However, AsiaBarometer provides the largest ever comparative survey in Asia and focuses on the daily lives of ordinary people, using standardized instruments designed around a common research framework. Hence, the author believes that the survey data of AsiaBarometer is conducive to reconsidering East Asian middle class; at the same time, the author hopes to provide a new viewpoint for researches on East Asian middle class from such data.

This research employs AsiaBarometer in 2006, covering 1003 samples from Japan, 1023 samples from South Korea, and 2000 samples for Chinese Mainland⁶.

Table 1 shows the survey data of AsiaBarometer for China, Japan, and South Korea in 2006.

Table 1: Overview of Data Collection

Country	Sample Size	Sampling Areas and Collected Samples
China	2,000	-Eastern (840) -Central (760) -Western (400)
Japan	1,003	-Hokkaido/Tohoku (120) -Kanto (330) -Chubu (182) -Kinki (170) -Kyushu (110) -Chugoku/Shikoku (91)
South Korea	1,023	-Seoul Metropolitan Area (507) -Middle Area (134) -Southwest Area (111) -South-east Area (271)

III. East Asian middle class with objective indicators

⁵ Raw data of 2003, 2004, and 2005 AsiaBarometer survey: <https://www.asiabarometer.org/>.

⁶ It should be noticed that, considering the difficulty of random sampling, AsiaBarometer adopts quota sampling. Restricted by the budget, all data of AsiaBarometer are collected from cities of Japan, China, and South Korea.

As introduced in the research background, this research selects income, occupation, and education which have great influence on people's economic and social status as indicators to classify the interviewees of AsiaBarometer from Japan, China, and South Korea in 2006 and conclude East Asian middle class with objective indicators⁷. The results of this research are as follows:

1. “Middle class of income”

Although most sociologists incline to take occupation as the standard to define the middle class, as stated above, economists prefer to use the income level. However, there hasn't yet been a recognized figure standard to determine the income level for distinguishing the middle class in Japan, China, or South Korea so far. It is difficult to choose such a figure which is yet indispensable for income level from the prospective of operational classification. Therefore, on the basis of previous researches and data surveys, the author takes the annual income ranging RMB 30 thousand through 100 thousand as the income standard for Chinese middle class (肖文涛, 2001; 张宛丽, 2002; 卢嘉瑞, 2003; 刘毅, 2006; 李春玲, 2009), the annual income ranging JPY 5 million through 10 million as the income standard for Japanese middle class (annual survey report on Japanese national income by the National Tax Agency in Japan), and the annual income ranging KRW 30 million to 60 million as the income standard for South Korean middle class (the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs's report on social bipolarization and policy tasks). As a result, the “middle class of income” among the interviewees from Japan, China, and South Korea are demonstrated as follows (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of “Middle Class of Income” among the Interviewees

Country	“Middle Class of Income”	(%)
China	561	28.1
Japan	295	39.2
South Korea	416	41.98

(Investigation by F8 in the questionnaire:

“What was the total gross annual income of your household last year?”)

As shown in the table, the proportions of middle class of income among the total interviewees are 28.1%, 39.2%, and 41.98% respectively in China, Japan, and South Korea.

2. “Middle class of occupation”

Taking occupation as the standard for defining the middle class is a common practice in current sociological researches in some of which the small independent businessmen and landowners are called “the old middle class” while the white-collar management and other non-physical white collars are called “the new middle class”. In this paper, as all data are from AsiaBarometer which are drawn from surveys in Asian countries where the old middle class samples occupy a small percentage, the old middle class is excluded from the research scope. Referring to the paper named as “Emergence of Homogeneous Social Class ?” composited by Prof. Shigeto Sonoda in 2009, this research takes the interviewees giving senior managers (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

⁷ Although the author considers occupational prestige score, social evaluation, family property and consumption style as very important indicators in stratum research, the author has to give them up for they are unavailable in the survey data of AsiaBarometer.

company with less than 300 employees), employed professionals or specialists (hospital doctors, employed lawyers, engineers, etc.), and clerical workers as the reply to the issue of occupational property as “middle class of occupation”. In accordance with such statistics of occupational standard, the proportions of “middle class of occupation” in the survey data of AsiaBarometer in 2006 are shown as follows (Table 3).

Table 3: Proportion of “Middle Class of Occupation” among the Interviewees

Country	“Middle Class of Occupation”	(%)
China	458	22.90
Japan	174	17.44
South Korea	151	14.77

(Investigation by F6 in the questionnaire:

“What is your occupation? Please select one of the following responses.”)

As shown in the table, the proportions of middle class of occupation among the total interviewees are 22.90%, 17.44%, and 14.77% respectively in China, Japan, and South Korea.

3. “Middle class of education”

Income, occupation, and education are closely related to each other, among which education, to some extent, may decide income and occupation and stand for the stratum status. Hence, education is always an important indicator in stratum researches. Experts and scholars hold relatively consistent opinion on the establishment of educational standard for middle class. This research takes the interviewees with education background of “university/graduate school” as the middle class of education according to the previous standards for researching East Asian middle class. The proportions of “middle class of education” in the three East Asian countries on the basis of such statistics are as follows (Table 4).

Table 4: Proportion of “Middle Class of Education” among the Interviewees

Country	“Middle Class of Education”	(%)
China	251	12.55
Japan	216	21.66
South Korea	386	37.77

(Investigation by F3 in the questionnaire:

“What is the highest level of education you have completed?”)

As shown in the table, the proportions of middle class of education among the total interviewees are 12.55%, 21.66%, and 37.77% respectively in China, Japan, and South Korea.

4. East Asian middle class with composition of the three objective indicators

In the sections above, this research has achieved the “middle class” with three objective indicators, namely, “middle class of income”, “middle class of occupation”, and “middle class of education”. The author hereby integrates the three objective indicators of income, occupation, and

education, to determine the “objective middle class” of Japan, China, and South Korea, and to find out the number of people complying with the multi-dimensional standards among the interviewees of AsiaBarometer (Table 5). Table 5 indicates that, no matter in China, Japan, or South Korea, the number of the middle class simultaneously complying with the three objective indicators of income, occupation, and education is very small, only occupying 10% of the total number, to be specific as 5.17%, 9.28%, and 7.26% in China, Japan, and South Korea respectively.

Table 5: Proportion of “Objective Middle Class” among the Interviewees

Country	“Objective Middle Class”	(%)
China	103	5.17
Japan	70	9.28
South Korea	72	7.26

(Investigation by F3, F6, and F8 in the questionnaire)

IV. East Asian middle class with subjective indicator

As mentioned above, due to constraint of data, this research takes the reply of “average” to Q8: “How would you describe your standard of living” as the standard for judging “subjective middle class”. Although, in a strict sense, subjective orientation of “average” living standard fails to stand for all the subjective contents and value identification contained in the term “middle class”, the meanings of the two concepts are similar as interpreted in Note 4. It can be found in previous relevant researches that both self-judgment of the living standard and self-judgment of the stratum property are easily influenced by many objective factors, such as income, occupation, and education. Thus the two concepts are of strong correlation and high repeatability, allowed to be regarded as analogues (間々田, 1993).

By analyzing the relevant data of AsiaBarometer, the following results are obtained (Table 6).

Table 6: Proportion of “Subjective Middle Class” among the Interviewees

Standard of living	Country	Respondents	%
High	China	21	1.05
	Japan	15	1.50
	South Korea	9	0.88
Relatively high	China	193	9.66
	Japan	114	11.40
	South Korea	95	9.30
Average	China	1360	68.07
	Japan	703	70.30
	South Korea	631	61.74

Relatively low	China	320	16.02
	Japan	132	13.20
	South Korea	231	22.60
Low	China	104	5.21
	Japan	36	3.60
	South Korea	56	5.48

(Investigation by Q8 in the questionnaire: “How would you describe your standard of living?”)

As shown in the table, the proportions of interviewees giving “average” as the reply concerning his/her living standard among the total interviewees are 68.07, 70.30%, and 61.74% respectively in China, Japan, and South Korea.

V. Discussion about inconsistency between East Asian middle classes with subjective and objective indicators

Table 2-6 indicate that, no matter in China, Japan, or South Korea, the proportions of East Asian middle class among the interviews are show total difference with subjective and objective indicators. Among the interviewees from the three countries, the percentage of people regarding his/her standards of living were average goes beyond 60%, which is far exceeding the analytic statistics with objective indicators. Such inconsistency between the objective status and subjective identification in East Asian middle class has been a repeatedly interpreted issue in various empirical researches by now.

In Japan, many scholars have started to propose various hypotheses since middle 1970s, attempting to explain the relationship between “objective middle class” and “subjective middle class”: Kenichi Tominaga pointed out in his paper that, existence of a large number of “subjective middle class” is because the distribution system of social resources and rewards was democratized, but not that all are in the middle position of the society. Such inconsistency originates in a greater inconsistency of status characteristics (富永, 1977). Tominaga’s explanation seems reasonable, but, in Takao Mamada’s data validation, it was proved to be effective in high growth of Japanese economy but not convictive, for the data did not show expected dramatic decrease of “subjective middle class” in the economic recession and intensified social inequality of Japan after 1974 (間々田, 1993). Following that, Shigenobu Kishimoto interpreted that the number of “subjective middle class” is more than that of “objective middle class” because: (1) people tend to make comparisons with the past, then think that their own life is better than in the past, and (2) people are apt to compare themselves to others in the same time, thence consider that they are all more or less the same (岸本, 1978). One year thereafter, Michiko Naoi analyzed the SSM survey data of 1975 and demonstrated that Kishimoto’s explanation is false and that various objective stratum elements, such as age, education, occupational status, family income, and property, were of influencing but not decisive contribution to people’s subjective stratum consciousness to some extent. She pointed out that it was people’s understanding of their own living state that decided the subjective stratum consciousness (直井, 1979). Henceforth, Kazuo Seiyama criticized Naoi’s opinion, for he regarded that, the living state and stratum consciousness both fell into the subjective category, thus the inconsistency between subjective and objective middle class remained unsolved (盛山, 1990). Yasusuke Murakami coined a new term “the

new middle mass” to stand for “subjective middle class”. He held that “the new middle mass” had the unique lifestyle and stratum consciousness and were the product of the advanced industrial societies (村上, 1984). However, since Murakami called “subjective middle class” as “the new middle mass” to weakening their attribute as a stratum, how could he grant it with unique stratum consciousness? In addition, most scholars believed that the large proportion of “subjective middle class” in Japan was out of the influence of Moderation Ideology; but Yoshiyuki Sakamoto regarded that this phenomena could also be found in other East Asian countries besides Japan (坂元, 1988). As a result, this research discovers that, although these Japanese scholars have tried to consider the difference between “objective middle class” and “subjective middle class” under a variety of hypotheses, every scholar fiercely criticize the previous researches before proposing his/her own hypothesis and providing the interpretations, and reasonable explanations do not yet exist so far. However, in 1988, Kenji Kosaka found a new way and wrote in his book, “The social status consciousness is not a judgment made by individuals about their positions in the actual, objective social status structure. Instead, at first each individual has his/her own unique perceptual knowledge of social class image, and then based on such image, he/she establishes his/her own social status. Hence, before solving the problem of social status consciousness, the problem of the class image formation should be explicated.” (高坂, 1988). In 1990, Kazuo Seiyama also mentioned in his thesis that, people always make an image about their standards of living, and then under the influence of the image, they decided their consciousness of social standards (盛山, 1990). Different from previous scholars, Kosaka and Seiyama offered the key to an understanding of the difference between “objective middle class” and “subjective middle class”, but they did not point out or conducted any corresponding convictive analysis of where the image influencing the stratum consciousness came from and how it was formed.

In China, most researchers on middle class interpret the cause for the inconsistency between present Chinese middle class’s objective status and subjective identification from the following two viewpoints.

1) Structuralization: seen from the social totality, the inconsistency between Chinese middle class’s subjective identification and objective indicators is out from the objective social stratification structure (孙立平, 李强, 深远, 1998; 肖文涛, 2001; 李春玲, 2003; 李培林, 张翼, 赵延东, 梁栋, 2005; 沈晖, 2005). As per the discussion of these scholars, in the process of “social transformation” of China, complete unification is yet unavailable in internal structural differentiation for the middle class, thus it is unlikely to form a middle class which is in the middle position concerning all aspects or to form the due common cultural identification of the middle class. It can be concluded that the interpretation from this viewpoint is based on Marx’s theory that “people’s social consciousness cannot decide the social being, but oppositely, it’s the latter that decides the former”. Such interpretation from the viewpoint of structuralization is the main stream of present researches of this kind in China.

2) Construction: some Chinese scholars have been aware of some other factors that influence the subjective identification formation of the social members who fall into the middle class with objective indicators, hence, they hope to go deeply into the middle class’s psychological mechanism generating the stratum consciousness and identification in addition to objective determinism, so as to make it possible to dialogue with stratum identification epigenesis of constructivism. With Xin Liu (刘欣, 2002) as the initial, Chinese domestic academic circle has begun to bring in the proposition of “relative deprivation”, aiming at analyzing the influence of the social member’s perception of changes in life fortune and sense of social unfairness on formation of subjective stratum consciousness. Thence,

social member's subjective judgment was taken as an argument pointer to interpret the formation of stratum consciousness. Following this idea, Yandong Zhao (赵延东, 2005), Hui Shen (沈晖, 2005) and etc. provided their discussions about the "status of relative deprivation" and "sense of relative deprivation" of the middle class. Zhao held that "relative deprivation proposition" was effectively interpretive to the social member's subjective stratum identification. Furthermore, he noted that, with the dramatic changes of social structure and rapid development of information technology, people were no longer limited to their peripheral social groups when selecting the "reference group", and they might evaluate their own social status with the ideal social group and life style learnt through various information, thus their "sense of relative deprivation" was stronger than before when they had took their peripheral people or people with similar identity status as the referents (李培林, 张翼, 赵延东, 梁栋, 2005:84). Limited by the length of the article, he did not conduct more discussion. Going further than him, Shen pointed out that the identification formation mechanism of the middle class could be analyzed through social mechanism and psychological mechanism. She believed that the fault selection of reference led to irrational self-identification of the social public. "The city public does compare their present life with that of the past or the social lower class, but takes the social upper class life or the expected life as the reference" (沈晖, 2005: 51-52). Vaguely taking media image as the reason for the middle class's fault reference, Shen regarded that "present Chinese understanding of the middle class is mainly from information input", thereby denied the existence of rational thinking and self-awareness of media image in the middle class.

Various hypotheses and statements of inconsistency between subjective and objective East Asian middle class by Japanese and Chinese scholars by now have been reviewed as above⁸, from which we can roughly draw the following conclusions in spite of different interpretations and statements: the reason for the inconsistency between subjective and objective East Asian middle class includes not only social environment and various objective factors, such as occupation, income and education, but also complex influence from psychological mechanism. Therefore, when considering East Asian middle class, we should set out from both subjective and objective aspects, adding new explanatory variables to existing objective factors. For instance, "media" which has ever been mentioned by scholars but no convictive statements provided can be such a variable to develop and deepen existing researches.

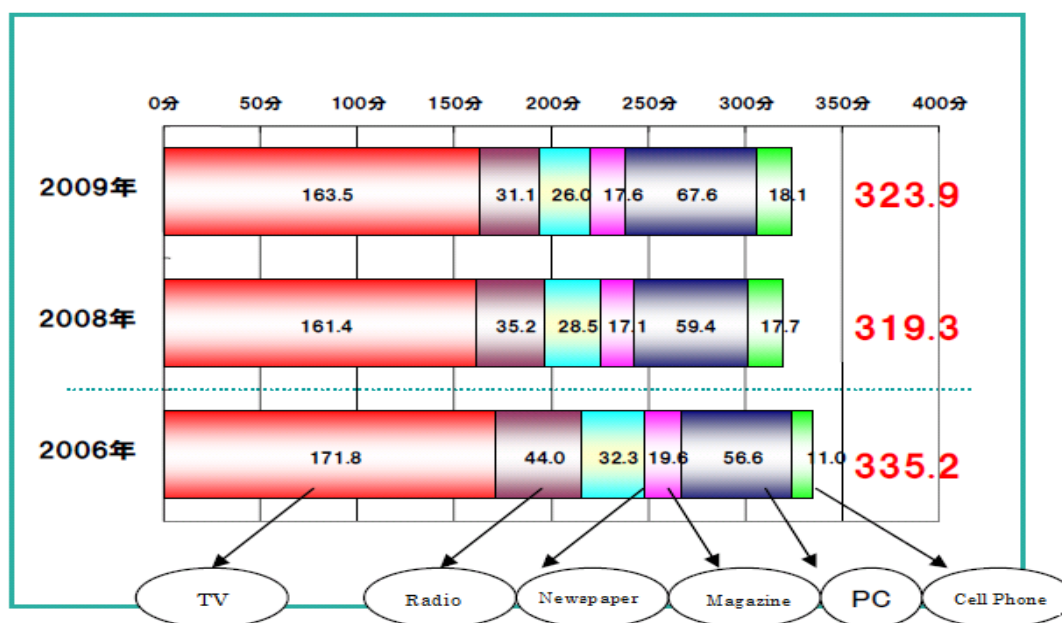
Although no relevant items proving the influence of media on East Asian middle class and the relationship between media and East Asian middle class can be found in AsiaBarometer data, it is an undeniable fact that the ubiquitous media have become an indispensable part in our daily life. In other words, no matter how many efforts we make to resist or deny the influence of media, media are surrounding the majority of our daily life. For instance, the results of national life time survey by Japanese NHK in 2005 indicate that, the Japanese averagely spend 4 hours and 27 minutes contacting media, and thereof the time spent on TV occupies the most⁹. The 2009 Central Location Test made by Institute of Media Environment of Hakuhodo DY Media Partners Inc. in 2009 also proves that, Tokyo residents spend up to more than 5 hours utilizing media. Moreover, the indirect contact with media is

⁸ It should be declared that relevant researches on South Korean middle class found in this research are mainly discussions about such political features as democratization. The only paper on South Korean stratum consciousness found is *Stratum Identification in Korea; An essay* composed by Tamio Hattori (服部, 1995), however, this paper is of no representativeness for it is about the relationship between South Korean stratum consciousness and income and property. Thus this paper fails to list relevant researches in South Korea.

⁹ The NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute:
http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/research/kokunai/kokunai/list_kokunai1.html

not included in the contacting time in the above two surveys (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Media utilization time of Tokyo residents



(Hakuhodo DY media partners Inc: <http://www.media-kankyo.jp/#home>)

In fact, influence of media on stratum construction is a permanent topic in traditional media studies and cultural studies. As having been proved by many scholars, the functions of media include “construction of image” and “social construction of reality” (Lippmann 1954; Berger and Luckmann 1967; Adoni and Mane 1984). Stuart Hall has ever remarked that, “As social groups and classes live, if not in their productive then in their ‘social’ relations, increasingly fragmented and sectionally differentiated lives, the mass media are more and more responsible (a) for providing the basis on which groups and classes construct an ‘image’ of the lives, meanings, practices and values of *other* groups and classes; (b) for providing the images, representations and ideas around which the social totality, composed of all these separate and fragmented pieces, can be coherently grasped as a ‘whole’. This is the first of the great cultural functions of the modern media: the provision and the selective construction of *social knowledge*, of social imagery, through which we perceive the ‘worlds’, the ‘live realities’ of others, and imaginarily reconstruct their lives and ours into some intelligible ‘world-of-the-whole’, some ‘live totality’ (Hall, 1977: 340-341).” Canadian economist Dallas Smythe even regarded media as the consciousness industry, commenting that, “The prime item on the agenda of Consciousness Industry is producing *people* (Smythe, 1981: 13).”

In current study on the middle class, the role of the media is often mentioned. The representative scholar Charles Wright Mills mentioned the influence of media on the formation of middle class in his book. Moreover, he argued that, since in Marx's era, the media had not been sufficiently developed yet, Marx considered that the economic base decided the superstructure unilaterally. However, the media had in fact made a great impact on the superstructure, even affecting the formation of social status (Mills, 1951). In about 1960, the Japanese sociologist Kunio Odaka also stated in his paper that the development of the media homogenized Japanese society and facilitated the formation of the Japanese middle class (尾高, 1961:5). In recent years, with the boom of studying the Chinese middle class, the

majority of researchers have noticed that the media images have impacted and have even been instrumental in the construction of the formation of the middle class. Some sociologists have maintained that this phenomenon should be given enough attention (李春玲, 2009: 120). In spite of the limited available Korean researches, the author has also realized that in Prof. Sangjin Han's recent paper, it is suggested that we need to be concerned about the impact of culture and the expression of the press while analyzing how to decide social status (Han, 2009). Although these studies have paid attention to the influence of the media, what seems to be lacking is to analyze the media images of the middle class in practice.

On the other hand, most communication studies researchers believe that the mass media creates many images of the middle class in the field of lifestyle and consumption. Nevertheless, it seems that the relevant empirical research is scarce. In existing media studies, research on feminine and family images in the movie, television or magazine from the viewpoint of feminism is going on. However, studies on the media images of the middle class, or the research on the relationship between middle class and media are quite few. In Japan, a Tetsuo Arima paper stated that American TV drama offered the fiction of middle class more than its reality (有馬, 2003). But Arima did not develop enough analysis about how the television described the fiction of middle class. There are three representative researches in Europe and the U.S.A: researches with American magazines from 1890 to 1905 as the research subject made by Richard Ohmann (Ohmann, 1996) and researches on consumption of "middle class" culture Lebanese metropolitans in 1990s made by Liechty (Liechty, 2003). The two scholars discussed about the relationship among middle class, media, and consumers. However, their researches still failed to provide answers to how media constructs the middle class. Moreover, in 2000, Fernandes Leela researched Indian media in late 1990s, pointing out that media's construction of middle class image was an outcome of global extension of consumption culture (Fernandes, 2000). Similar to Ohmann and Liechty, Fernandes did not develop analysis of concrete media image and its formation process. In China, this kind of research can be approximately divided into two aspects. One is the critical researches on media stratification and differentiation caused by the emergence of Chinese middle class (Yen Xiaoping, 1995; Zhao Yuezhi, 2000; 孙玮, 2002; 王艳, 周正昂, 2003), and the other is the critical research on taking fashion magazines exclusively for Chinese middle class to lead vanity consumption emerging in late 1990s (戴锦华, 1999; 周春玲, 2000; 王晓明, 2000; 孟繁华, 2004). These researches pay attention to Chinese middle class – a rising social stratum in the first time, and incisively perceive the changes and development of Chinese media, attempting to seek for the correlation between them. However, similar to overseas researches, these researches fail to develop concrete analysis of texts about media image. In spite of analysis of the media image of Chinese middle class from the perspective of texts by the new generation of Chinese media researchers with Jing He (何晶, 2007) as the representative, these previous researches are limited to media studies, failing to organically combining the same with middle class researches.

As a result, the author holds that, attempts shall be actively made to combine media studies and stratum researches in future researches, to develop interdisciplinary and multi-angle East Asian middle class researches, fill the vacancy of previous researches, answer the essential question of "what is East Asian middle class on earth", and find the real meaning of East Asian middle class.

VI. Conclusion: future prospects of researches on East Asian middle class

Up to now, in the process seeking for “what East Asian middle class is”, this paper reviews various previous researches relevant to East Asian middle class, and focuses on middle classes of Japan, China, and South Korea based on AsiaBarometer data in 2006. With three objective standards of occupation, income, and education, “middle class of occupation”, “middle class of income”, and “middle class of education” are identified in the three East Asian countries. Then, the question about understanding of “living standard” which is closely related to stratum identification is drawn for indirect investigation of the subjective identification of East Asian middle class. Upon discovering the inconsistency between subjective and objective East Asian middle class, this paper refers to representative discussions about consciousness of East Asian middle class, and holds that attention need to be paid to the new variable of “media” on the basis of existing East Asian middle class researches.

Finally, based on previous researches on the relationship between middle class and media, the author suggests that, in future researches, methods of media studies shall be actively introduced on the basis of previous researches, through analyzing the texts relevant to media image of East Asian middle class and exploring the formation and consumption processes of media image, to fill the vacancy of previous researches, perfect the interpretation of constraints of subjective identification of East Asian middle class, and enhance the statement for the inconsistency between subjective and objective East Asian middle class. Meanwhile, comparative analysis can be made among the media image of East Asian middle class, middle class in academic language, and that in official language; appropriately added by viewpoints of diachronicity and globalization, contributing to all-dimensional interpretation of “what East Asian middle class is on earth” and its potential meaning.

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