

Draft: Not for Citation

**A Matter of Trust:
Southeast Asian Middle Class
Perspectives of the State**

Terence Chong, PhD
Senior Fellow
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

One of the defining characteristics of classic middle class theory is its critical relations with the state. For a variety of historical reasons, such characteristics find little analytical traction with regards to the Southeast Asian middle class. Given the porosity and ambiguity of the term, this paper, premised on the findings from the Asia Barometer, suggests that analyses of state-society relations in Southeast Asian escape the rigid conceptual boundaries of ‘middle class’ literature and, instead, isolate factors that demonstrate strong correlation with state criticality for a better understanding of the evolving social compact and political change in the region. This paper surveys the literature on the Southeast Asian middle class and presents the findings on levels of trust that Southeast Asians have for their state. It proceeds to identify ‘age’ and ‘education’ as key factors in determining attitudes towards the government.

Introduction

Just a stone’s throw away from the bustling crowds at the downtown shopping district, retired civil servant James Lim sips his morning coffee. As he muses over the dramatic material and infrastructural changes that he has witness over the last 50 years, Lim nods soberly, “Singapore owes a lot to the PAP [People’s Action Party]. Look, we were a swamp, and now look at what we have made for ourselves. Without them, we would not be here today”. Some three and a half hours away by flight in Hanoi is An Nguyen, a textile businessman. Nguyen is a clear beneficiary of the 1986 *doi moi*, and he makes no qualms about it. When asked if the “socialist-oriented market economy” was good for the country, Nguyen smiles broadly revealing a gold tooth, “Good, yes good. It help [sic.] many Vietnamese people. The government made the right decision [with *doi moi*]. The government has helped many people do

business and improve their lives”. Lim and Nguyen have one thing in common –they both trust their respective governments to work for their society’s interests. They have another thing in common - they are both over 55. Heading down south from the 55-and-above demographic, a different picture emerges. Yasmin, an energetic theatre producer in Kuala Lumpur, has a different take. “We’re getting tired of the ‘race’ politics that has been going on for so long here. It [United Malay National Organisation] is always singing the same song, ...it’s just perpetuating racial and religious divisions in the country for its own advantage”. In Jakarta, Melani S. observes of national politics, “there is too much fighting in government. The bureaucracy is too big, too many holes... things, money, all fall into these holes. The ordinary people don’t see much”. Yasmin and Melani too have several things in common – they both display less trust in their respective governments; they are under 35 years of age; and they both have university degrees. Lim, Nguyen, Yasmin and Melani all belong to the Southeast Asian middle class.

The candid reflections of older citizens like Lim and Nguyen underline one of the defining characteristic of the region’s middle class – its emergence and rise has been largely dependent on centralised and developmental states with close links to global capital. Southeast Asia’s urban centres have increasingly integrated into global and regional networks of finance and production (Katzenstein 2000), while multinational corporations have negotiated with local governments for favourable operating conditions (Shiraishi 2006). The central role of the Southeast Asian state in economic growth must be a key explanation for the limits that the Southeast Asian middle class has had on the democratising process in the region. It may be further argued that the central developmental state and a generally consistent pattern of economic growth have heightened levels of trust that Southeast Asian have in the state and its apparatuses. Surveys show that Southeast Asians claim to have more trust in their governments to do what is best for society, more so than East Asians and citizens from elsewhere.

And yet younger well-educated people like Yasmin and Melani tend to be less trusting of the government and state institutions than their older counterparts. Surveys show that those who enjoy better education tended to be less trusting of the public education system and other state institutions. This is perhaps not surprising for even if the Southeast Asian middle class has been a by-product of the centralised state, societies like Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and to some extent, the Philippines, from the late 1980s onwards have experienced major economic and social transformations which led to more class-stratified and urban societies. Open to the inflows of global capital, urban centres in these countries have witnessed not just industrialisation and mass consumption but also greater reception to cosmopolitan (largely Western) values, civil society and desire for political pluralism.

This paper explores one of the most enduring features of the Southeast Asian middle class - its relationship with the state and its apparatuses. The so-called ‘Asian miracle’ of the 1990s saw the rapid expansion of the *nouveau riche* among the ‘Asian Tigers’

(Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore), prompting scholars to explore their modes of consumption, identity formations and changing relations with centralist authoritarian states. Jointly managed by the Research and Information Centre for Asian Studies at Tokyo University and the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at Waseda University, the Asia Barometer represents the largest survey in Asia, covering East, Southeast, South and Central Asia.¹ It focuses on ordinary Asians and their relationships with family, neighbourhood, workplace, social and political institutions and the marketplace. The survey was conducted with country-wide face-to-face interviews using standardized instruments designed around a common research framework.² The Asia Barometer was carried out according to country clusters from 2003-2009, with Southeast Asian countries surveyed in late 2005 and early 2006. This survey gauged attitudes towards governance, social virtues, the new middle class, religiosity, mass media, identity and globalisation.

This paper focuses on the respondents from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, who were asked if they trusted state institutions - such as the central government; the legal system; the police; public health and education - to “operate in the best interest of society”.³ The results will be discussed according to country, gender, age group and education level. It attempts to show that while the historical and political specificity of the term “Southeast Asian middle class” eschews western theoretical frameworks, the variables of age and education have strong correlations with notions of governmental trust.

The Southeast Asian Middle Class: Diversity and Complexity

The Southeast Asian middle class is often thought of as the ‘third wave’ of development in greater Asia. The ‘first wave’ was the emergence of Japan as an economic entity in the early 20th century; the ‘second wave’ was the rise of so-called “Asian Tigers” (Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore) from the 1970s onwards; while the ‘fourth wave’ is currently seen as the rise of the Chinese middle class. The middle classes across Southeast Asia - particularly Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore - have emerged from complex historical, political and economic forces. They are the product of globalisation, first in the form

¹ The Asia Barometer was initiated by Prof Takashi Inoguchi. More information can be gleaned at www.asiabarometer.org

² There have been, thus far, a total of six surveys conducted in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008 with a total respondent size of 50,000.

³ The findings presented in this paper are based on the dataset released in July 2010 by Tokyo University. Question 29 on page 12 of the *Asia Barometer English Master Questionnaire 2006* was “Please indicate to what extent you trust the following institutions to operate in the best interest of society. If you don’t know what to reply or have no particular opinion, please say so”. The options offered to respondents were “Trust a lot”; “Trust to a degree”; “Don’t really trust”; “Don’t trust at all”; “Haven’t thought about it”; and “Don’t know”.

of post-WWII American capitalist expansionism and, later, Japanese investments in the region (Yamashita and Eades 2003). They are, to different degrees, “largely a state-generated phenomenon” (King 2008a:74), whose political character of the Asian developmental state stretches across a wide spectrum from the democratic, semi-democratic, soft authoritarian to the authoritarian, the nature of which contributes to the relationship it shares with its respective middle class (Case 2002). Nevertheless, attempts towards a singular concrete definition of a ‘Southeast Asian middle class’ have proven unfruitful. Although a variety of methods – from the Weberian classification of class, status and power to Marxian notions of class conflict to – have been deployed, the sheer density of ground realities renders the relationship between phenomenon and theory “confusing” and “complex” (Dhakidae 2001:476-485), so much so that some have asserted that “the Asian middle classes... cannot, at present, be characterised as similar to the class presented in the Western model, which is distinct from other strata in terms of culture and consciousness” (Hattori *et al* 2003:136). Others see the ‘Southeast Asian middle class’ as heuristically perplexing and issue the collective demand – “Will the real Southeast Asian middle class please stand up!” (Kessler 2001:36).

As such, many have preferred to see the Southeast Asian middle class not as a single but plural group. It has been called “middle classes” to reflect the variety of the middle portion of society (Kahn 1996); it has been examined as “fractions” because of contrasting modes of leisure and consumption patterns (Paritta 2002); while others see it as a more fluid dynamic across three main segments, namely the “new middle class” (consisting of salaried professionals); the “old middle class” (consisting the self-employed and small scale entrepreneurs); and the “marginal middle class” (consisting of lower grade white collar workers) (Hsiao and Wang 2001; see also King 2008b). Even for Singapore, widely known as a middle class society, the criteria of income and occupation reveals four strata including “upper”, “middle”, “working” and “lower” (Tan 2004). In the case of Indonesia, scholars have written about a location-specific middle class. As the very centre of the process of Indonesian industrialisation, Jakarta “has given rise to a specific kind of Indonesian middle class” (Dhakidae 2001:509). Meanwhile, the classical concept of class distinction is unhelpful in Thailand given that the cultural division between the rural community and the Thai middle class is not clear cut, for “even the elite and the middle class follow some spiritual practices” (Pongsapich 2001:103). In Malaysia, the phenomenon of the *Melayu Baru* is a complex signifier of state intervention, global capital and cosmopolitan taste, and distinct from the Chinese or even older Malay middle class (Chong 2005).

Another method in the examination of the Southeast Asian middle class is to replace the term 'middle class' with 'new rich', and investigated by way of its consumption patterns, lifestyles and identity formations (see Robison and Goodman 1996; Pinches 1999; and Chua 2000). This mode of scholarship took off in the late 1990s when the decade of economic growth, the 1997 Asian financial crisis notwithstanding, resulted in the emergence of a middle class in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore whose conspicuous consumption offered scholars evidence to examine the intersections of globalization, politics and cultural identities (see also Shiraishi and Phongpaichit 2008). Such modes of analysis utilized an arsenal of disciplines from cultural studies, semiotics, feminist theories, psychoanalysis to postmodernism. However, while "Asia's new rich" were described as beneficiaries of capitalism and "uniquely positioned in a global and international context, in which their societies have long been subjugated and disadvantaged" (Pinches 1999:9), they nevertheless "do not constitute a monolithic and homogenous category, and cannot be assumed to have a vested interest in subordinating the state to society and making accountable its officials" (Robison and Goodman 1996:7). However, even though the term "new rich" suggests that the scholars concerned had moved beyond the Western classical definition of the 'middle class' and its history-specific characteristics to understand the emerging Asian middle class as one steeped in material consumption, it is still highly problematic as an analytical concept (King 2008a).

The 'Southeast Asian middle class' is a highly porous and ambiguous term. This paper does not seek to analytically define the middle class but to offer several broad trends and patterns with regards to age and education across the region which may provide some conceptual consistency. The Asia Barometer results suggest that age and education continue to be primary factors in determining attitudes towards the government.

Trust in Central Government

Trust in central governments remains relatively high in Southeast Asia. Over 4 out of 5 respondents from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand said that they "trust a lot" or "trust to a degree" that their central government would operate in the best interest of their society. The highest scores were from Singapore which registered 91.2 per cent; followed by Malaysia with 88.9 per cent; Indonesia with 80.6 per cent; Thailand with 79.1 per cent; the Philippines with 72.7 per cent; and finally Cambodia with 72 per cent. The high figures for Singapore do not come as a surprise as other polls have shown similarly high levels of citizenry trust in the Singapore government.⁴ The high scores of Thailand and Malaysia may coincide with the popular (and populist) administrations of Thaksin Shinawatra and Abdullah

⁴ The 2010 Edelman Trust Barometer, for example, finds that Singapore demonstrates the highest level of trust in government at 84 per cent among the 22 countries polled [<http://www.edelman.com/trust/2010/>] (accessed: 25 Sept 2010).

Badawi, respectively, both of which enjoyed high approval ratings before their eventual replacement.

Conversely, respondents who professed the lowest levels of trust in their central government were from Cambodia, with 27.1 per cent answering “don’t really trust” or “don’t trust at all”. They were followed by the Philippines (26.8 per cent); Thailand (20.9 per cent); Indonesia (19 per cent); Malaysia (10.8 per cent); and finally Singapore (7.3 per cent). Comparatively speaking these Southeast Asian countries display high levels of trust in their central governments with an average of 81.1 per cent. East Asian societies like China, Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan show an average of 58.5 per cent trust level,⁵ while the global average drops further to 49 per cent.⁶

There seems to be a correlation between levels of trust and a country’s stage of economic development and education level. With the exception of Singapore, societies like Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan which are economically mature and enjoy better education have lower levels of trust in their central governments to operate in the best interest of society. On the other hand, in countries like Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines - where corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency and nepotism are widespread - levels of trust still remain relatively high.

Trust in the Legal System

Trust in the legal system is also generally high across the Southeast Asian countries. When asked if they trusted their legal system to operate in the best interest of society, Singaporeans ranked highest with 90.9 per cent answering that they “trust a lot” or “trust to a degree” that it would, while the lowest ranked were the Cambodians with 53 per cent who answered “trust a lot” or “trust to a degree”, while 46.3 per cent answered “don’t really trust” or “don’t trust at all”. The corresponding figures for Malaysians were 84 per cent (“trust a lot” or “trust to a degree”) and 15.6 per cent (“don’t really trust” or “don’t trust at all”); Indonesia – 76.1 per cent and 22.3 per cent, respectively; Filipinos – 67.5 per cent and 32 per cent, respectively; and Thais – 76.4 per cent and 23.5 per cent, respectively.

Again, these Southeast Asian countries compared well with East Asian societies. Southeast Asian respondents who answered that they “trust a lot” or “trust to a degree” comprised 76.6 per cent of those surveyed. Meanwhile, East Asian respondents who answered the same way came up to 57.8 per cent.

Gender and Levels of Trust

⁵ Source: Asia Barometer. China shows the highest levels of trust with 88.1 per cent respondents answering “trust a lot” or “trust to a degree”; followed by Hong Kong with 58.8 per cent; Taiwan with 34.9 per cent; and finally Japan with 33.3 per cent.

⁶ 2010 Edelman Trust Barometer

There also appears to be some correlation between gender and levels of trust. Women are more likely to answer that they “trust a lot” or “trust to a degree” that state institutions will operate in society’s interest. The percentage of women who pick these two categories is generally 5-10 per cent higher than men in the same categories. However, the opposite is not necessarily true. There does not seem to be a correlation between gender and levels of distrust, with both men and women equally likely to answer that they “don’t really trust” or “don’t trust at all”.

Age and Levels of Trust

Nevertheless, when age is introduced as an independent variable, a particular trend emerges. The correlation between age group and levels of trust becomes stronger. For example, of the Southeast Asian respondents who answered that they “trust a lot” in the central government to operate in the interest of society, 24.5 per cent were aged between 20-29 (the youngest group). However, of the respondents who answered “don’t really trust”, the percentage of 20-29 year olds increased to 33.2 per cent. With the exception of Singapore, the youth from these Southeast Asian countries were less likely to trust the central government.

25.1 per cent of Cambodians aged between 20-29 answered that they “trust a lot” in the central government; while 36.8 per cent of the same age group answered “don’t really trust”. For Indonesia, the figures were 27.9 percent and 42.2 percent respectively; Malaysia – 28.6 per cent and 37.9 per cent; the Philippines – 13.8 per cent and 31.6 per cent; Singapore - 20.9 per cent and 16.5 per cent; and Thailand – 21.9 per cent and 27.2 per cent. As can be seen, youth in the Philippines had the least amount of trust in their central government. This correlation between age and other institutions like public health or education is less obvious.

This correlation is as strong in East Asian societies. With the exception of Japan, young respondents from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan were much more likely to distrust their central governments. 21.5 per cent of China respondents aged between 20-29 answered “trusted a lot”, while 25.5 per cent answered “don’t really trust”; 6.1 per cent of Hong Kong respondents answered “trust a lot”, while 26.1 per cent answered “don’t really trust”; while 8.3 per cent of Taiwan respondents answered “trusted a lot”, with 29.5 per cent answering “don’t really trust”. Only Japan saw 18.2 per cent who replied “trust a lot”, with the figure lowering to 16.4 per cent for those who answered “don’t really trust”.

Another clear correlation between age and trust can be found when young citizens were asked about the police. Here citizens aged between 20-29 in all Southeast Asian countries were more likely to express higher levels of distrust. 33.3 per cent of young Cambodians answered that they “trust a lot” in the police to operate in the best interest of their society; while 34.9 per cent answered “don’t really trust”. The corresponding figures for young Indonesians were 29.5 per cent (“trust a lot”) and

37.7 per cent (“don’t really trust”); young Malaysians 28.3 per cent and 35.7 per cent, respectively; young Filipinos 23.3 per cent and 30.2 per cent, respectively; young Singaporeans 20.4 per cent and 26.2 per cent, respectively; and finally, Thailand 25.2 per cent and 28.9 per cent, respectively. The noteworthy finding here is that young Singaporeans were more likely, among their Southeast Asian counterparts, to say that they “don’t really trust” the police.

Education and Levels of Trust

Finally, and perhaps most pertinent to the issue of the middle class, is the correlation between respondent education levels and their trust in state institutions. Respondents were asked to choose from a variety of education levels that best described them – ‘no formal education’; ‘elementary school/junior high/middle school’; ‘high school’; ‘professional school/technical school’; and ‘university/graduate school’.

For convenience sake, this paper divides respondents into three different education levels – ‘low’ (no formal education); ‘mid’ (elementary school/junior high/middle school and high school) and ‘high’ (professional school/technical school and university/graduate school). In general the trend appears to be that respondents with “low” education levels are more likely to trust their central governments while those with mid-high levels of education are less likely to do so. For example, those with “low” education answered that they “trust a lot” (51 per cent) in the central government to operate in society’s interest. However, of those who answered “don’t really trust”, 54 per cent enjoyed “mid-high” education as opposed to 46 per cent who had “low” education. More starkly, the percentage of “mid-high” education respondents who answered “don’t trust at all” increased to 64.6, making the better educated the clear majority. Paradoxically, those who showed the highest level of trust in their public education system were those who had “low” education. Respondents with “mid-high” level education were more likely to have lower levels of trust in their public education system.

Political Pluralism without Political Change?

The findings of the Asian Barometer, arguably, underline the historical significance of student movement and the youth in Southeast Asia. Due to the relatively low levels of literacy amongst the rural and the poor in the region, youth and education have traditionally been seen as agents of political consciousness. The findings also neatly aligns with the argument that the older or more established middle classes tend to have closer links with the state and, hence, the status quo. Movements like the *Reformasi* movement, both in Indonesia and Malaysia, were primarily student driven, though supported by networks of alternative media and civil society (Weiss 2006; Nyman 2006). After all, the young and the educated are the most receptive

sites for the combination of idealism and the values of political pluralism. The fermentation of this idealism hinges on a variety of factors such as perceived social or political injustices, personal freedom issues, as well as capacity networks such as new media technologies.

Nonetheless, one should not assume that the lower levels of trust displayed by the young and educated will lead to agitation for political change. The lower levels of trust may lead to the declining moral legitimacy enjoyed by state institutions which, in turn, would respond in locally contextual modes to win back this legitimacy. Such a dynamic would probably entail a complex bargaining process whereby political stability would be exchanged for pockets of personal freedoms in limited areas of national life. In this sense, these lower levels of trust may not be indicative of a desire for political or governmental change but for the consumption of political and ideological pluralism. The end result may be the emergence of superficially democratic institutions or practices that have limited abilities to effect real political change.

Conclusions

The Asia Barometer dataset is broad-based and notable for its large sample size. There are however, many limitations. For example it offers no clear definitions of concepts like “trust” or accounts for the different ways it is interpreted by respondents from different cultures. It also lacks a clear quantifiable cross-country unit of analysis whereby terms like “low”, “mid” and “high” education would mean exactly the same in Singapore as they would in Cambodia. Nevertheless, the dataset offers a broad sketch of the values and perceptions of Southeast Asians over a variety of issues.

From the dataset and findings presented above, three general conclusions may be drawn. Firstly, the level of trust in central governments and state institutions remain relatively high compared to East Asia and the rest of the world. Secondly, younger Southeast Asians tend to be less trusting of the government and state institutions than their older counterparts. Thirdly, those who enjoy better education tended to be less trusting of the public education system and other state institutions.

End of Paper

References

- Case, William. 2002. *Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less*. Richmond Surrey: Curzon Press
- Chong, Terence. 2005. The Construction of the Malaysian Malay Middle Class: The Histories, Intricacies and Futures of the Melayu Baru. In *Social Identities*, Vol. 11., No. 6 (November), pp: 573-587
- Chua, Beng Huat, ed. 2000. *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities*. London and New York: Routledge
- Dhakidae, D. 2001. Lifestyles and Political Behaviour of the Indonesian Middle Classes. In *Exploration of the Middle Classes in Southeast Asia*, ed. Michael Hsiao Hsin-Huang. Taipei: Institute of Ethnology Academia Sinica
- Hattori, T, Funatsu, T, and Torii, T. 2003. Introduction: The Emergence of the Asian Middle Classes and their Characteristics. In *The Developing Economies* (Special issue) Vol. 4: 129-139
- Hsiao, Hsin-Huang Michael and Wang, Hong-zen. 2001. The Formation of the Middle Classes in Southeast Asia: An Overview. In *Exploration of the Middle Classes in Southeast Asia*, ed. Michael Hsiao Hsin-Huang. Taipei: Institute of Ethnology Academia Sinica
- Kahn, Joel S. 1996. Growth, Economic Transformation, Culture and the Middle Classes in Malaysia. In *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, MacDonald's and the Middle Class Revolution*, ed. Richard Robison and David S. Goodman. London and New York: Routledge
- Katzenstein, Peter J. 2000. Varieties of Asian Regionalisms. In *Asian Regionalism*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein, Natasha Hamilton-Hart, Kozo Kato and Ming Yue, 1-34. Ithaca: Cornell University Press
- Kessler, Clive S. 2001. Alternative Approaches, Divided Consciousness: Dualities in Studying the Contemporary Southeast Asian Middle Class. In *Southeast Asian Middle Classes: Prospects for Social Change and Democratisation*, ed. Abdul Rahman Embong. Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
- King, Victor T. 2008a. The Middle Class in Southeast Asia: Diversities, Identities, Comparisons and the Vietnamese Case. In *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*, Vol. 4 (2) (November), pp. 73-109
- King, Victor T. 2008b. *The Sociology of Southeast Asia: Transformations in a Developing Region*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press
- Nyman, Mikaela. 2006. *Democratising Indonesia: The Challenges of Civil Society in the Era of Reformasi*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press
- Paritta, Chalernpow Koanantakool. 2002. Thai Middle-class Practice and Consumption of Traditional Dance: "Thai-ness" and High Art. In *Local Cultures and the "New Asia": the*

State, Culture and Capitalism in Southeast Asia, ed. Wee, C.J.W-L. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

Pinches, Michael, ed. 1999. *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia*. London and New York: Routledge

Pongsapich, Amara. Chinese Settlers and their Role in Modern Thailand. In *Alternate Identities: The Chinese of Contemporary Thailand*, ed. Tan Chee Kiong and Chan Kwok Bun. Singapore: Brill

Robison, Richard and Goodman, David S, ed. 1996. *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, MacDonal'd's and the Middle Class Revolution*. London and New York: Routledge

Shiraishi, Takashi and Phongpaichit, Pasuk, ed. 2008. *The Rise of the Middle Classes in Southeast Asia*. Kyoto, Japan and Melbourne, Australia: Kyoto University Press and Trans Pacific Press

Shiraishi, Takashi. 2006. The Third Wave: Southeast Asia and Middle-Class Formation in the Making of a Region. In *The Dynamics of East Asian Regionalism*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein and Takashi Shiraishi. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press

Tan, Ern Ser. 2004. *Does Class Matter?: Social Stratification and Orientations in Singapore*. Singapore: World Scientific

Weiss, Meredith. 2006. *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia*. California: Stanford University Press

Yamashita, Shinji and Eades, Jeremy S., ed. 2003. *Globalisation in Southeast Asia: Local, National and Transnational Perspectives*. New York: Berghahn Books