

Beyond Convergence and Divergence: Mapping the Changing Class Structure in Asian Textbooks

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Preamble

- This, basically, is a think piece – if there were to be a textbook (or textbooks) on East Asian/Asian Sociology, what would it look like
- Here in this panel we shall proceed with focusing on 1-2 key questions (social stratification and social inequalities) and take a quick survey of what has been (and how) researched
- We'll start with the pieces before deciding whether there is a puzzle to deal with.



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Broader Background

- This is also the appropriate time to rethink the value of an Asian Sociology
 - This is NOT to challenge the methodologies that sociologists around the world have already developed and used well
 - Nor are we arguing that only local specific concepts are meaningful
 - Rather we are suggesting we'll need to develop a new attitude to assist us in *interpreting* social changes in a globalizing world in a more meaningful way

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Does Class Matter?

- Many Asian sociologists began not so much with the application of class concept but with a rejection (or reservation) of its applicability
 - Distinctively different *modus operandi*
 - e.g., *guanxi* and inter-personal relationships in Chinese societies
 - Political environment in different Asian societies
- Gradually by the late 1970s and early 1980s, then social stratification has been taken up as an issue of growing concern

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Does Class Matter?



- A common response was to conduct the study of occupational prestige and the ranking of occupations
 - This was taken up by sociologists on either side of the debate
 - Some wanted to argue that gradually, as a result of industrialization, the social foundation of the social stratification system in developing Asian societies converge with those in advanced industrial societies
 - Others wanted to suggest that there continued to exist a significant gap that would not warrant a straight-forward application of those so-called Western concepts
 - e.g., the persistence of small business

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Espousing Convergence Without Saying So



- The intensification of industrialization and economic development in Asian societies (say, the Four Little Dragons in the 1970s and 1980s) brought stratification studies onto the social agenda
- Researchers informed by either modernization theory or Marxism would start with similar premises
 - Changing social structure as an outcome of socio-economic transformation brought about industrialization, etc.
 - Sectoral shift (from agriculture to manufacturing, and from manufacturing to the tertiary sector)
 - Stages of capitalism and/or articulation of modes of production

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Espousing Convergence Without Saying So



- The stimulus-response (or change-reaction) approach to study the changing social structure
 - Changing social structure to be interpreted in the light of transformation in the macro environment
 - Modernization theory: the passage of the traditional social order
 - Marxism: a new class structure under neo-capitalism
- Some hidden assumptions about convergence and the idea of some kind of benchmarking
- Inadequacy of such an approach becoming evident in the 1990s

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“Empire Strikes Back” and More



- Failure of the earlier attempts to answer local questions. Just to give a few examples
 - The need of analyzing the immediate institutional context
 - the “under-performance” of the middle class
 - It is not just about whether the concept of middle class is relevant and/or there really exists a middle class in different Asian societies, but rather it touches on *how* we should proceed to analyze the middle class and interpret their attitudes and behaviours

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“Empire Strikes Back” and More



- Examples (continued)
 - The inadequacy of a uni-directional model of development
 - e.g., the market transition thesis
 - The impacts of globalization
 - global city network and city as a unit of analysis?
 - New emerging cleavages that shape our life chances
 - e.g., the mobility (and thus transferability of skills) of services – new mobile middle class vs embedded middle class in Hong Kong

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Concluding Remarks



- A new round of reflection on Asian Sociology
 - The changing relevance of the so-called Western Sociology
 - The lessons to be learnt from intra-Asia comparison
 - To have something to share without suggesting that there’s a common path of development
 - A new perspective for unpacking the “social”
 - e.g., the role of the state in social stratification

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