



The Dynamics of Middle Class Politics in Korea: Why and How Do the Middling Grassroots Differ from the Propertied Mainstream?*

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This paper is aimed at 1) a theoretical exploration of the significance of identity as an explanatory variable of the middle class politics; 2) an historical investigation of the formation of the middle class as well as its differentiation into the propertied mainstream and the middling grassroots; and 3) an empirical testing of the differences of these two segments in terms of their socio-political orientations and the capacity of citizen's action by using the nation-wide survey data accumulated since the middle of the 1980's. The grassroots segment of the middle class is distinctive for its emphasis on, and sensitivity to, a people-oriented identity, which remains relatively weak if not totally absent among the propertied mainstream. The empirical analysis shows that the middling grassroots with a college education is a phenomenon of full significance, and, as such, invites our further researches.

Keywords: identity, middling grassroots, propertied mainstream, discursive formation, citizen's participation

Conceptions of the middle class vary depending on the theoretical perspectives taken by sociologists. Among others, Eric O. Wright (1985: 19-57) conceptualized the middle class as a 'contradictory location' between the capitalist and working classes. Starting from this, yet taking up the perspective of discursive (cultural) formation with an explicit focus on identity, this paper is aimed at delineating the middle class into two segments, the propertied

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mainstream (PM) and the middling grassroots (MG), which differ significantly in terms of their political, social, and moral orientations.¹ The grassroots segment of the middle class is distinctive by its emphasis on, and sensitivity to, the people-oriented identity—which remains relatively weak, if not totally absent, among the propertied mainstream. This paper argues that the internal differentiation within the middle classes and the role of identity in this process needs to be grasped and properly explained for a better understanding of the dynamics of middle class politics in democratic transitions and post-transitional settings as well.² Identity here is understood not as determined by any external (or structural in the conventional sense) factors such as the relations of production or organizational power divisions, but as constituted along the processes of the discursive, symbolic, and cultural formation of subjectivity.

The internal differentiation of the middle class is more discernable in countries where the people-centered normative tradition has been firmly established as a ruling ideology. One case in point is the *Minben* philosophy of politics as one of the core normative principles of Confucianism. Owing much to this tradition, we find that in South Korea since the 1960s (in the process of rapid economic and political transformation full of contradictions), a significant part of the emerging middle class identify themselves as more associated with ‘people’ than with the ruling class. It is well known that this tendency gave rise in a massive scale to the student movement during the 1980s. Dual structuration here means that the emerging middle class tends to be differentiated into a status-oriented (conservative) segment and a people-oriented (progressive) segment. Based on the nation-wide survey data, I would like to show why and how the middling grassroots are more active in citizens’ participatory initiatives, and hence are more critical and progressive, than the middle class mainstream.³

The historical and empirical claims of this paper are largely based upon the experience of capitalist development and democratic transformation in Korea. The empirical claims will be tested against the nation-wide survey data accumulated since the middle of the 1980’s. More precisely, to clarify the context in which the middle classes have been formed rapidly in Korea, I shall first draw attention 1) to the role of the state as the maker of Korean capitalism and social classes since the 1960’s and examine how the propertied mainstream was formed in this

¹ Wrights (1985: 14) argues that “the process of class formation is decisively shaped by a variety of institutional mechanisms that are themselves ‘relatively autonomous’ from the class structure and which determine the ways in which class structures are translated into collective actors with specific ideologies and strategies.” The concept of ‘contradictory locations’ is a logical outcome of this translation of the class structure as the ultimate basis of class practice. In fact, ‘contradictory’ means the coexistence of two irreconcilable orientations within the same subject. This paper explores whether these different orientations can be better dealt with within a framework of identity formation, not determined or translated by the abstract class structure constructed by sociologists, but shaped along the process of discourse and communication more at the political and cultural than production level in the case of the middle classes.

² The political role of the middle class has been discussed in many different ways, too. An overall review of the main arguments can be found in an article “The Political Missions of the Middle Strata” by Martin Openheimer (1982).

³ I do not make any essentialist claim. Nothing can be fixed. However, identity as a principle of organizing experiences can make certain tendencies to continue despite historical fluctuations.

process. This will be followed by 2) an analysis of the moral tradition associated with the intellectuals and the universities where the most conspicuous forms of protest movement unfolded all throughout the period of Korea's authoritarian capitalist development. I argue that the grassroots segment of the middle classes began to form explicitly within this framework of moral protest movements when the college graduates continually marched into social institutions with their own grassroots identity. Finally, 3) I shall suggest the analysis of survey data to show how the middles have been internally differentiated and what the major characteristics of the grassroots segment (MG) are when compared with those of the propertied mainstream (PM).

THE FORMATION OF THE PROPETIED MAINSTREAM⁴

A macroscopic view of Korea's economic development since the early 1960s shows an extremely fast rate of growth, indicated by more than a 10% increase in the GNP for many years. The great population shift from rural areas to central cities followed a rapid succession of factory openings which led to a miraculous increase in exports. In particular, the political economic variable of crucial significance for the rapid formation of the middle classes and the skilled workers is the policy of heavy and chemical industrialization declared just a few months after the Yushin constitutional reforms in October, 1972. The 1970's can, therefore, be seen as a critical turning point. The 1960's offered Korea the first experience of economic boom throughout her modern history, as evidenced by an 8.4% annual increase in GNP and a 38.5% annual increase in exports. After one decade of energetic growth, however, there appeared certain symptoms of economic contractions and business crises in the beginning of the 1970's, and this converged with an emerging radicalism among the urban workers who began to protest against exploitation built into the state-led model of export-oriented industrialization. In this context, furthermore, a horizontal linkage began to form among the urban workers, students, intellectuals, and the oppositional party, demanding sectoral autonomy and liberalization. This popular activation was significantly strengthened by the presidential elections in 1971, in which President Park could win only by a small margin.

It was within this context that President Park announced the Yushin reforms in 1972, which amounted to the implantation of a specific type of state which Guillermo O'Donnell (1973) called "bureaucratic authoritarianism" (BA hereafter). It must be stressed, however, that the BA state emerged in Korea not as a consequence of actual crises, but as a way in which the ruling elites responded to perceived uncertainties. In other words, the power elites who

⁴ The analysis of the historical context of the formation of the middle classes below is taken largely from my publication, "The Political Economy and Moral Institution: The Formation of the Middling Grassroots in Korea," in *The Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, Vol. 23(1-2): 71-89, 1997.

controlled the state apparatus deliberately made use of emerging uncertainties for their own political purposes. They quickly declared martial law in December 1971 and prepared for the Yushin reforms with almost no visible opposition. In so doing, they made it clear that they as the principal organizers of Korean capitalism would not tolerate any more challenges to state power (Han 1987).

Almost at the same time, President Park announced an ambitious plan for heavy and chemical industrialization, with the promise that by this policy he would raise per capita income to US 1,000 Dollars and increase exports to US 10 billion Dollars by 1980. This would surely be an unprecedented accomplishment since the projected figures amounted to almost triple the actual tally of those days.

Empirical data show that the development of heavy and chemical industries was made a top priority in state economic policies throughout the 1970's.⁵ The total investment into these industries from 1973 to 1979 was about US 10 billion Dollars of which 85.9% was invested to productive facilities in machine, steel, chemical, electronic, shipbuilding and non-ferrous metal industries. The declared national goals of GNP and exports expected to be reached by 1980 were in fact attained by the end of 1977. To expedite the expansion of exports, the government not only monitored and evaluated the export performance of leading business enterprises, but also used powerful schemes of inducement and constraint to force enterprises to follow government leadership. The proportion of heavy and chemical industries in the manufacturing sectors and in the export basket increased significantly, laying the foundation for self-reliant national armed forces.

Included in this scheme of inducements were the financial, banking, and tax benefits (Woo 1991). The secret lay in the state control of the pipelines of the capital supply to the private sectors. Since the direct investment by international corporations was not much at that time, and because private enterprises were limited in mobilizing their own domestic capital, the Korean bourgeois had no choice but to depend on the financial and banking capital supplied by the state. The state was in a position to dispose of enormous foreign loan capital, special funds, and other programs designed to promote the export sectors, particularly the heavy and chemical industries. The state also used such devices as policy loans, industrial subsidies and other legally stipulated means by which the government reduced or exempted taxes, alleviated customs taxes and deferred debt redemption.

The state favored large-scale private enterprises, with the view that they can compete far better internationally. The state disciplined not only the workers but also businessmen. In an ironic way, however, the state helped the economic conglomerates to grow fast in a short span of time. The selectivity of state industrial policy in favor of the size of the economy has yielded

⁵ The historical and empirical analyses in detail may be found in my book, *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism in Korea* (1989) published in Korean language.

enormous repercussions to the formation of class structures in Korea—not only on the formation of the powerful bourgeois class, but also the working class as well as the middle classes.

Based on such structural changes undergone in Korea as economic growth, rapid urbanization, intensification of industrial structures, diversification of occupations, rising levels of education, expansion of the white collars and skilled laborers, etc., the middle classes as a whole, particularly its propertied segment which has vested interests in the status quo, have grown greatly not only in size but also in their capacity to advocate the politics of order and stability. Since they have been deeply involved in the national project of modernization within the framework of political authoritarianism, they tend to identify themselves with the role they have played in this process without fully developing other sensitivities for political pluralism and industrial democracy. In other words, they have been deeply preoccupied with such symbols of economic success as the miraculous increase in GNP and exports, the construction of automobiles, semiconductors, shipbuilding and steel industries, high-rise buildings in metropolitan cities, overflow of passenger cars, communications infrastructure, and consumption-oriented culture. The core of this propertied segment of the middle classes lie in the managerial, administrative and professional employees and the upper echelon of the petty bourgeois class, and they find themselves heavily concentrated in large cities.

THE FORMATION OF THE MIDLING GRASSROOTS

In contrast to the propertied mainstream, the ‘Middling grassroots’ (MG) began to emerge as a consequence of the combination of university-centered popular movements and socioeconomic modernization. What made the MG different from the propertied mainstream of the middle class (PM) was an identity that the former perceived as their own. In other words, PMs refer to those who identify themselves as part of the middle class, without developing the kind of grassroots identity which MGs have nurtured. At stake is the “*Min-Joong*” culture which was spread all over the colleges and universities during the 1980’s, evoking various responses in the society. As a counter-culture, this provided the students with fresh imaginations, sensitivities, perspectives, etc. which sharply contrasted with those of the older generations. Once established, this culture also made possible all kinds of subaltern discourses, activities, performances, and so on. Constitutive also of this culture was the self-reflection of one’s identity, namely the questions of “who I am” or “who we are.” This led the students to experience the collapse of the conventional self and values taken for granted in the family and the school. Instead, the students found themselves in painful strains and agony, searching for a new identity characterized by radical openness, solidarity, discourse, and justice. The students were driven to get rid of the long-held elitist conceptions and the familiarized self, conceiving

of themselves as part of the people in opposition to the injustices of authoritarian capitalist development.

The formation of the MGs can be traced back in two ways. The first is characterized by a horizontal expansion of the movement circles from the campus to such grassroots organizations as the labor unions and the churches with social commitments. There were a number of young students who decided to pursue an activist career in affiliation with Christian churches (Protestant or Catholic) espousing the theology of liberation. Likewise, there were also many who directly plunged into the manufacturing industries to organize democratic labor unions. Given the fact that the workers at that time had neither the democratic organization to represent their interests nor the institutions and channels to express their legitimate discontents, and given the fact that they were often treated with disdain and contempt rather than as human beings in the workplace, it was by no means surprising that the students felt compelled to move into these areas, forming various discussion groups, seeking the common basis of mutual understanding.

The second is characterized by the massive vertical entry of the new generations from universities into social organizations. An empirical question in this regard is whether and if so, to what extent they have kept their grassroots identity after they get jobs of their own. Experience indicates that they have tended to preserve this identity, though they are not as much involved in activism as before. They found themselves more disposed to resisting the inertia of organizations than simply becoming assimilated into it. Compared with older generations, they were, as a group, more liberated from the legacy of the Cold War age.

One way of looking at the differences between MGs and PMs is focusing on the generation gap in terms of socialization and value orientations. By and large, PMs are now in their fifties and sixties, and are those who had experienced absolute poverty in their childhood, thus being emphatically driven to get out of such a situation by any means. Thanks to such desires and efforts, they became the major carrier of modernization, making upward vertical mobility their own terrain. In contrast, MGs are a fruit of a modernization which is self-reflexive and critical. Largely born after 1960, the MGs were relatively free from poverty and thus became more concerned with such values as self-expression and participation. These values finally burst out onto their campuses during the 1980's.

THEORETICAL REFLECTION: WHY AGENCY AND IDENTITY?

Having talked about the historical formation of the middle classes in Korea, I would like to raise a theoretical question. Why is the issue of identity so important in explaining the dynamics of middle class politics? How can we best deal with the problem of agency with regard to historical change?

From the beginning, sociology has been deeply interested in the question of agency in historical change. Many founding fathers of sociology like Marx, Weber and Durkheim were deeply interested in searching for the subject of historical change, though from different perspectives. Contemporary social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Touraine, Jurgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, among others, have attempted to show how structural constraints and possibilities are concretely embedded in the field of social action and interaction against all forms of unmediated determinism, whether they be technological, economic, biophysical, environmental, or structural. Habermas' (1996) inquiry into the public sphere shows well how the public sphere, as a discursive field of social formation, is shaped and functions within complex legal, political and moral relationships of social groups as a key explanatory variable of historical change.

When we study the middle classes, we can consider two kinds of approach. To keep things simple, one may ask how the middle classes are composed. The focus here is on the common 'objective' conditions or determinants of the middle classes. With the idea of structural determination, one may argue that the objective position one holds within occupational structures or power hierarchies is decisively important for a sociological analysis. In reality, however, some may put more emphasis on education while others put more emphasis on occupation or income. No matter where we stand, once a conceptual model is formulated, we are supposed to collect and classify data to show of what variables the middle classes are composed. Advanced methodologies with considerable sophistication may be employed. These efforts, however, seem to fall short of demonstrating why and how they act in the way they do, not the other way around. As structurally determined, they may be depicted as holding certain objective potentialities within them, leaving it open when and how these potentialities might be materialized in the real world.

Another approach, in contrast, is to draw attention to the field of practice, not as a dependent variable, so to speak, but as a mediating and enabling factor. The focus here is not on any external factor of determination, but on the practice-specific rules of formation. It is asked how a social group sees the world as they do, and why they act and interact in the way they do, but not the other way around. In other words, human agency is understood in terms of practice. Needless to say, human perception, desire, and actions are deeply interwoven into, and are shaped by communication and culture. If we can reasonably assume the overlapping relationship between class positions objectively defined and cultural orientations, there may be no serious problem. However, since cultures, images, information or, if you want, 'simulated desires' deeply penetrate into everyday life today, cutting across class boundaries, it seems no longer meaningful to privilege the class model of determination. On the contrary, one should go further to capture the logic of practice by paying full attention to the efficacy of culture and discourse (Bottero 2004; Payne and Grew 2005; Sayer 2005; Skeggs 2003).

I am in agreement with this discursive approach to social classes. This is why I pay special

attention to identity, with the claim that identity is more dynamic and consequential than simply being a ‘subjective’ sense of belonging, a claim often heard in the debates on social classes. We all know that there are multiple identities as exemplified by the identities formed along gender, ethnicities, nations, religions as well as occupations and classes. Once established, an identity serves as one of the core principles of organizing one’s perceptions, expressions and actions. In other words, I see identity not simply as a ‘dependent’ variable but also as an ‘independent’ variable by which we can explain many underlying differences among social groups. Identities unfold as deeply interwoven within the cultural, communicative, and discursive processes of social formation in a given country. It is conventional to ask when the workers come to obtain their identity as the working class. In principle, however, it should remain open if and to what extent they obtain their identity as the middle strata. In short, identity is formed within the fields of cultural and discursive formations, not dictated by the logic of production outside discourses.⁶ We can link identity to the study of social classes in a way more constructive than conventionally pursued (Rose 1997; Martin 1998; Surridge 2007).

The concept of the middle class as a ‘contradictory location’ implies that the members of the middle class are predisposed to act either as the managerial (capitalists) or as the working class depending upon historical conjunctures. These predispositions are derived from the objective positions one holds in a system of occupations and power relationships. However, if we pay attention to the formation of subjectivity within the fields of cultural, communicative, and discursive formations in which identities are constituted, the middle classes—as newly emerging and expanding social forces within the concrete processes of socio-economic and political developments—tends to face the question of whether they see themselves as orienting toward the power-bloc above them or want to understand and embrace the ordinary people below from whom they were originated. This is particularly so when and where 1) a symbolic opposition between the power-bloc and the people exists due to the deep underlying modern history of a country and 2) the current power-bloc immensely suffers from the lack of political legitimacy whereas people are seen as the source of legitimate voices for change. This was actually what happened in Korea during the 1980’s. Furthermore, I assume that it can also happen in regions or countries where the tradition of ‘*minben*’ (people-based: 民本) politics has been a deeply underlying trend in modern history as we can see in China (Han 2009).

⁶ Though I have good reasons to claim this theoretically, I have no intention to deny the relationship between the objective position of social class and such dependent variables as attitudes and behavior altogether. This is an important issue of empirical study. The only claim that I make is that insofar as we are concerned about socio-political orientation, the influence of identity is more conspicuous than that of the objective positions of social class.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND DATA

The size estimation of the middle class and its differentiated segments is an empirical question. The data used for this purpose in this paper are the nation-wide survey data from 1987 (Table 2). The year of 1987 marked the end of military dictatorship and the new beginning of political democracy in Korea. Along with the massive mobilization of various social forces and the solidarity for democracy, the symbols of “*Joongsan*” strata (中産層) and *minjoong* (民衆) became widely dispersed among the people. In a nation-wide survey, therefore, it was possible to ask the respondents how they perceive themselves in relation to these symbols of identity. The term of *joongsan* was thought to have more economic than political connotations, while the term *minjoong* was the opposite. But it was implicitly assumed that the members of the *joongsan* strata are better off economically while politically conservative and, in contrast, the members of *minjoong* are economically less well off while being politically progressive. However, since these two symbols are NOT mutually exclusive, it was an open question if, and to what extent, the members of the *joongsan* strata share the identity of *minjoong* and vice versa. In fact, various white-collar groups as *joongsan* strata developed a *minjoong* identity and actively joined and/or supported democratic movements during the 1980’s. Thus the question

Table 1. Conceptual Model of Identities

		<i>Minjoong</i>	
		Yes	No
<i>Joongsan</i> strata	Yes	Middling Grassroots (中民)	Propertied Mainstream (中産 主流)
	No	Bottom Grassroots (基層 民衆)	Bottom Subject (基層 臣民)

Table 2. Social Survey Data Examined⁷

Year	Region	Sample
1987	National (employees)	1250
1995	National (world values)	1237
1999	National (employees)	1202
2001	National (world values)	1214
2002	National (world-cup & value)	1000
2005	National (generations & value)	1006
2006	National (world values)	1006

⁷ Included in these surveys were the two questions designed to check whether the respondents identified themselves as included in the *Joongsan* strata and *Minjoong*.

was asked: “Given the term *Joongsan* strata that we use in everyday life, do you think that you belong to this or not?” The same question was asked to *Minjoong*. And the respondents were given the choices, Yes or No.

The first-step of analysis already showed the following characteristics.

1. Those who understood themselves as part of the middle class (*joongsan* strata) occupied 54.2% of the respondents in 1987 and significantly increased to 63.8% in 2005, reflecting continuous economic growth and prosperity, but thereafter sharply decreased to 34.7% in 1999 after the experience of financial crisis from late 1997.⁸ The middle class identity broadly understood tended to increase visibly in 2001 and 2002 when the sense of overcoming the economic crisis was spreading over the society. However, it began to drop sharply from 2005 when the popular perception of economic crisis began to worsen and penetrate. Consequently, those who understand themselves as part of the middle class are only about 30-35% of the respondents today, demonstrating the immense difficulties of the middle class today in Korea.
2. In contrast, those who understood themselves as part of the *minjoong* occupied 45.7% of the respondents in 1987 and increased to 65.3% in 1999 when the middle class identity sharply decreased. The *minjoong* identity was shared by 55.9% and 45.1% in the year of 2001 and 2002. In a sharp contrast with the middle class identity, the

Table 3. Historical Trend of Four Identities (1987~2006)

Classification	Frequency (%)						
	1987	1995	1999	2001	2002	2005	2006
Middling Grassroots	260 (20.8)	322 (26.0)	310 (25.9)	436 (36.0)	483 (48.3)	289 (28.7)	228 (22.7)
Propertied Mainstream	418 (33.4)	468 (37.8)	106 (8.8)	98 (8.1)	65 (6.5)	75 (7.5)	84 (8.3)
Bottom Grassroots	213 (17.0)	163 (13.2)	479 (39.9)	409 (33.8)	294 (29.4)	392 (39.0)	388 (38.6)
Bottom Subject	359 (28.7)	284 (23.0)	304 (25.4)	268 (22.1)	157 (15.7)	250 (24.9)	306 (30.4)
Total	1,250 (100.0)	1,237 (100.0)	1,199 (100.0)	1,211 (100.0)	999 (100.0)	1,006 (100.0)	1,006 (100.0)

⁸ The sharp decrease of the propertied middle class since 1999 has something to do with the psychological uncertainty of the middle class after the economic crisis. Many of those who identified themselves with the middle status of income, for instance, began to deny that they belong to *joongsan* strata, if this term is used. Even after the crisis, those with the middle status of income did not drop significantly whereas the identity of *joongsan* strata decreased dramatically. Which segment of the former is out of the latter is an empirical question to be investigated.

minjoong identity continued to flourish in 2005 and 2006 occupying more than 60% of the respondents.

3. The result is shocking if the two axes are combined. Those who understood themselves only as part of the middle class but not as part of *minjoong*—propertied mainstream of the middle class—constituted 33.4% of the respondents in 1987 but alarmingly reduced to less than 10% since 1999. This is probably what has been meant by the ‘breakdown’ of the middle class consciousness often referred to by the mass media.
4. Contrasted with the stagnating identity of the propertied mainstream of the middle class, the identity of the middling grassroots, as a double identity of the middle class AND *minjoong*, is still as conspicuous as in 1987. Evidences show that the identity of the middling grassroots is more thriving and influential than that of the propertied mainstream of the middle class.
5. Overall, however, as of today, the identity of the bottom people is most widely dispersed in the society, reflecting the impact of ever-enlarging socioeconomic polarization today.

In this regard, two kinds of comparative study seem to be worthwhile to pursue. The first is the comparison between the grassroots segment of the middle class and its propertied mainstream and another is the comparison between the grassroots segment of the middle class and the bottom people. In what follows, I shall confine myself only to the former.

THE MIDLING GRASSROOTS AND EDUCATION

The next question we should raise is simple and clear-cut: Who constitutes the grassroots segment of the middle class and who its propertied mainstream? What are the basic demographic profiles of each of these segments?

The most persistent and enduring demographic factor in this internal differentiation is education. During the 1980’s and until the middle of the 1990’s age was as conspicuous as education. This means that the middling grassroots were more likely to be found among the young cohort groups than the old. Since then, however, the influence of age has been significantly reduced, if not having disappeared altogether. In contrast to this, in the case of the middling grassroots, the influence of education has been proved to be very clear-cut consistently from 1987 to 2006, as can be seen in Table 4.

The shape of the bottom strata of people by education is exactly the opposite. The lower the level of education is, the more the bottom people. The propertied mainstream of the middle class is not consistently clear-cut. It shows a similar tendency as the bottom people in the data

Table 4. Middling Grassroots by Education (1987~2006)

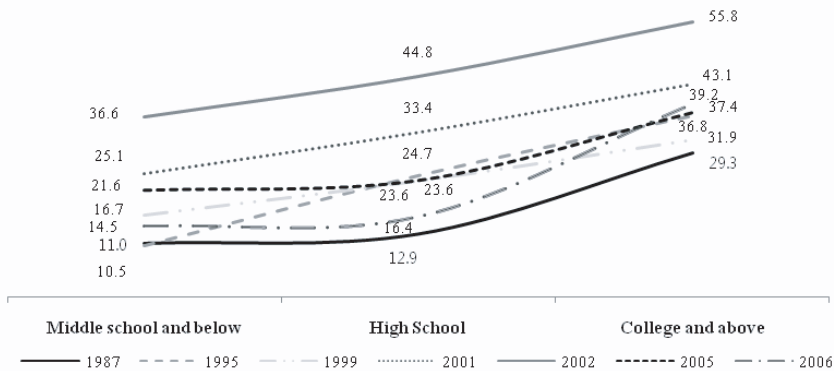
	Middle School	High School	College and above	Frequency (%)
1987	11.0	12.9	29.3	213 (17.0)
1995	10.5	24.7	36.8	322 (26.0)
1999	16.7	23.6	31.9	310 (25.9)
2001	25.1	33.4	43.1	436 (36.0)
2002	36.6	44.8	55.8	483 (48.3)
2005	21.6	23.6	37.4	288 (28.7)
2006	14.5	16.4	34.8	228 (22.7)

Table 5. Distribution of Middle Class Identities by Education, 1995

1995 wvs	Education			Total
	Middle & lower	High school	University	
Identities				
MGs	31(22.5)	123(39.0)	168(50.0)	322(40.8)
PMs	107(77.5)	192(61.0)	168(50.0)	467(59.2)
Total	138(100.0)	315(100.0)	336(100.0)	789(100.0)

Note | $\chi^2 = 31.382, p < 0.001$

Figure 1. The Middling Grassroots by Education (1987-2006)



of 1995. Overall, however, a negative correlation between identity and education cannot be generalized.

In the case of the middling grassroots, however, it is clear that the higher the level of education is, the more the grassroots segment of the middle class becomes salient. The strong positive correlation between identity and education is unmistakable.

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Table 6. Question: I'm going to read out some forms of political action that people can take, and I'd like you to tell me, for each one, whether you have taken any of these actions, whether you might do it or would never do them under any circumstances

1995 WVS	Have done	Might do	Would never do
Signing a petition	3	2	1
Joining in boycotts	3	2	1
Attending peaceful demonstration	3	2	1
Joining in labor strikes	3	2	1
Joining in sit-down strikes	3	2	1

Note | 1. Number means the value given to the answers in scaling 1-3 for each item and 5-15 as whole.
2. In 2006 WVS only the first three items were included.

Table 7. Participation in Peaceful Demonstration 1995

1995wvs		Middle Class		Frequencies (%)
		Middling Grassroots	Propertied Mainstream	Total
Answers	Have done	72 (22.4)	36 (7.7)	108 (13.7)
	Might do	135 (41.9)	176 (37.8)	311 (39.5)
	Would never do	115 (35.7)	253 (54.4)	368 (46.8)
Total		322 (100.0)	465 (100.0)	787 (100.0)

Note | $\chi^2 = 44.646$ $p < 0.001$

IDENTITIES AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

I have argued that the key question of middle class research is not about its composition, size, estimation, or the structural conditions of its determination which sociologists can handle by means of concepts and techniques, but the practical issue of how the middle class, as living subjects, see the world and act. In other words, the socio-political, ideological and cultural orientations together with their capacity of action and intervention are of crucial significance for understanding the middle class in a given country. In this regard, of many interesting aspects and dimensions, I would like to examine how the grassroots segment of the middle class and the propertied mainstream differ in terms of political actions of various kinds which citizens can pursue legitimately. The design of the question used is as follows.

Analysis shows clearly that in all of the five items of 1995 WVS and three items of 2006 WVS, the MGs are much more active than the PMs in participating in the political actions surveyed. The distribution of responses is very different in the two segments of the middle class in 1995 as one can see in Table 7. In short, the grassroots segment of the middle class is far more capable of participating in and supporting citizens' campaigns of various kinds than

Table 8. Two Segments of the Middle Class and Citizens' Participation

	1995			2006		
	MGs	PMs	Total	MGs	PMs	Total
Petitions/appeals	91.3	79.8	84.4	84.1	60.7	75.3
Product Boycott	86.1	72.4	78.0	72.8	50.0	65.1
Peaceful street demonstrations	64.3	45.5	53.2	73.7	50.0	65.5
Labor strikes	52.7	33.5	41.4	-	-	-
Sit-down strikes	33.3	18.5	24.6	-	-	-

Note | Percentage of those who responded "Have done" and "Might do".

the propertied mainstream.

Table 8 shows the overall tendency of how the MGs differ from the PMs with respect to the political action of the middle class from 1995 to 2006. Those who responded "Have done" and "Might do" are put together and the results are suggested. The correlation between identity and political action turns out to be highly significant statistically and consistent.

DEPTH ANALYSIS

Given the fact that the identity of the middling grassroots is strongly influenced by higher education, however, it can be questioned whether this identity alone can wield independent influence with education controlled. In Table 9, the dependent variable of political participation is made by the sum of the relevant items of citizens' participation.

The multiple regression analysis reveals that the identity of the middling grassroots is significant in shaping citizens' participation in political actions independently. To be sure, the

Table 9. Multiple Regression Analysis

	1995	2006
	Beta	Beta
Age	-0.134***	0.009
Education	0.259***	0.242***
MG identity	0.182***	0.126***
Income	0.053	X
Socio-economic status	X	-0.037
Men	0.042	0.089**
R ²	0.199	0.087
F	38.159***	18.765***

Note | *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Table 10. Two Segments of the Middle class, Education and Citizens' Participation (1)

		Education by Identities				Total	χ^2
		University MG	University PM	High school & lower_MG	High School & lower_PM		
1995	Signing a petition	162 (96.4)	151 (89.9)	130 (85.5)	220 (74.1)	663 (84.5)	46.634***
	Joining in boycotts	160 (95.2)	147 (87.5)	117 (76.0)	190 (63.8)	614 (77.9)	73.321***
	Demonstration	126 (75.0)	96 (57.1)	81 (52.6)	115 (38.9)	418 (53.2)	57.613***
	Labor strikes	109 (65.3)	69 (41.1)	60 (39.0)	86 (29.1)	324 (41.3)	58.249***
	Sit-down strikes	61 (36.3)	30 (17.9)	46 (30.1)	55 (18.6)	192 (24.5)	24.870***
2006	Signing in petition	113 (90.4)	18 (60.0)	78 (76.5)	33 (61.1)	242 (77.8)	25.817***
	Joining in boycotts	103 (81.7)	14 (46.7)	63 (61.8)	28 (51.9)	208 (66.7)	24.729***
	Demonstration	103 (81.7)	13 (43.3)	65 (63.7)	29 (53.7)	210 (67.3)	24.910***

Note | 1. The number of the respondents saying either "Have done" or "Might do."

2. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

independent influence of education is greater than that of identity as can be confirmed in Table 9. However, it is important to discover the independent status of identity in explaining the different modes of middle class politics. Whether or not one develops the grassroots identity of the middle class gives rise to the significant difference of political practice. As such, it calls for our careful analysis.

Thus, to be more precise, I would like to examine how two independent variables, namely education and identity, are interacting to concretely shape the parameters of the political practice of the middle class.

The analysis is suggestive and revealing. First, among the four different groups—MGs with university education, MGs with high school or lower education, PMs with university education, and PMs with high school or lower education—the MGs with university education have proved to be the most active in political actions in all items under the survey in both 1995 and 2006. No single exception has been found. Secondly, the group who comes second in 1995 is the PMs with university education in all items except the sit-down strikes. Though the MGs and PMs have university education, the difference between them is rather stark. More striking is the fact that in 2006 the second is occupied not by the PMs with university education, but by

Table 11. Two Segments of the Middle Class, Education and Citizens' Participation (2)

Means (Standard deviation)

		University MG	University PM	High Sch. G & lower M	High Sch. & lower PM	Total	F
1995	Petition	2.55 (0.567)	2.32 (0.650)	2.29 (0.706)	2.01 (0.728)	2.25 (0.750)	24.138***
	Boycotts	2.27 (0.544)	2.08 (0.569)	1.88 (0.586)	1.70 (0.586)	1.94 (0.614)	39.502***
	Demonstration	2.08 (0.758)	1.70 (0.688)	1.64 (0.675)	1.44 (0.584)	1.67 (0.705)	33.544***
	Labor strikes	1.72 (0.580)	1.44 (0.555)	1.41 (0.532)	1.32 (0.536)	1.45 (0.567)	18.803***
	Sit-down strikes	1.40 (0.571)	1.18 (0.384)	1.33 (0.524)	1.21 (0.453)	1.27 (0.489)	8.831***
2006	Petition	2.48 (0.667)	1.87 (0.819)	2.19 (0.793)	1.91 (0.830)	2.23 (0.787)	10.300***
	Boycotts	2.06 (0.649)	1.47 (0.507)	1.72 (0.603)	1.63 (0.653)	1.79 (0.639)	10.852***
	Demonstration	2.02 (0.619)	1.43 (0.504)	1.72 (0.603)	1.63 (0.653)	1.79 (0.639)	10.912***

Note | *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

the MGs with high school or lower education consistently in all three items under the survey. The efficacy of identity is unmistakable in this case, since identity turns out to be more influential than education. Thirdly, among those with high school education or lower, it is proven that the MGs are consistently more active than the PMs in participating in and supporting middle class politics. Fourthly, the analysis shows that in the case of the data of 2006, to our surprise, the PMs with university education are less active than the PMs with high school education or lower, despite the former's higher education. This is probably because of the one-sided leaning of the education of the propertied mainstream of the middle class towards ultra-conservative orientations. This also implies that education as an independent variable of explanation is no longer effective in this specific case. In 2006 the group most active in political practice are the MGs with university education, which is followed by the MGs with high school education or lower. The next are the PMs with high school or lower education and last is the PMs with university education.

I have advanced two empirical claims concerning middle class politics in Korea. The first is that overall the variable of identity as an independent variable of explanation is as significant as the variable of education in shaping middle class politics. The second is that in certain cases like that of the 2006 data as we have seen, identity turns out to be more crucially influential than education over middle class politics. The participation index of 1995 and 2006 clearly

Table 12. Two Segments of the Middle Class, Education and Citizens' Participation (3)

Means (Standard deviation)

		University MG	University PM	High sch. & lower MG	High sch. & lower PM	Total	F
1995	Participation index	10.02 (2.237)	8.72 (1.957)	8.48 (2.215)	7.66 (2.071)	8.55 (2.284)	44.830***
2006	Participation index	6.53 (1.532)	4.77 (1.501)	5.62 (1.747)	5.19 (1.874)	5.83 (1.77)	14.807***

Note | *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

supports these claims, too. The scale is here 5 to 15 in 1995 and from 3-9 in 2006. Table 12 shows the means of the participation index of four different groups in 1995 and 2006. We can sense here how education and identity interact to produce different effects on the political practice of the middle class. Care must be taken to see the fact that the MGs with high school and lower education are significantly more active than the PMs with university education in middle class politics and that the PMs with university education are lagging behind the PMs with high school and lower education. Above all, the middling grassroots with university education is a phenomenon of full significance, and, as such, invites extensive further research.⁹ By the same token, it needs to be investigated carefully why the PM with university education turns out to be the most conservative. It seems plausible that other factors than education are here shaping the attitudes of this group.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Everywhere in the world, the middle class as a product of modernization tends to emerge and expand as economic growth continually unfolds. Korea since the 1960's is a good example. As a consequence of the development strategy taken by the state, available resources have been heavily channeled into big firms such as conglomerates under the assumption that they can better compete internationally. This policy gave rise to the large quantity of trained workers and white-collar employees in a short span of the time. Furthermore, in the case of Korea, the middle class is also the product of political democratization in the sense that they were highly disillusioned with authoritarian regimes and thus, at least part of the middle class, if not the whole, strongly demanded and supported democratic reforms by joining in various social movements and citizens' campaigns. In this respect, this paper deals with the questions of how

⁹ The profile figures from Appendix 1 to 4 at the end of this paper shows clearly how the middling grassroots and the properties mainstream of the middle class as well as the four sub-groups divided by education differ from each other.

the middle class has been internally differentiated, who have been more active in political practices, and why this has been so by drawing attention to the role of identity.

In concluding, I would like to emphasize that the focus on identity enables us to better grasp social classes in terms of their practices and lived experiences. Identity serves as a sort of sorting mechanism or core principle of organization of one's preferences, expressions and practical orientations. Far from being determined externally, identity is formed along with the process of lived experience and practices deeply embedded in the discursive, symbolic, and cultural formations of a country. The aggregate categories that sociologists construct by means of classifications and technologies such as the income middle class, the occupational middle class, and so on, can be meaningful only when these are well linked to an understanding of the practical life of the group in question. Seldom, however, do these categories turn out to be meaningful in this specific sense. This is why we need to shift attention from an 'objective' approach in the conventional sense to a discursive, communicative, and cultural approach to our subject matter.

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