CONSUMPTION IN ASIA
Lifestyles and Identities

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Consumption in Asia

From the 1960s until 1995, East and Southeast Asia experienced tremendous capitalist economic growth, through which emerged a new urban middle class with a greatly improved material life. This book examines the processes that have transformed underdeveloped countries into full-blown consumer societies.

The essays in this collection challenge conventional ideas about consumption and consumerism. For example, instead of engendering political passivity, the emergence of KTV in Taiwan in fact reveals how popular cultural practices can influence political change under an authoritarian regime. The ways in which a McDonald’s hamburger is marketed in Singapore show that the symbolism of the ‘made in America’ label is not serviceable at a site which is ideologically non-Western. Consumption in Asia considers the differentiation among the middle class in Hong Kong around the concept of ‘taste’; the changing symbolic position and significance of the US in Japan; and the preference in the Malaysian royalty for Harley Davidson motorcycles.

This is the first book to analyse consumerism in the region in detail, and will provide fascinating insights for students and researchers in Asian studies, economics, politics and cultural studies.

Chua Beng-Huat is Associate Professor of Sociology at the National University of Singapore.

The New Rich in Asia

Asian Studies/Economics/Politics/Cultural Studies
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London and New York
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6  Global Lifestyles under Local Conditions: the New Indonesian Middle Class

Solvay Gerke

Introduction

The economic take-off of Asian countries has given rise to new wealth and the emergence of new middle classes whose formation process differs distinctly not only from that of their European counterparts. (Evers and Gerke 1994:5; Lev 1990:25; Robison 1996:8) but also from nation to nation within Asia; as Crouch (1984:116) suggests, the Indonesian class structure is quite different from that of Thailand and Malaysia. Although the new rich and the newly established middle classes have been collapsed often into one category, as the bearers of ‘modernity’, their socio-economic backgrounds differ, making it difficult clearly to identify who has joined the middle class and who is still excluded. The terms ‘new rich’ or ‘new middle class’, therefore, describe, in broad terms, the new wealthy social groups that have emerged from industrial changes in Asia, with their social power based either on capital and expertise or rent and/or position in the extensive state apparatus.

With specific reference to Indonesia, until the beginning of economic and political crisis in mid-1997, observers generally agree that a middle class was growing but that it was still small in number relative to other Southeast Asian countries. The social and economic base of this emergent middle class was largely anchored in the extensive state apparatus. As a result of rapid expansion of both the bureaucracy (Evers 1987) and the education system, civil servants constituted the largest and distinct group inside the emerging middle class. The still small but growing group of businessmen and professionals were also dependent on the state for contracts and monopolies. Overall the state was ‘the fountain of social and economic power and success depends upon gaining access to the flow’ (Robison 1996:97). Given this dependency on the state,
the new middle class had not developed into an autonomous social force. Its role in Indonesian society must, therefore, be understood in the context of the role of the state and its representatives in society.

In the early 1990s, Chalmers (1993:54) estimated that families who were able to enjoy a middle-class lifestyle constituted between 7 to 10 per cent of the population, living predominantly in urban areas. According to Juwono Sudarsono, Minister of Education and Culture in the post-Soeharto Habibie government, the GDP per capita in Indonesia fell from US $1,300 in July 1997 to about US $400 in mid-1999 and the size of the middle class was reduced to about 5 million in a population of about 230 million (Straits Times, 19 May, 1999).

However, the economic crisis has also brought about the much-desired yet also much-feared removal of Soeharto from the presidency. It was much desired because corruption was rampant under the authoritarian regime, causing greater and greater social and economic inequalities in the midst of rapid economic expansion. It was concurrently much feared because of the power vacuum that would be left behind by his removal from office, potentially causing social and political chaos in an archipelagic nation that spans 17,000 islands, large and small. Nevertheless, Soeharto’s removal came to pass. Amongst other consequences, this has provided opportunities for the democratisation of the polity. For the first time in more than three decades, Indonesians went to the polls in a relatively free election in June 1999. This was only the first step on the long road to democratisation, and Indonesian politics is thus still vulnerable to great uncertainty and instability for the foreseeable future.

Before the crisis, the emerging middle class was striving for a consumption-oriented lifestyle, with new models of leisure that included shopping, sports, travel and watching Western movies. Consumption of mass-produced goods and the promotion of lifestyles of leisure have become their defining characteristics in Indonesia. However, the effects of this development are beyond the middle class itself. Consumerism as cultural practice affected the life of all people, enticing them to surround themselves with all kinds of ‘discretionary’ consumption goods that symbolise ‘modernity’ and urban lifestyles. Thus, with the emergence of the new middle class, rules of social integration changed in Indonesia. Consumption practices as constituting a ‘lifestyle’ were gaining greater significance as marks of social rank, in contrast to socio-economic criteria of classification.¹

The development of a culture of consumption in Indonesia reflected and yet differed from observable global tendencies. Globally, lifestyle is increasingly becoming ‘valid’ as a form of social identification.
It signifies an independent standard of reference for social integration; one that is not reducible to other factors of social status because lifestyle can be used not only for the construction of self-identity and to communicate this identity to others but is also well suited for establishing and maintaining membership in collective identities. Thus, lifestyles are blueprints for the organisation of everyday life. Bourdieu (1979), Featherstone (1991) and others have widely documented such developments in Western societies and placed the phenomena in theoretical perspectives. However, consumerism as a lifestyle under conditions of economic underdevelopment, as in Indonesia, took a different course than consumerism in developed economies.

By the standards of developed nations, the ability of the Indonesian middle class to consume was very weak, even before the 1997 crisis. Nevertheless, this did not prevent individuals from judging others by ‘lifestyle’; indeed, to a large extent questions of style structure social contacts. Consequently, those who were not able to pursue a middle-class lifestyle felt the social pressure to give their life a middle-class ‘touch’. One way of managing this dilemma is what I call ‘lifestyling’. Lifestyling refers to the symbolic dimension of consumption and can be defined as the display of a standard of living that one is in fact unable to afford. ‘Virtual’ consumption instead of real consumption, the demonstration of the symbols of a modern lifestyle instead of buying lifestyle goods—behaviours that rely on the demonstration of a certain lifestyle without the economic basis for real consumption—these are what I call ‘lifestyling’. In this essay, special emphasis will be placed on lifestyling strategies of the ‘much neglected and under researched populist lower middle class’ (Robison 1996:88).

Amidst the ongoing economic restructuring aimed at refloating the devastated economy and the political restructuring in hope of greater democratisation, the life of all Indonesians, not the least the middle class, will be undergoing significant and rapid changes for at least the next decade. The lifestyles of the middle class have been reduced by the crisis, with scant chance of recovery in the near term. The following analysis of the consumption patterns and collective lifestyling patterns and strategies of the Indonesian middle class, undertaken before the onset of the 1997 crisis, must be read in a historical perspective. As such, apart from the substantive analytic values, its heuristic value lies in the future, when there is an opportunity for comparison with yet another new middle class that will undoubtedly emerge when the economic and political dust settles.
The emergence of the Indonesian middle class under Dutch rule

The analysis will begin with an overview of the emergence of the Indonesian middle class, with necessarily emphasis on the emergence of government bureaucrats because they constituted the largest component group. Until the end of the nineteenth century, traditional rulers as well as the colonial government never displayed much concern for formal education for local Indonesians. Access to Western education was confined to the sons of the traditional aristocracy, thus perpetuating the gap between the traditional aristocratic elite and the people. It was not until the end (in the period 1901 to 1942) of more than 300 years of colonial rule that the Dutch began to allow children of well-to-do Indonesian parents to have access to Dutch secondary and tertiary education in such fields as medicine, law and engineering. This was the beginning of the creation of a modern Indonesian middle class. The Dutch’s aim was to produce a small Western-educated elite who could fill administrative positions in the growing civil service. However, contact with Western liberal values during their education in the Netherlands made these privileged Indonesians more aware of the character of colonial rule, of the differences between Dutch rule in the Netherlands and that in the East Indies. The fact that they had only limited career prospects reminded them of their second-class status in their own country.

Independence marked a radical shift in Indonesian development. The non-aristocratic, Western-educated middle class replaced not only the Dutch colonial regime but also the traditional aristocratic leaders as holders of political and moral power. The new government of independent Indonesia, formed by a small group of Dutch-educated intellectuals, was republican and democratic in political orientation. Furthermore, the leaders were attracted to Marxism and were strongly anti-capitalist, favouring socialism instead of liberalism in the economic sphere. Castles nicely describes the circumstances:

As the commanding heights of the Nederlands Indiës economy were already occupied by European capital, nationalist sentiment coincided with socialist in demanding their nationalization…As employees of the state, the elite had every reason to favour the maximization of its economic role.

(Castles 1967:74)

Under Sukarno’s presidency (1948–1965) parliamentary democracy was subsequently abandoned in favour of ‘Guided Democracy’ and ‘Guided
Economy’, which was said to be ‘Socialism à la Indonesia’. The essence of Sukarno’s ideology was that the elite, the peasants and the workers form a single united class, with the state’s concern for justice and economic equality expressed in the Panca Sila (five principles)\(^4\) written into the Constitution. Unfortunately, the socialist spirit did not raise the level of welfare of the people through effective measures to achieve greater equality in the distribution of basic commodities. In theory the masses should have benefited also from the nationalisation of foreign enterprises; in practice, however, rapid bureaucratisation was initiated and, because of widespread corruption, distribution was implemented only for civil servants.\(^5\) Nevertheless, public sector goods and services were heavily subsidised. The impact of the subsidies on the budget was so great that attempts to reconcile state ownership with popular welfare were economically disastrous, leading to hyper-inflation. ‘Anyone with liquid capital and political connections was well placed to make large profits through concessions and speculations’ (Dick 1985:87). The society was thus characterised by worsening inequality with a small group of newly rich families and individuals on one side and people at different levels of poverty on the other.

The rise of the educated middle class in independent Indonesia

In his book on *Social Changes in Yogyakarta*, Selosoemardjan (1962) provides a vivid picture of social changes that occurred in Yogyakarta during the late 1950s. He describes the many features of the Javanese principality that had survived the turbulent years of the Japanese occupation, the short period during which the city was the capital of the Republic of Indonesia, and its final integration into the administrative structure of the new republic under President Sukarno’s leadership.

Two basic processes were central to the social changes in Yogyakarta. First, traditionally Javanese society was divided into three classes, the nobility, the bureaucracy (*priyayi*) and commoners (*wong cilik* or ‘little people’). As the nobility lost its function as intermediary between the Sultan and his bureaucracy and between the Sultan and the people, its prestige declined, ‘particularly in the city, where the intelligentsia and the new group of *pegawai negri* [government officers] were moving upward in the social hierarchy’ (Selosoemardjan 1962:121). After the revolution, the allowances of the nobility were not raised and were quickly eroded by rising rates of inflation, leading to their further decline in status and political importance. Selosomardjan analyses
the rather complicated process through which the declining traditional courtiers were replaced by or transformed into civil servants employed by the provincial or the central government. Indeed, this process has captured the imagination of several scholars since Selosoemardjan’s account (see Sutherland 1979; Benda 1965; Evers 1987). The basic question commonly asked is: Was the old *priyayi* elite replaced by modern civil servants of Weberian persuasion or did the civil servants permute into ‘*neo-priyayi*’ by taking over the cultural values and behavioural patterns of their predecessors? Most authors favour the latter position by pointing to the centralised structure of the Indonesian administration, the culture of *bapakism* (father knows best), the top-down approach of the bureaucracy, the prevalence of Javanese in top positions and the typically Javanese way in which the administration was run generally.

Second, after independence, the new government increased the number of civil servants. ‘This policy was in line with the high social value of government jobs, that was carried over from the Dutch colonial period’ (Selosoemardjan 1962:106). The formation of a new middle class was intimately connected with this growth of the civil service.

The new middle class which grew up under Dutch aegis occupied a place parallel to that of the *priyayi* class. The members were Indonesians, for the greater part Javanese, who worked as officials in the Dutch administration in Jogjakarta and were thus the colleagues of the *priyayis*. Most members of this new class had either primary or high school education.

(Selosoemardjan 1962:37)

In Java the ‘intelligentsia’ usually emerged from *priyayi* circles (Sutherland 1979:56), but had divorced itself from its cultural heritage and the feudal civil service (*Pangreh Praja*).

According to Selosoemardjan, this ‘educated class’ replaced the nobility, and took over leadership of new political and social institutions.

The rise of the intelligentsia to the upper class was recognised by other classes, which tried to acquire the external symbols of this new class by wearing Western-style dress and walking around with a dispatch case in one hand and a fountain pen showing in the upper pocket of the jacket. But by far the most distinguishing symbol of the new upper class was the use of foreign languages, namely Dutch or English.

(Selosoemardjan 1962:129)
Upward social mobility of the middle class thus meant downward mobility of the aristocracy. The new intelligentsia, as the new middle class, adopted a Western lifestyle and engaged in politics, whereas the new bureaucrats patterned their behaviour on that of the traditional priyayi court officials. It was thus apparent that the upward movement of young people into new social positions took two very different cultural turns.\(^6\)

The political and economic situation changed dramatically when the ‘New Order Regime’ came into power by a military coup in 1965. The winners of this coup were obviously the Armed Forces. Subsequent institutionalisation of the dual-function \(dwi\ funksi\)\(^7\) of the military further emphasised its non-military societal responsibility, strengthening its influence in society. Along with the military, an emerging middle class of bureaucrats was among the winners of the coup. Dick notes,

> It is no paradox that the students, who in 1966 spearheaded the movement which forced Sukarno to abdicate were absorbed so easily into the New Order. In 1966 they were not only the conscience of the emerging middle class but also had a strong vested interest in a system of privilege for those with education.

\[(Dick\ 1985:88)\]

These individuals filled the expansion of the bureaucracy under the New Order (Evers 1987).

Although the bureaucracy grew in size under Guided Democracy, the majority of its members suffered a remarkable decline in living standards and privileges because of hyper-inflation, which stood at about 600 per cent in 1965–6. After the coup, with the help of international development aid, the inflation rate was reduced to 10 per cent in 1969. Between 1970 and 1980, the economy maintained a remarkable annual growth rate of about 8 per cent in real terms, mainly due to the booming oil sector, which accounted for the major proportion of the value of exports and of central government revenues. The benefits of this impressive rise in real income per capita have flowed disproportionately to the relative small urban middle class, which included the increased number of the civil servants.

To its credit, the New Order government further vigorously and successfully promoted education expansion during the three decades that it was in power. Universal education had always been a demand of nationalists in the pre-independence period because they themselves owed their political influence and personal advancement to the fact
that they were educated. The ideology that education, personal engagement and responsibility for one’s own future are the keys to economic success led to very high levels of school attendance beyond primary education (cf. Gerke 1992:72–6). Improvements to the education system raised hopes and expectations among the population for upward social mobility, which was associated with fixed incomes, expansion of consumption, particularly of imported goods, and a lifestyle which included leisure activities. The material aspirations and the level of consumption of the middle strata expanded dramatically under the Soeharto regime. Any cursory observation would have confirmed this: the number of private cars rose significantly, the number of motorcycles increased dramatically and the growing number of urban modern housing complexes marked the growing number of well-to-do middle-class households.

Having established that there was a rising, albeit still small, middle class, we are now in a better position to delineate the class structure of contemporary Indonesia.

**Defining the new middle class**

The most common stratification model for contemporary Indonesian society has been, and continues to be, the differentiation between those who can ‘barely make it’, those who ‘have enough’ (*cukupan*) and those who are ‘rich people’ (*orang kaya*), which included high office holders. This threefold division has been used throughout Indonesia in both urban and rural areas and can, therefore, be called a ‘folk model’ of Indonesian social stratification (Evers und Gerke 1994). A more academic approach recognises a ‘poverty line’, for which a variety of

---

**Table 6.1 Government employees, Indonesia, 1920–90**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Government employees (1000s)</th>
<th>Government employees (per 1000 population)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>111.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>82.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>303.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>393.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>515.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>2047.0</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>3771.2</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Evers (1987), updated by using census and other official data.
Collapsing these two models into one, we arrive at a stratification model in which the poverty line separates the lower stratum of Indonesian society into a ‘lower-lower stratum’ of the absolute poor members of the society and an ‘upper-lower stratum’ of those, who have enough (Table 6.2).

This folk model has been redefined by delineating a ‘new middle class’ (see Tanter and Young 1990) or a middle stratum whose members earn enough to participate in a modern consumer culture (Table 6.3). This stratum consists of those who have been able to secure higher education and are able to afford at least the symbolic items of middle-class consumption; thus, defining themselves as the ‘new middle class’ (golongan menengah) (Gerke 1995). The ‘cukupan’ level is now clearly situated in the lower stratum, separating the very poor from the not-so-poor.

Admist the debate regarding who belongs to this rising new middle class in Indonesia, our survey in 1994 gave some indications on the features of this new group in two typical Indonesian cities, Yogyakarta and Padang (Evers and Gerke 1994).

In the survey, we first looked at the middle-income group in Indonesian society. As stated earlier, the ideology that education, personal engagement and responsibility for one’s own future are the keys to economic success lead to rapid expansion of secondary education since the late 1970s (Gerke 1992:72–6). This has in turn contributed

---

**Table 6.2** Organization of Indonesian society: poverty line approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Upper-lower status</th>
<th>poverty line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orang kaya (elite)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cukupan (enough)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute poor</td>
<td>Lower-lower status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6.3** Organization of Indonesian society: consumption line approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consumption levels</th>
<th>Social strata</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orang kaya (elite)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real consumption</td>
<td>Upper middle stratum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic consumption</td>
<td>Lower and middle-middle stratum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cukupan (enough)</td>
<td>Lower stratum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute poor</td>
<td>Lower-lower stratum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
significantly to the growth of a middle class and the spread of middle-class values. Accordingly, and following their self-definition, we have counted only those with high educational attainment (high school or university graduates) as members of the middle class. The Yogyakarta data show a distinct group of people with an average per capita daily wage of between Rp5,000 and Rp20,000. Another useful measure of the middle strata, in consumption terms, was provided by data on the expenditure for food as percentage of total monthly household expenditure (Engel’s curve). In Yogyakarta, we could clearly separate two groups, namely those with more than 50 per cent food expenditure (lower strata) and those with 30 per cent to 50 per cent food expenditure (middle strata).9

Rapid expansion of the bureaucracy and the education system had spawned the civil servants as the largest group inside the Indonesian middle class. Of the government employees in our sample 85.3 per cent fell into the middle strata of society. Alternatively, looking at the situation from the other side, 62.8 per cent of the middle class, across all age groups, were civil servants.10 They constituted a state-caste with a high degree of occupational inheritance and exhibited a strong aspiration to secure their position (Evers and Gerke 1994:9). As loyal government employees, they fully supported the New Order government. Furthermore, in contrast to the professionals, businessmen and military personnel interviewed, they shared a decidedly non-critical political outlook, in the sense that they are not interested, nor sufficiently informed, to recognise all the facets of political life in the country. The state supported them and they supported whatever the state did in a true bapak-anak (father-son) relationship. Indeed, there was no shortage of social issues in Indonesia during the time of research; among other events, were the murder of a woman labour activist, Marsinah; reported political unrest in East Timor; and worker strikes in Medan. However, for these civil servants to be

Table 6.4 Distribution of middle-class* occupations, by city (%), Indonesia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Yogyakarta</th>
<th>Padang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labourer</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government officials</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>61.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Middle-class in pop.</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: n = 455 (Yogya, 169, Padang 226), wage earners only. Members of the ‘middle class’ earn between Rp5,000 and Rp200,000 per day and have completed high school (Gerke 1994).
‘knowledgeable’ about these political happenings would have meant becoming intellectually and psychologically involved as critical citizens.

There is no doubt that a middle strata emerged in Indonesia during the 1980s and 1990s, sandwiched between the poor and the very rich members of the society. The socio-economic backgrounds of its members differed dramatically. A clear-cut differentiation of who was already in and who was still out of the middle class was hard to draw with parameters used for developed economies (Evers and Gerke 1994). For example, the classical variables of research on the American and European middle class (SES = occupation, income, education) did not apply here. Nevertheless, in spite of economic underdevelopment, the term ‘middle class’ was a frequently-used emic category that had, above all, a social function in Indonesia. Members of Indonesian society who characterised themselves as ‘modern’ and who wished to demonstrate this through what was, in their eyes, a specifically ‘modern’ lifestyle routinely described themselves as ‘middle class’. ‘Membership’ was thus not necessarily dependent on income but was defined through social behaviour and lifestyle. Consumption thus became a symbolic act signalling ‘modernity’ and membership in the ascriptive category ‘middle class’. The frequently observed conspicuous consumption of Western consumer goods very often did not reflect the economic capabilities of the consumers nor their production class situations.

The culture of the ‘new middle class’

Typical in its formation, the culture of the ‘new middle class’ is one marked by an ongoing attempt to demarcate itself against the lower strata of the society. Its formation is thus bounded in a complex process of distancing itself from the poor ‘Other’. In Indonesia, the ‘new middle class’ was in the strategic social position to construct hierarchies via the creation and promotion of a ‘modern’ lifestyle through consumption. Although consumer and leisure industries remained underdeveloped during the Soeharto regime, the emerging middle class was already promoting consumption and leisure as its ultimate values, through both the control over the production, and subsequent appropriation, of lifestyle images in TV, radio and the press.

As elsewhere in the contemporary world, lifestyle identifications were engendered by the media industry that continued to boom from the end of the 1980’s. (Ironically, during the economic and political crisis, print media continued to expand as a result of the lifting of licensing controls and rapid expansion of press freedom.) During the Soeharto years,
representatives and employees of this industry were commonly identified as members of the ‘new middle class’ and placed themselves as the arbiters, hawksers and interpreters of lifestyles. Interviews with journalists of the magazines *Femina* and *Tiara* confirmed that they, indeed, regarded themselves as stylists and missionaries of ‘modernity’ as well as trend-setters of a new way of life. They were the providers of symbolic goods of ‘modernity’. The cultural appropriation of the images they produced and the reality-simulation effects of these images altered peoples’ perceptions and their sense of the real, the possible and the fictional. Thus, lifestyle became an increasingly important new mode of social integration in Indonesia, as it could be used not only to signal self-identities but also for establishing and maintaining membership of collective identities. As suggested earlier, it signified a distinct and independent standard of reference of social integration, not reducible to other elements of social status.

**Symbolic consumption and lifestyling**

The role of cultural differentiation in the delineation of social positions is, following Bourdieu (1979:191), a process by which a particular class-determined habitus distinguishes itself in the cultural marketplace by identifying with a clearly defined set of products and activities—a lifestyle. In Indonesia, it seemed, nearly everyone wanted to take part in ‘modern’ life. The socially palpable pressure to re-establish, constantly, middle-class membership led inevitably to demonstrative consumption. As Mulder puts it: ‘One way or another, consumerism affects the life of all, enticing people to surround themselves with all kinds of goods that become indispensable as markers of urban ways’ (1994:112). Through such consumption, Indonesians manifested a ‘class consciousness’ that was determined not by interest in political action but one of identification with a class or group of people pursuing a particular lifestyle.

However, even before the 1997 crisis, only a small portion of the Indonesian new middle class was able to afford a Western or urbanised lifestyle. The overwhelming majority was unable to consume the items defined as appropriate for members of the middle class. They might be educated and employed in jobs that provided social prestige, but they could not afford a lifestyle that would be regarded as suitable for their status. Thus, they engaged in substitutional activities to give their lives a middle-class ‘touch’. As their consumption possibilities were limited, consumption assumed a mere symbolic dimension. For example, one could readily see young people and families spending hours sitting
in strategic places, where they could be seen by all and sundry, at McDonald’s or Pizza Hut drinking Coke or milk-shakes with a burger. They would take the empty hamburger bags with them, as they left the fast-food restaurant, so that everybody in the street could see where they had lunch or dinner. Students would share one Benetton sweater with two or three others, wear second- or third-hand Hammer T-shirts and borrow jewellery from roommates to go shopping or hang around shopping centres.

Such acts gave new meanings to the idea of ‘symbolic’ consumption. I call these behaviours *lifestyling*, to signify a superficial activity with no real consumption deriving from economic well-being. Lifestyling has symbolic features to manifest a standard of living that is absent in fact. In this sense we have to see demonstrative consumption and the whole set of lifestyling practices as aspects of a more general strategy for the establishment and/or maintenance of self-identity. Through active lifestyling people constantly demonstrate group membership and very often ignore their social and economic reality.

**Lifestyle-shopping**

The Indonesian youth population might be said to be especially susceptible to media-produced dreams and have invented their own mechanisms of ‘lifestyling’, in order to participate in the ‘modern’ life. Fashion is their métier. They invested energy and money in their outfits and the wearing of ‘brand names’. It had to be Levis (and not ‘no name’) jeans and no ordinary T-shirt but only a Hammer (a popular local brand) or Benetton would do. If one were unable to afford the desired lifestyle articles to signal one’s identity and belonging to the modern way of life, one could take advantage of the second-hand market for brand name articles. The second-hand market—with the goods sorted according to their degree of wear—offered everything from Benetton to Boss and Aigner.

A highly popular means to get access to lifestyle articles was ‘resource pooling’. In Indonesia, it had been a common practice for several families to contribute to a common fund to obtain festive costumes, so that their daughters could dance proudly as the main attraction at village events. Traditional credit associations (*arisan*) also give members of village society the opportunity to pool small individual contributions into larger collective funds, to uplift their subsistence production by, for instance, raising chickens. Such financial arrangements were used by students who lived together in hostels, by teenagers from the same neighbourhood or by groups of friends to pool their limited resources in order to accumulate a shared
collection of brand name articles of clothing, so that they could trip down to McDonald’s for a Coke, togged in a Hammer t-shirt. Even the act of making a purchase became part of the group experience of lifestyle-shopping (Shields 1992). Generically, the places where the objects of consumption appear are social spaces where people meet, display themselves, communicate and interact. It is therefore highly appropriate that Indonesian town planners represent shopping centres on city maps by symbol usually reserved for amusement or recreation areas.

**Education and lifestyling**

Education was another element of lifestyling. This is perhaps ironic but not surprising, as the first step of being defined as ‘modern’ is to possess the symbols of ‘modernity’, of which ‘education’ is an important icon. Thus, in pre-crisis Indonesia, symbols of education defined middle-class membership and the collection of these symbols reflected aspects of consumption (Gerke 1992:134; Mulder 1983:50). The main concern of the education system was neither quality nor knowledge transfer. Knowledge was not adapted to local conditions but adopted from outside with English or ‘Indonenglish’ terminology used throughout. The great majority of members of the academic community have, however, little or no command of English. Thus, very often ‘forms’ were transmitted but not content. What indigenous knowledge production or home-grown scientific discourses there were, existed in some isolated enclaves staffed with foreign or ‘globally’ trained scholars. School certificates, university titles, diplomas and degrees were not indicative of reliable qualifications. Although those who possessed them were assumed to be ‘knowledgeable’ in the same way that those who owned the symbols of modernity were modern. The value of the degree as a symbol created a certain state of general acceptance of its ‘reality’; thus, it was not important that the education system did not generate knowledge but only holders of titles and diplomas. Consequently, looking at the boom in the education industry, from mid-1970s till mid-1990s, one could only conclude that this expansion had only ‘symbolic’ value, expressed quantitatively in the number of schools and universities and the number of ‘graduates’.

**Housing consumption**

The one area in which there was substance in the consumption of the Indonesian new middle class was in housing, where privatisation ran
contrary to conventional practices of the past. To a certain extent, conventionally, consumption assets such as bicycles, TV sets and radios were, and continue to be, shared or borrowed goods. Refusal to lend something, as well as not allowing neighbours to share the privately owned TV, is regarded as anti-social behaviour. The social pressure to share has resulted in certain middle-class families moving out of inner-city *kampungs* into housing estates (*perumahan*) that are now spreading in every Indonesian city. Even village middle-class families who worked in urban or semi-urban environments would leave their home villages and move into housing estates at the urban fringe (see Table 6.5). These housing estates accommodated people with the same living standard who enjoyed their privacy and avoided too much contact with their neighbours. Here, women played an important role in defining class boundaries because they did not allow their offspring to play with children from the lower strata of the society.

**Collective lifestyle strategies**

As part of the class formation process, the production of lifestyle is not just a personal matter, it is also directed towards the establishment of social boundaries and structures of exclusion, in order to establish a ‘collective’ identity. The specific structuring of Indonesian society into social groups with strategic interests has already been theorised by Evers and Schiel (1988). According to the strategic group theory, power structures in Southeast Asian societies emerged partly as a result of planned, long-term action of groups, like the military and the bureaucracy, who tried to shape society in such a way as to enlarge their own chances of appropriating economic goods in the first instance but increasingly cultural and symbolic goods as well. These goods can be seen as strategic resources that are necessary to produce and reproduce a social order which is in the interest of the dominating strategic groups. The basic focus of Evers (1973) and Evers and Schiel (1988)
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Real consumption</th>
<th>High-ranking military</th>
<th>Big business</th>
<th>High bureaucrats</th>
<th>High-income professionals</th>
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<tr>
<td>Real consumption</td>
<td>Upper military</td>
<td>Big business</td>
<td>Upper bureaucrats</td>
<td>High-income professionals</td>
<td>Upper-middle class</td>
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<td>Symbolic consumption</td>
<td>Middle-ranking military</td>
<td>Middle business</td>
<td>Middle bureaucrats</td>
<td>Middle-income professionals</td>
<td>Middle-middle class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subsistence level</td>
<td>Low-ranking military</td>
<td>Small business</td>
<td>Lower bureaucrats</td>
<td>Low-income professionals</td>
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has been the transformation of ‘quasi groups’ with unrecognised common interests and goals of appropriation into ‘self-conscious’ strategic groups. After the transformation, group solidarity and social integration emerge on the basis of increasing self-recruitment and a common lifestyle. The relevance of these latter aspects to strategic group theory is very underdeveloped and undertheorised.

In Indonesia, politically active strategic groups like the military and the bureaucracy, who were successful in developing strategies to regulate social distribution of economic resources, were also in the position to control access to symbolic goods. Along with the business community, the bureaucracy and the military represented strategic groups that were extending their privileged positions into the cultural sphere, in the struggle for prestige and distinction. Part of this attempt was through the production of collective identities through lifestyles. Membership in these groups were expressed through the presentation of specific lifestyles. ‘Lifestylisation’ was a means to culturalise social distinctions, to cultivate perceptions of difference in relation to other strategic groups and, at the same time, to strengthen group identity and group spirit. Lifestyle was thereby a visible form of a socially approved collective Lebenspraxis, which is draped in the trappings of cultural symbols, representing an increasingly important mode of social integration (see Table 6.6).

For example, lower-ranked bureaucrats with a monthly income similar to that of the lower class (about Rp150,000 at the time of field work) would not identify with those of similar class positions, such as small-scale businessmen, lower-ranked members of the military and other wage workers. Instead, they would identify with higher-ranked members of the bureaucracy and attempt to imitate whenever possible the latter’s lifestyle. Thus, occupational group consciousness was highly developed while class consciousness was not. The bureaucracy and the military supported such group consciousness and group identification of their members through all kinds of sport and leisure activities, during which participants wore the same T-shirts, carried the same handbags, without apparent regard for the differing social status which is intrinsic in such organisational hierarchies.

This apparent ‘equality’ among group members hid the fact that sports played were obviously distinction markers with these organisations: lower-ranked bureaucrats played table tennis and football; middle-ranked bureaucrats played volleyball, some in the upper-middle strata played tennis, and high-ranked bureaucrats played tennis and golf. Recreational activities were prime examples of strategic management of the resources available to members of the group. The types of recreational activities,
the matching outfits that ranged from T-shirts to bicycles to the brand of golf clubs, were all items of public display. All these items varied according to occupational groups and status distinctions within these groups and all had a socially integrative function. Social distinction and high status were achieved not just through wealth or by the fact of being a government official or a military officer. The political and ideological demand to generate symbolic equality among group members dictated crucially how one converted his or her position into one of prestige in the cultural arena.

Thus, a large proportion of the Indonesians who were commonly considered as belonging to the middle class were faced with a dilemma. As members of specific occupational groups they were under acute social pressure to demonstrate their standing by means of a certain group lifestyle that varied according to social positions within the group. For example, an official of the mid-level of civil service (golongan IIIa) had to adopt a certain house-type that was identified in brochures as III-house or RS house (RS means rumah sederhana, simple house). If he were promoted, he would have to build an addition to the house, enlarging it to meet the standards of the house type reflecting the higher position. The improvements would have to include a parabolic antenna, a symbol that would make his status even more visible. Since only in a minority of cases did official position actually correlate with income, a financial dilemma would arise. This dilemma would be solved either through additional income (corruption) whenever possible or through symbolic consumption, i.e., ‘lifestyling’.

The majority of people, who, in terms of education and occupation were counted as middle class, nevertheless belonged economically to lower-income groups. They were, therefore, not in a position to own or consume the goods that were attributed to their positions, status and strategic groups. They therefore felt coerced into giving their lives a middle-class ‘touch’. Since they were financially limited, symbols took the place of real consumption. Establishment of symbolic spaces (or virtual realities) became the survival strategy for maintaining middle-class status. For example, living rooms would be decorated to ‘demonstrate’ travel and recreation. If individuals could not afford a trip to Singapore or Germany, they acquire a Merlion sculpture, the trademark of Singapore, or a cuckoo clock in Jakarta or Medan. Placed at a prominent and quite visible place in the living room, these objects created a symbolic environment that enhanced feelings of belonging to the middle class, as the items demonstrate leisure, the ability to travel, to be international—values strongly associated with middle-class activities.
All the above strategies of lifestyling were desperate attempts to maintain ‘membership’ of the middle class. In Indonesia, where the tradition of negative sanctioning of individuality still holds, ‘personal’ styles had always been simultaneously distinctive characteristics of membership of a social group. Tendencies towards individualisation could readily be and were indeed integrated into new forms of association, into the lifestyles that expressed collective identities. Lifestylisation was the concrete and visible mode of a \textit{Lebensführung} that was collectively approved. Accordingly, before the economic crisis that disrupted the political hierarchy and thus the position of civil servants and military officials in society, cultivated sensitivity to those signifiers that had social recognition value not only enabled clear social distinctions to be made but also promised a person gains in prestige.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In Indonesia, the above forms of symbolic demonstration of class and group membership were made necessary because of the demonopolisation of symbolic hierarchies and patterns of interpretation of status and prestige which were defined and dominated by Javanese court culture, and by neo-\textit{priyayi} government officials before the New Order regime. With rapid capitalist economic development, prestige and status became negotiable values, depending mainly on a person’s lifestyle and consumption patterns, and no longer based on traditional established values and hierarchies. In this process, local cultural elements lost much of their status-enhancing function, displaced and often replaced to a large extent by globalised modern/Western symbols. In general, this displacement has, at least, two possible effects. First the relative standardisation of culture of consumption of globally marketed goods enables people, including Indonesians, to be identified as members of the middle class on a national, even international, scale. Second, it may lead to a new generation of strollers through the ‘no place’ postmodern urban spaces (Calefato 1988) for whom TV is the world.

In Indonesia, as we have shown above, a certain mode of symbolic consumption defined membership in the new middle class, not income and actual consumption. This was because Indonesia was a poor country, made poorer by the 1997 crisis. The small Indonesian middle class primarily identified themselves as members of strategic groups and expressed their identifications and memberships through the imitation of lifestyles of the upper ranks in their respective groups. If contemporary lifestyles
associates with the middle class were conventionally based on actual education, occupation and income, then what had emerged in Indonesia might be said to be the development of a ‘virtual’ middle class, before the economic basis for middle-class formation is established. One of the consequences of this process of appropriation of middle-class symbols without actual consumption capacity is the reduction of social conflict without political democratisation.

As mentioned in the introduction, Indonesia has been one of the worst-affected nations of the economic crisis that has swept through East and Southeast Asia since mid-1997. The financial crisis radically devalued the Indonesian currency to a mere fraction of its pre-crisis worth within a few months. It further precipitated the much-desired but also much-feared removal of President Soeharto, who had been at the centre of an authoritarian regime for more than three decades. The political crisis that ensued also reduced radically the prestige and status of individuals who were part of the military and/or government bureaucracy. High-profile individuals within these ranks were attacked publicly for their part in the maintenance of a thoroughly corrupt regime. To the extent that the majority of the pre-crisis middle class were functionaries of the state, in military and civil bureaucracies, one of the questions for future research has to be: What happens to the ‘virtual middle class’ and its lifestyling during and after the current financial and political crisis.

Obviously, given the tenuousness of the middle class in a poor country such as Indonesia, any financial instability would quickly reveal the vulnerability of the class itself. As mentioned earlier, an immediate effect of the crisis has been the reduction of the middle-class ranks, within two years, to a paltry 0.2 per cent of the total population. Accordingly, one would expect the great majority of the above-described members of the lower-middle strata, who were manipulating lifestyling strategies to demonstrate their ‘middle classness’, to have fallen back into poverty, which by early 1999 has expanded to include, supposedly, more than 50 per cent of the total Indonesian population. The broad group of lower- and medium-ranking civil servants who relied primarily on government salaries to meet routine expenses would be expected especially to face mounting difficulties in maintaining their pre-crisis standard of living. From the information provided by residents of Padang in 1999, civil servants with additional income from other sources, such as informal business and subsistence production, appeared to be faring better, although they too had to struggle to meet such financial obligations as paying back credit and loans. On the whole, with the exception of the clearly upper-middle class, every social strata below that level in
the pre-crisis class structure has experienced downward mobility, sinking to at least the class below, if not further.

However, in spite of the overall decline of income and expenditure across the middle class, the need to maintain ‘symbolic’ consumption has not necessarily disappeared among those who are still able to do so. Indeed, the situation calls for ‘new’ strategies to demonstrate one’s middle-class status. Thus, one saw TV and movie entertainers opening, and serving at, their own sidewalk cafes and restaurants. Their status as ‘entertainers’ acted as promotional advertisements for the humble but relatively successful establishments. The once young and upwardly mobile urban middle-class individuals still have to make their rounds in the local scenes, such as bars and discos, albeit consuming a lot less food and liquor, in order to impress upon others that they are not affected by the crisis. Indeed, it would appear that such acts of symbolic consumption have become even more necessary in the struggle to avoid further slides down the class structure and into the economic abyss. The economic crisis receded somewhat by mid-1999, and conditions have begun to stabilise. The ‘prestige’ of the armed forces as a whole and that of the subservient politicians and bureaucrats has also been symbolically dismantled. As Indonesians look to a more democratic government and a more transparent and accountable civil service, with a new president in 1999, the shape of the middle class that will undoubtedly emerge subsequently will likely adhere more closely to the class-formation process found elsewhere in the capitalist world and the consumption pattern will, hopefully, be more substantively real than imaginary and hollow.

Notes

1 This paper reflects first results of a field study on middle-class lifestyles which I carried out in Indonesia in 1993 and 1994 under the auspices of the Sociology of Development Research Center at the University of Bielefeld. Fieldwork was supported by the Faculty of Social Sciences at Andalas University in Padang and the Population Studies Center at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta.

2 Much has been written on the Ethical Policy as, for example, Furnivall (1939).

3 Indonesians did not get the same remuneration as Europeans in services such as education or credit where they worked side by side (see Van Niel 1960:180–1).

4 The ‘five principles’ (Panca Sila): belief in God, the sovereignty of the people, national unity, social justice and humanity

5 See Tan, 1967, 29ff. See also Evers 1987
It should be noted that this type of analysis differs somewhat from Geertz’s well known description of the partition of Javanese society into three ‘aliran’ (vertical socio-cultural groups) of Priyayi, Santri and Abangan. The Westernised intelligentsia has no place in Geertz’s scheme.

The ‘dual function’ claimed by the Indonesian Armed Forces, i.e., a role in society as well as the defence of the nation.

For a discussion of the ‘poverty line approach’ see Evers 1995.

Twelve calculations based on unpublished SUSENAS data 1992 for Yogyakarta city.

On the Indonesian state and its middle-class bureaucrats see Robison 1996: 82ff.

The majority of our respondents in Java as well as Sumatra put the line that separates the lower from the middle stratum of the society at a daily regular income of more than Rp5,000 per person (US $2.30) (more than Rp20,000 for a couple) and an education beyond secondary school level (SNM). This corresponds with data reported in the Far Eastern Economic Review (20 July, 1995) which cites the well-established Brokerage Smith New Court which counts those as middle class in Indonesia who earn at least $1,630 annually.

Indonesians use the term kias menengah or golongan menengah to classify themselves or others as members of the broad middle stratum of the society.

See also Kessler (1991) who provocatively states that Asia’s new middle classes are interested solely in consumption.

For a discussion about inclusion, exclusion and boundary maintenance see Schlee 1992.

The RS house is 36 m² and cost about Rp6.9 Million in 1994.

References


—— and Solvay Gerke (1994) Social Mobility and the Transformation of Indonesian Society, Sociology of Development Research Centre, WP Series no. 204, Bielefeld.


