

# Policy Transfer and Social Stratification: Park Chung-hee's Middle-Class Socialization in South Korea and Implications for Vietnam

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**Abstract:** *In the context of industrialization and modernization of the country, the Park Chung-hee administration (1961-1979) proactively sought solutions for sustainable national development. Accordingly, the middle-class socialization policy in the Republic of Korea (ROK) is identified as one of the important solutions to promote this class to contribute to national prosperity, helping the ROK become a modern industrial country, and moving from authoritarian politics to a democratic society. Based on that reality, the research analyzes and explains the middle-class socialization policy in the ROK under President Park Chung-hee, starting from the formation basis, characteristics, and policy results. At the same time, from the experience of the ROK, the article proposes some suggestions as a reference for Vietnam in building and developing a harmonious, dynamic, and sustainable society.*

**Keywords:** Middle class, policy, Republic of Korea, Park Chung-hee.

## 1. Introduction

The middle class is a complex concept because it is formed from many different fields (economics, sociology, philosophy, etc.), so up to now there is still no consensus on its definition. This concept comes from the West, originating from Aristotle's idea in Politics that the middle class is people with a standard of living "average between wealth and poverty" (Aristotle, 1999:95). By the 19th century, K. Marx and F. Engels in the Communist Manifesto (1848) called the class which "stand in between" the upper bourgeoisie and the working class is the middle class (Marx & Engels Complete Works, 1995: 600). After that, this concept continued to be supplemented and completed by subsequent generations of scholars. From an academic perspective, the middle class has been mentioned in many aspects such as status, social role, educational level, occupation, lifestyle, political attitudes, and cultural behavior. Therefore, in our opinion, the middle class should be understood as a group of people belonging to the middle level in the social stratification, they have an income higher than the average and have a relative stability in living standards and social status, educational level, and cultural behavior. People of this class often have moderate political attitudes, a trendy lifestyle, and respect the community's laws and rules. Today, in most countries, research on the middle class is influenced by one of the following two approaches: First, Weber's approach to clarifying the formation process and development conditions associated with the middle class related to income and occupation (1978: 302-307). Second, Bourdieu's approach pays more attention to the consumption and cultural activities of the middle class (1984: 114). Essentially, both approaches support each other in clarifying the middle class's political, economic, and cultural nature. However, these approaches only recognize the middle class as a "natural product" of the country's industrialization and modernization, ignoring that they are also formed and

developed from the political will of the ruling elite (Yang Myung-ji, 2012: 426).

In East Asia in the second half of the twentieth century, the government control of countries and redistribution of social resources in a harmonious and equitable direction has gradually become popular. Originating from the tradition of centralization and worship of power in Eastern society, besides natural factors, the role of the political regime contributes to the formation and development of a group of people. In the case of the ROK, President Park Chung-hee created favorable conditions for the middle class to be born, then turned them into a model representative of social discipline and a symbol of national prosperity. Since the '60s and '70s of the twentieth century, Park Chung-hee also tried to build, consolidate, and perfect the policy system to develop middle-class society. Up to now, research to analyze the content and explain the characteristics and nature of middle-class socialization policies still has scientific and practical significance not only for ROK but also for Eastern countries that are promoting industrialization and modernization like Vietnam. Experience in building and developing the middle class in Korea contributes to suggesting policies for Vietnam in the process of creating a harmonious, dynamic, and sustainable multi-layered society.

## 2. Discussion and Results

### 2.1 Basis for forming the middle-class socialization policy in ROK

#### 2.1.1 Theoretical basis

Scholar Philip S. Gorski (1993) points out that: The state can only govern society through establishing rules. However, how can the state impose these rules and discipline on society? According to Gorski, the state needs to create or support a group of people who represent the wishes of the

state. They will help social rules and disciplines be applied widely and effectively in the community (Gorski, 1993: 270). In the case of the ROK, the state and intellectuals have placed expectations on the middle class because they converge on all three factors: (1) discipline, (2) living and working according to industrial style and (3) escaping from the cultural institutions of smallholder society.

President Park Chung-hee and Korean intellectuals found that the upper class is often conservative while the working class is poor and has low professional qualifications (Nguyen Hoai Son & other authors, 2021: 45). Only the middle class is the most steadfast force, immediate benefits like the upper class do not easily bribe them and are not as sentimental as the manual labor force. This perception of Park Chung-hee was formed from two foundations: *First, the experience of modernization and social governance of Japan and the United States; Second, the influence of nationalism with the desire to make ROK an economic power.* President Park Chung-hee not only learned from the progressive thinking of the Meiji Emperor, Fukuzawa Yukichi, but also researched social welfare, labor, and health policies for the middle class in the United States. From a national perspective, Park Chung-hee found South Korea vulnerable to military attacks and political interference from outside (Choi Jang-jip, 1996). Therefore, narrowing the military gap with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and shortening the economic gap between Japan and the West have become the goals and ideals of Park Chung-hee throughout his presidency. Along with the policy of industrialization and modernization of the country, the middle-class socialization policy has become a key task for this President to create a prosperous new ROK.

### 2.1.2. Practical basis

While understanding of the middle-class society in the ROK is still limited, since the 1960s of the twentieth century, Japan's modernization experience has shown that the middle class plays an important role in the economy and social development of the country. With progressive welfare policies, Japan has gradually become a country with a developed middle-class society with an education system, job opportunities, and advancement for all people (David Chiavacci, 2022). The middle class always plays a role in important national issues such as population aging, fertility decrement, and unemployment rates. Japan has been very successful in "socializing" the middle class, that is, attracting the active, proactive, and effective participation of this group of people in the activities of health, education, and urban management to solve urgent problems in the social development (Tran Thi Minh Ngoc, 2018: 189-190).

Unlike Japan, the ROK at this time was in crisis due to the failure of previous governments in national development. In his final years in power, President Rhee Syng-man fell into corruption while Chang Myon's weak government caused stagnant production, social chaos, and decadent lifestyles (Yang Myung-ji, 2012:428). In 1945, the urban population doubled from 15% to 30% (1960) but still up to 70% of the population lived mostly in the countryside (Michael J. Seth, 2010:375) with the purely agricultural labor force accounting for 61.4% (Adrian Buzo, 2002:137).

Thus, before Park Chung-hee took power, the ROK was still an agricultural society with a middle class limited in quantity and quality. They are mainly skilled workers, managers, and intellectuals, so they have no experience participating in modern social governance activities. Faced with the urgent need of the government to have a core force to carry out the task of national development, Park Chung-hee chose the middle class, as well as, determined the middle-class socialization policies in the ROK in the 1960s of the twentieth century.

## 2.2. Characteristics of Park Chung-hee's middle-class socialization policy

### 2.2.1. Policy contents

#### \* Group of economic policies

After successfully consolidating his power and officially governing the country, Park Chung-hee announced the first 5-year Economic Development Plan (1962-1966). This plan not only determines costs and outputs in key economic sectors but also focuses on overcoming the consequences of the crisis, creating jobs, and stabilizing security. This plan aimed for a growth rate of 7.1% per year, but the actual results exceeded the initial target. The ROK's GDP increased by 7.8% between 1962 and 1966 (Adrian Buzo, 2002:115). In terms of economic structure, the industrial sector leads the overall growth rate with an average of 14.9 %/year; The agricultural sector increased by 5.6% and the service sector increased by 7.7% (Song Ho-jung & other authors, 2019:267). The initial successes of the state-led planned economic model became the premise for ROK's later economic policies. The main sectors can be divided into two phases corresponding to two different economic development plans: Phase 1 (1967-1972) is characterized by the strategy of building and perfecting light industries to take advantage of the abundant but not highly skilled labor force; Phase 2 (1972-1977) was associated with the development of heavy and chemical industries, with priority given to the development of the steel industry and the petrochemical refining industry (Hoang Van Viet & Nguyen Thi Be Loan, 2021: 07). To realize that ambition, Park Chung-hee is interested in investing in the development of science and technology, training human resources capable of proficiently using modern machinery and technological equipment.

For the policy of developing high-quality human resources, the Government focuses on vocational and technical education programs. With the goal of "effectively developing human resources...", Park Chung-hee reformed the entire current curriculum and promoted the practicality of the new education (Yoon Kaeung-hun, 2013: 44). To meet the country's requirements, education must now directly serve the cause of industrialization and modernization; Therefore, each citizen needs to have enough capacity, qualities and professional skills to adapt to changes in production. Park Chung-hee built a vocational education system at the secondary level, supporting science and technology for domestic research and teaching facilities (Song Sue-yeon, 2016: 384). At the same time, the government also builds vocational training facilities and establishes technical training programs at college levels or higher.

President Park Chung-hee also focused on investing in heavy industry for large business corporations (Chaebol) during the 1970s. As a result, Hyundai and Daewoo became two of the prominent corporations with strong development during this period (Mark L. Clifford, 1998: 113). Corporations always require highly specialized workers to respond quickly and effectively to changes in production levels. It has stimulated the development of the education and training system. Along with the state's educational reform efforts, the strict recruitment criteria of these corporations have contributed to shaping the framework of competencies, qualities, skills, and attitudes for workers in the industrialization period.

The Government's synchronous solutions have made the number of skilled workers, experts, managers, and office workers increasingly large from 6.7% in the mid-1960s to 16.6% at the end of the decade of the 1970s (Hagen Koo, 1991: 485). During this time, the engineering team has increased ten times and the senior management team has nearly doubled than before (Nguyen Hoai Son & other authors, 2021: 46). Not only that, there has also been a big change in the employment structure: In the 1960s, highly educated people were concentrated in state administrative agencies, but from the 1970s onwards, Private enterprises are the most attractive places for them (Mark L. Clifford, 1998: 124) due to higher wages and better social benefits.

It can be seen that factors such as high income, stable jobs, and good social benefits have directly created a group of people with a higher standard of living than the social average. In just a quite short time, the middle class was born and increasingly asserted its position in society. The rapid industrialization along with the differentiation of occupational structure and scale of economic organizations has contributed to the development of the middle class in the ROK.

#### **\* Group of Cultural and ideological policies**

For the emerging middle class in the ROK, President Park Chung-hee's cultural and ideological policies have the effect of consolidating their status and opening up opportunities for many people to gradually achieve status. This is through the policy of equality in education and the policy of building a standard lifestyle and cultural behavior for the people.

*First, for the policy of equal educational opportunities*, the ROK implemented a two-step roadmap in 1963-1972 and 1973-1980 respectively (Lee Jong-jae & other authors, 2010). After completing universal primary education, the state began abolishing entrance exams for middle school and then high school. For higher education, the government lowered entry standards and implemented many high-value scholarship programs to encourage good students from difficult circumstances to continue going to school. In 1974, the policy of equality in education was completed. By the end of the 1970s, the ROK had a developed education system in both quantity and quality. In the early 1980s, the ROK became a society with a relatively high level of education with 1,000 professionally trained experts - this number is higher than the US, Taiwan, and Japan (Korean Studies Textbook Preparation Department, 2008: 125-126). By investing in education, the middle class expects their children's social status can improve in the future.

*Second, concerning ideological life*, with the policy of building a standard lifestyle and cultural behavior for each person, President Park Chung-hee wants to carry out a "spiritual revolution" for the whole society (Yang Myung-ji, 2012: 428). Accordingly, the government hopes to change people's thinking and life attitude by showing them that material wealth can only be created when the whole society changes its value system and each changes their view (Kim Bo-hyun 2006:30). Not only that, Park Chung-hee also called on people to develop "*the spirit of self-management and self-determination*", avoiding melancholy, depression and pessimism (Bum S. Shin, 1970: 286-290). The ROK also encourages people to practice saving habits. Park Chung-hee thoroughly used the image of a middle-class family to "tighten its belt" to popularize the policy of saving throughout society, in which women in middle-class families became the subjects to implement this policy. With their ascetic and disciplined lifestyle, the middle class has performed their role quite successfully in maintaining a disciplined, thrifty, and self-reliant lifestyle; At the same time, it creates motivation to live and spread inspiration to work in society.

Thus, with the tools of state power, Park Chung-hee nurtured and developed emerging middle-class families in Korea. This has a significant impact on the thinking and behavior of the middle class while creating a unique identity to distinguish them from other social classes. Thanks to the enthusiasm for education, frugality in spending, discipline in behavior, and standards in morality, they are the defining points of the middle class in Korea in the 60s and 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **\* Group of social policies**

In addition to economics and culture, social policies also play an important role in strengthening the status of the middle class. For a country going through the process of industrialization and modernization like the ROK, the protection of the middle class has been of early concern to the Park Chung-hee government through housing and welfare policies.

Housing policies and social housing projects have been implemented by Korea since the early 1960s to solve the urban housing crisis and increase resources for industrialization. The Government identifies the main groups of beneficiaries of this policy as people with low and middle income. The policy focuses on helping people have housing and a stable life to work and contribute with peace of mind (Jeong Da-hye, 2015: 20). In addition to building residential areas and social housing apartments, the government also supports people with loans to buy houses at low interest rates through the Housing & Commerce Bank (established in 1969).

Social welfare policies such as insurance, health care, and pensions to develop a middle-class society were also implemented by Park Chung-hee. During the period 1961-1964, he mainly targeted disadvantaged groups (children, the elderly) and workers in general. Welfare policies during this period helped the Korean middle class maintain their social status (Yoon Hong-sik, 2019: 57). Following the success of previous policies, in the period 1964-1972, President Park Chung-hee paid attention to labor groups in light industry,

especially female workers. The government also gradually expanded welfare issues for male workers in the period 1972-1979 (Yoon Hong-sik, 2019: 58-59). Thus, by the end of his presidential term, Park Chung-hee had basically built a relatively complete social welfare system with mandatory health insurance, stable pensions and incentives for employees.

Overall, Park Chung-hee's social policies have provided synchronous and comprehensive support for the working and living of the middle class. The Korean government not only strengthened their social status but also that of their children and families. From analysis of economic, cultural, and social aspects, President Park Chung-hee's middle-class socialization policy has contributed to creating ideal conditions and opportunities for the formation and development of the middle class, giving them a stable position in the social stratification to be able to undertake the task of developing the country and revitalizing the nation.

### 2.2.2. The Nature of Middle – class socialization policy

From the analysis of the content of the policies to the middle-class socialization policy in the ROK during the Park Chung-hee period, we see that these policies have two outstanding natures, which are national nature and class nature, specifically:

The national nature is expressed in the purpose of the birth of the middle class. They were born to revive the country after a long period of war and crisis in Korea. From his political philosophy and modern vision, Park Chung-hee thoroughly used the image of the middle class to spread his ideal of a new Korea. The practice of thrift, disciplined lifestyle, and self-discipline of middle-class families were raised to become a "patriotic" act. The fact that a middle-class woman who is thrifty, conserves her wealth and devotedly sacrifices for her husband and children is considered a model of society. Not stopping there, in the process of its formation and development, the Korean middle class is also oriented to become a different version of the middle class of advanced societies such as the US and Japan or Taiwan. One of the biggest differences of the middle class is that they are built on the model of the Confucian family with a tradition of respecting morality and promoting male authority (Denise P. Lett, 1998: 4-5).

The class nature is shown in the fact that Park's authoritarian state has the characteristics of a bourgeois state. All policies issued by the Government (including the middle-class policy) are class nature. This is shown first of all in the context of the birth of policies associated with the Cold War and the constant inter-Korean conflict. During this time, the Korean government also needs to quickly build a harmonious and equal society and limit the outbreak of social revolution. In addition, the nature of class is also expressed in the educational program and ideology of the state. Anti-Communist content was introduced into teaching and the government brutally suppressed anyone who challenged the State's power. Furthermore, middle-class families whose children participate in left-wing activities may lose their middle-class status and be stripped of all social privileges and favors. It can be seen that the clarity in the government's

attitude towards the middle class has shown the class nature of the middle-class socialization policy in the ROK.

### 2.3. Some comments and suggestions for Vietnam

#### 2.3.1. Achievements and limitations

From the experience of advanced countries combined with personal thinking and political vision, Park Chung-hee's policy of middle-class socialization policy in the ROK was born and gradually improved. By the early 1980s, that policy was implemented effectively on a national scale, especially in large urban areas. Reviewing after four decades, this policy reflects the following achievements:

First of all, Park Chung-hee's middle-class socialization policy promoted the formation and development of the middle class in the ROK. This force contributes its strength to the modernization of the country, bringing the ROK from the poorest country in the area to one of the 'dragons' in Asia. The achievement of the "Han River miracle" not only demonstrates the strategic vision of the elite but also the merits of skilled workers, engineers, and managers of the middle class.

Not stopping there, the middle – class socialization policy in Korea also aroused the patriotism and innovation desire for the nation. With specific propaganda slogans, the government reminded people about the country's tragic situation, and about what they can contribute and receive in return for the nation's development. Thanks to this, the middle class adopted an ascetic lifestyle, ignoring social injustice and poor working conditions to revive the country.

From a political perspective, these policies are the foundation for the middle class to gradually realize their role and position in the political arena. By the early 70s and 80s of the twentieth century, the middle class gradually replaced the elite in the political arena. They both voiced their opinions and encouraged progressive forces (Michael J. Seth, 2010: 417). It was the participation of the middle class in Korean politics in the 1980s that ushered in the country's social transition from dictatorship to democracy. From a cultural perspective, the success of the middle-class policy also gradually transitioned Korean society from traditional to modern. By middle-class socialization, the government has popularized a middle-class lifestyle characterized by the formation of core families with a lifestyle that favors privacy, and with a social life that emphasizes freedom and democracy.

However, these policies also have many limitations. Firstly, in terms of economics, the Korean government's preferential policies are only for a group of large businesses and the most outstanding individuals in society, therefore, small and medium-sized businesses and poor workers often face difficult situations. It indicates that the ROK has implemented a middle-class socialization policy based on class group classification. Second, in terms of culture, Confucian ideology, and patriarchy dominated the dissemination of images of middle-class families and middle-class women during the 1960s and 1970s. Third, in terms of society, the Government's welfare policies are often unstable and inconsistent because they depend on the

personal views of each president. This will directly affect the quality of life of the middle class, making them vulnerable to unexpected changes in circumstances.

### 2.3.2 Suggestions for Vietnam

For a developing country like Vietnam, it is extremely necessary for using the most of all resources to industrialize and modernize. However, until now the middle class in Vietnam has still grown naturally as a product of the Innovation process. Therefore, from Korean practice, the following experiences can be suggested to Vietnam:

**First**, Vietnam needs a system of appropriate policies for the growing middle class. However, to make an appropriate and effective policy, society needs to have a correct and complete understanding of the middle class, especially a strategic vision of the role and position of this group of people in society's development. First of all, the concept of "middle class" from academia needs to be popularized in the political and legal fields, especially in the state's socio-political documents. In addition, the content of "middle-class socialization" should not be implicit in terms such as "reducing poverty", "improving quality of life", or "encouraging enrichment" but should be clarified to build a growing middle-class society.

**Second**, practice in the ROK shows that the development of the middle class requires a harmonious combination of economic development and social justice, in which, rapid and sustainable economic growth is the top priority. Therefore, the Vietnamese Government should build a system of comprehensive and specific policies in the economic, political, cultural, and social fields to gradually strengthen and protect the middle class. The Vietnamese government needs to research and develop a "middle-class index" suitable for each scale of development, as a basis for proposing middle-class policies and managing the development of the middle class.

**Third**, the Korean Government under President Park Chung-hee has succeeded in controlling corruption and negativity in production and social management activities to create maximum conditions for people to thrive and make an effort to work. Therefore, to successfully build a middle-class society, Vietnam needs to focus on repelling corruption and negative social evils and building a healthy environment capable of preventing anti-democracy and anti-development. Corruption is making people poorer and the country weaker, thereby hindering the formation of a truly middle-class society.

**Fourth**, the ROK's experience shows that the government can completely use the image of the middle class to popularize progressive values, correct lifestyles, and positive thinking to the people. Vietnam can refer to this approach to promote the role of the middle class in building culture, and lifestyle, in building consumption behavior and enjoying cultural products. Today, it is very common for negative manifestations of foreign affection, lavish consumption, use of products polluting the environment, or human rights violations. Orienting the middle class to a correct and progressive lifestyle is an effective solution to eliminate those negative behaviors.

**Fifth**, a middle-class society must be a cultural society (Hoang Chi Bao & Tran Thi Minh Ngoc, 2015:09). This society is not only wealthy but also civilized and modern based on education science, and technology. These two fields in Vietnam currently have many limitations that need to be improved and perfected. Therefore, the Government of Vietnam needs to continue to promote comprehensive reform and innovation of education and training, and at the same time, enhance exchanges, learning, and transfer of science and technology.

## 3. Conclusions

Originating from domestic circumstances, international experience, and the personal political vision of Park Chung-hee, the middle – class socialization policy in the ROK was born and gradually improved in the 60s and 70s of the twentieth century. This president has built a middle-class policy based on specific and synchronous solutions to create opportunities and conditions for the middle class to form and develop. In particular, the economic policy group is associated with the main fields (industry, science, and technology), investment in high-quality human resources, and priority given to chaebols. The cultural policy group includes the policy of equal educational opportunities and building standard lifestyles and cultural behaviors for people. These two groups of policies have brought the middle class a source of high income with good jobs and a favorable working environment. Finally, through housing and public welfare projects, the social policy group helps ensure that the middle class has a strong position in the class structure.

Through the process of policy planning and implementation, the class nature and national nature of the middle-class socialization policy are demonstrated. President Park Chung-hee's policy has been successful in creating opportunities and conditions for the country's middle class to emerge and develop. Thanks to that, participants of middle-class society have contributed back to the ROK's prosperity; At the same time, they also have promoted and created conditions for this country's society to transform strongly from tradition to modernity, from dictatorship to democracy. With Korea's experience, developing countries like Vietnam can learn to apply creativity in the process of industrialization and modernization of the country. In particular, a correct and complete awareness of the role of the middle class in development is the first thing that needs to be done. In addition, governments also need to build a complete, synchronous, and comprehensive policy system for each industry and field to create a harmonious, stable society, minimizing negative impacts hindering the formation of a middle-class society.

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