

ชนชั้นกลางในเมืองและการพัฒนาคุณภาพชีวิต กรณีศึกษา พื้นที่ชานเมืองตอนเหนือและตะวันตกของกรุงเทพมหานคร และปริมณฑล

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บทคัดย่อ

คำว่าชนชั้นเป็นคำศัพท์ที่ซับซ้อนในทางสังคมด้วยมีค่านิยมทางสังคมที่หลากหลาย ทั้งนี้การนิยามก็ขึ้นอยู่กับบริบททางสังคมวัฒนธรรม โดยทั่วไปแล้วการให้นิยามชนชั้นกลางในสังคมไทยมักมีความเกี่ยวข้องกับวัฒนธรรมและวิถีชีวิตแบบเมือง การพัฒนาเมืองรวมถึงความหลากหลายทางกายภาพ การเปลี่ยนแปลงทางเศรษฐกิจและสังคม อันส่งผลต่อคุณภาพชีวิตของผู้คนบทความนี้มุ่งไปยังการที่ชนชั้นกลางนิยามตัวเองผ่านการใช้ชีวิตแบบเมืองและให้ข้อเสนอเรื่องการปรับตัวอย่างยั่งยืนท่ามกลางกระแสบริโภคนิยม

บทความนี้มุ่งเน้นไปที่ความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรมของชนชั้นกลางในเมืองและคุณภาพชีวิตของพวกเขาซึ่งเป็นเรื่องที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการพัฒนาเมืองอย่างยั่งยืน การศึกษาครั้งนี้ใช้วิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพโดยอาศัยวิธีการเชิงชาติพันธุ์วรรณาแบบมหภาค และการวิเคราะห์แบบปรากฏการณ์นิยม หน่วยในการวิเคราะห์ที่ได้แก่ชนชั้นกลางในเมืองของสังคมไทย ซึ่งแบ่งได้เป็น 2 กลุ่มตามการให้นิยามของนักวิชาการ โดยกลุ่มแรกใช้เกณฑ์เรื่องการศึกษาและสภาพทางเศรษฐกิจสังคมเป็นตัวกำหนด ส่วนอีกกลุ่มหนึ่ง ใช้เกณฑ์เรื่องรายได้โดยรวม นั่นคือ การแบ่งเป็นกลุ่มชนชั้นกลางระดับบนและระดับล่าง พื้นที่ในการศึกษาครั้งนี้ ได้แก่พื้นที่เมืองที่ตั้งอยู่ในเขตชานเมืองทางตอนเหนือและทางตะวันตกของกรุงเทพมหานครและปริมณฑลซึ่งกระบวนการกลายเป็นเมืองมีการขยายตัวอย่างรวดเร็ว

งานศึกษาครั้งนี้มีเสนอแนะว่า นอกเหนือจากการใช้ชีวิตตามกระแสการบริโภคในชีวิตประจำวันแล้ว ชนชั้นกลางควรสร้าง “สำนึกร่วม” ในการสร้าง “ความร่วมมือกัน” เพื่อนำไปสู่การปรับปรุงคุณภาพชีวิตและสร้างความรับผิดชอบทางสังคมอันจะนำมาซึ่งการพัฒนาเมืองอย่างยั่งยืน เพื่อสร้าง “ความร่วมมือแบบเมือง” ให้เกิดขึ้น

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Urban Middle Class and the Quality of Life Development: The Case Study of Northern and Western Outskirts of Bangkok and Periphery.

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Abstract

Class-consciousness is a complex term with a very wide social definition depending on the socio-cultural context. Generally, in Thai society, middle class relates to the culture and the urban way of life. Urban development includes various physical, economic and social changes that have a significant impact on people's quality of life. This article looks at how the urban middle class define themselves within the urban lifestyle, and proposes recommendations for sustainable adjustment in the midst of consumerism. It focuses on the cultural diversity of the so-called urban middle-class lifestyle and their quality of life as it pertains to sustainable urban development. The qualitative method using Macro ethnography and phenomenology analysis are used. Snowball and Network techniques are important as a research tools. The unit of analysis is the Thai urban middle class, falling into two main groups as defined by academics. The first group is defined by an educational, socio-economic scale, and the other by income as a whole: upper and lower. The areas of study are the urban areas in the northern and western outskirts of Bangkok and its periphery, where urbanization is expanding rapidly.

It is suggested that apart from their daily consumption, the middle class should practice more "solidarity" in their collective consciousness, in order to improve their quality of life, and also to perform social responsibility to bring about sustainable urban development for "urban solidarity"

Keywords: Urban Middle Class, Urban Culture, Marginal Area, Bangkok and Periphery, Quality of Life Development

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Introduction

It can be quite confusing when we talk about class, especially the middle class, in Thai society and in the Thai urban context. Class analysis has usually been discussed as class-consciousness, and since there are no fixed boundaries in Thailand, people can associate themselves with any class. Middle class in Thai society is usually noted as higher and lower. Sometimes, the working class is also included as lower-middle class, depending on their income and lifestyle. As Jeffrey Hays (2008) states, the stratification of upper, middle, and lower classes is mostly based on the past social hierarchy (*sakdina*) and the family's financial powers. This social stratification is no longer enforced by contemporary law, but its presence is recognized by most Thais. However, there is cultural diversity among people who live in urban areas, in everyday life. They are linked by a common lifestyle and urban consequences without consideration of who they are.

Urbanization is an important phenomenon that has changed many aspects of people's lifestyles. From agricultural to industrial areas, people have to adapt themselves, including their personal values, to sustain their social status when life is changing to a more modern society. A fast-paced and more competitive lifestyle in cities makes people do things in a similar way. Therefore, class-consciousness is not meaningful in daily life. However, unlike in the past, the middle class in urban areas is a class of a very wide range and more difficult to identify today. This means that people who live in urban areas do not have many differences in their lifestyles even though they come from a wide variety of cultures and different personal cultural backgrounds. Therefore, how they earn and how they spend their lives is more significant than the social status they belong to. This phenomenon leads to the argument of how the urban middle class pursue their cultural traits to experience more as people of the city than the culture they are rooted from.

In living their lives as urban people, they have to face new challenges. Rapid urbanization over the past few years has created urban and environmental problems that have affected the quality of life. Urban development brings various physical, economic and social changes that have a significant impact on daily life. This article presents how people, especially the urban middle class, should adapt themselves to the urban lifestyle, proposing recommendations for sustainable adjustment. An urban lifestyle and consumerism that tries to conform to global trends tends to lead to

unsustainable life development. Thus, it is arguable how urban people can live to meet a sustainable quality of life development.

The area of northern and western outskirts of Bangkok and periphery is concerned here as it is the area where urbanization is expanded rapidly. Also, it is the area where diverse group of people are mingling together, especially the middle class who are migrants from the inner part of Bangkok and those who come from elsewhere. They have practiced common lifestyle, urbanism as a way of life which is impacted from the scattering of urban growth. This article aims to study the lifestyle of these middle class groups to trace how they live their quality of life and whether it is relevant to sustainable development. Concept of class, research methods, the consumption patterns and lifestyle of the middle class are reviewed and discussed as follows.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to evaluate the cultural diversity of the so-called urban middle class and their quality of life, and how it pertains to sustainable urban development.

Literature Review

This article is based on research that explores the cultural diversity of the middle class lifestyle as it pertains to their quality of life development occurring in the marginal areas of Bangkok and its periphery. This includes the outskirt areas of northern and western Bangkok and the surrounding areas. The “marginal area” term refers to areas of uneven development, both physically and culturally. The concepts of class-consciousness in cities and urban quality of life are used as a conceptual framework for the analysis.

Kingston (2000) states in his work, *The Classless Society*, that class sentiments are weak since evidence indicates that people’s objective class position and their subjective class identification are poorly related. He notes that when Americans are asked to identify their class positions by using a fixed choice format which includes working class, Americans divide themselves almost equally between the middle class and working class. Thus, self-identification with the working class is a strong indication that a high degree of working class consciousness has any meaningful sense. At the same time, when class identification is asked in a class labels format, most working-class

people identify themselves as middle class. Kingston concludes that class membership does not generate similar class sentiments either through the workplace or in the wider community. American society is thus a classless society as Kingston (2000) noted. In contrast to Kingston's discussion of class identification in the US society, Devine (2005) states that there is theoretically and empirically informed research on class subjectivities examining working class and middle class identities. Gender, racial and ethnic identities are also included within class identities. It is suggested that daily experiences of people in school, in work and communities in which they grew up and the ones in which they now live generate and sustain class sentiments and the lived experience of class identify people's cultural values and their practices.

The middle class concept of western society is widely discussed in more recent research. The study of Lamont (1992 cited in Devine 2005) addressed the culture of the French and American upper middle class. She interviewed professionals, managers and businessmen about what it means to be a 'worthy person', especially the use of symbolic boundaries to define their own identities and distance themselves from others. She found that socioeconomic boundaries were much more salient to her American upper middle-class informants than her French counterparts who attached greater significance to cultural and moral boundaries in their self-identification process.

Important factors for American men in how they view themselves and their social status are money, personal income, levels of consumption and their comfort levels. The research of historians have also explored middle class. For example, the study of Walkowitz (1999) considered what 'middle class' means. He stated that cultural studies and post-structuralism discuss that identities are historical and contingent. He shows that the meaning of middle-class identity has changed over the twentieth century by way of a history of social workers who patrol the boundaries of class. Walkowitz argues that social workers, in the early twentieth century, who were predominately low paid Jewish women, deployed narratives of professionalism to construct a middle-class identity. And it was challenged in the mid-century by the depression and poorer working conditions accompanied by the growth of more radical unionization. This led to a change in social workers' class identities in that they saw themselves as working class in the realm of job employment although still middle class in the world of consumption (Devine 2005).

The historical study of Walkowitz is a work of the changing meaning of middle class self-identification, which is not just a socio-economic category of middle-income

earners who live their lives in the array of consumer goods. It is also a racial and political type that separates “whites” from ‘others’, who are mostly poor black and Hispanic people living in dangerous urban places who see themselves more clearly as working class. And it shows that the study of class identities should not confine itself to questions of working-class identities and their consciousness. In such society, many people from working class backgrounds experienced upward mobility into middle-class jobs. In addition, the middle class reproduce their social positions across generations. One example of an upward process is that parents of lower working class who guide their children successfully through the education system into good jobs leading to social mobility. This phenomenon is seen, empirically, as a way of life in the cities. That is to say, people of the middle class who live in urban areas have shared their experiences of the city enjoying the consumption pattern that is irrelevant to their class-consciousness. However, it is remarkable to see here how it goes to relate to the urban quality of life.

In Thai society, as Lasuka (2015) noted, the Thai middle class is a social group which in the past few decades has played a critical role in transforming Thai society, especially in terms of economy and culture. There are many Thai scholars from various academic fields who studied the existence of this social group, which rapidly emerged during the period of the accelerated economic development after World War II. For example, Anderson (2014), Funatsu and Kagoya (2003), Nidhi (1993), Shiraishi (2006) and Paritta (2002) as cited in Lasuka (2015), studied this group, although some of these mentioned scholars used different terms, like “bourgeoisie” instead of middle class. Benedict Anderson (2014) notes that the Thai middle class emerged at the end of World War II¹. The scholars attempt to differentiate the social group’s quasi-economic independence from the aristocratic and bureaucratic social groups, and also the nature of the professions of the class members, which is not manual labor, but rather administrative, middle-man type work in the private sectors. Using the term of “middle class” in some of the research has allowed the scholars to be more flexible in looking at the diversity of the political ideology and culture of these social class members. While TsuruyoFunatsu and Kazuhiro Kagoya (2003 cited in Lasuka 2015) provide a

¹ The different terms for the Thai middle class is like the “bourgeoisie” that is translated in Thai as “Kradumphai”. While other scholars prefer to use the term “middle class”, Anderson (2014) tried to illustrate the exceptional characteristic of this social group. Though many members of the so-called “bourgeois” social group have a different socio-economic background from the members of their establishment, they were in alliance with and were willing to provide support and give legitimacy to the Thai state (Lasuka 2015).

detailed account of the implications of the two terms, bourgeoisie and middle class, Lasuka (2015 *ibid*) uses the term “middle class” to describe the sensibility of the class members which is supportive of the power of the old establishment to secure their own socio-economic privilege and interests. In this article, the term middle class is applied to the social group who gain their status with their economic security but beyond somehow the socio-political security and ideology.²

According to Phongpaichit and Baker (1995) it is said that the Thai middle class is related to Chinese immigration and rural migration to cities. It was in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when the rice economy expansion drew Siam’s labor resources off to the agrarian frontier. The expansion of urban labor was supplied by immigration from China. These Chinese immigrants later became a socio-political issue, resulting in labor disputes that could be forceful and violent. They built, however, no movement in the longer term. It is also stated that from the 1920s onwards, the profile of the urban workforce changed. There were workers as second or third generation city inhabitants. There were more new immigrants who settled down to stay in cities. Moreover, there were peasant migrants who gradually transformed the Chinese mass. It is noted that the distinction between alien Chinese and native Thai was erased by acculturation, co-operation, and their common experience. Therefore, with these changes, urban labor developed its potential for organization, self-expression, and political involvement. During that time, people from the countryside moved into the urban workforce at a modest rate. Thailand’s dominant regime of one-crop, rain-fed agriculture harbored large reserves of underutilized labor. Then, the growing urban economy borrowed from these reserves. The labor capacity to strengthen in organizational development and bargaining power was constrained by this reserve, and by the constant renewal of the labor force with rural migrants. Phongpaichit and Baker (1995) also noted that in the 1980s, the agricultural growth declined whereas the agrarian frontier was closed down and industry boomed. Over the decades, two million people were added to the urban workforce, boosting it from three to five million. Much of this increase was pulled out of the villages. More rural migrants moved than ever before, joining the ranks of factory labor.

²I prefer to explain the middle class lifestyle as it relates to their pattern of consumption and trying to relate their quality of life development to find out if it goes with the flow on consumerism and globalization and unsustainable development.

In brief, from the 1940s, labor has come to play a curious but critical role in Thailand's economic and political development. Urban labor has become a significant factor in society, and a major contributor to economic growth. Therefore, the middle class in Thai society involves people from different sources who move to live in cities within the manufacturing and industrial urban context. In this sense, the working class during those days has become the middle class in the later time according to the expanded industrialization. And it is ambiguous to clarify then for the class consciousness among such groups of people.

It is also challenging nowadays to explore quality of life in cities as we are living amidst a city crisis. It seems that urban governments are increasingly facing problems with which they are unable to cope (Rogerson, 1999). Diener and Suh (1997 cited in Rogerson 1999) state that there are three main approaches in defining and determining quality of life: (a) defined in relation to normative ideals and linked to the tradition of social indicator research; (b) defined in terms of the satisfaction of preferences relating to utility and choice; and (c) defined in terms of individual experiences related to subjective well-being studies.

To define further, Storrs McCall (1975), a Canadian philosopher, proposes that quality of life consists in the obtaining of the necessary conditions for happiness in a given society or region. He also notes that representing quality of life only as happiness is problematic. Consequently, the quality of life definition which relies on measuring levels of happiness and individual well-being will lack a part of the quality of life. Concerning the study of type A, Rogerson (1999) also suggests a framework on debating quality of life in cities by portraying the distinction between the material life arena (the external conditions) and the personal life arena (the internal, personal elements of people). The material life arena can be seen either as the geographical area within which people live for convenience such as community, neighborhood or city. This kind of quality of life is relevant to McCall's notion of the "necessary conditions" in terms of individual life satisfaction. The personal life arena includes individual life assessment, satisfaction, pleasure, happiness or other preference ordering, as well as measures based on people characteristics such as their preferences, priorities, aspirations or value systems. Rogerson *et al.* (1996) state that the material life arena consists not only of the presence or absence of such attributes but also includes a qualitative component. Each attribute has a different aspect related to the ways in which people describe, or obtain, their quality of life. The characteristics include, for example, issues of access, frequency

of provision and efficacy. While the subjective components are not included directly, particular sets of social relations include access to the attributes of the environment. In this sense, even if there may be differing priorities and tastes between peoples, the engagement with the material life arena is unlimited. In the study of type B conceptualization, a view of quality of life is based on the satisfaction of preferences that involve two elements: the identification of the preferences or what Cutter (1985 cited in Rogerson 1999) has called perceptual indicators; and an evaluation of the provision of those conditions. In this term, the approach examines the first concept, adding an explicit perceptual dimension based on the different characteristics of people and their tastes, aspirations, and value systems. Many of the U.S. studies viewed by Rogerson (1999) have shown how the definition of quality of life varies depending on what scale is used. The final concept of quality of life presented here, or type C, concerns the large quantity of individual well-being research where quality of life is seen as related to satisfaction. It is measured by individual cognitive and affective reactions to the whole life. In this respect, societies should strive towards achieving the highest level of happiness and satisfaction. The research in this type has focused on respondents' own internal judgment rather than the explicit identification of priorities or objective material life arena conditions. Thus, the personal aspirations and values as well as the environments in which life is experienced contribute to the measure of satisfaction as Diener (1984) and Myers and Diener (1995) state.

It is suggested that to simplify those three concepts of quality of life in research is to encapsulate the full meaning of the quality of urban life since it is insufficient to consider only the city environments and its facilities. In addition, quality of life includes a more consumer-oriented perspective, concerned with the way of services and the experience of enjoyment arising from living in cities. It is framed within the terms of reference of individuals and groups. This article examines Thai middle class culture as it relates to their urban way of life, reflected in how they spend their lives in various consuming patterns. Class-consciousness is arguably relevant to solidarity in the urban context.

Research Methodology

The qualitative method using Macro ethnography and phenomenology were employed in the study. An urban anthropological approach with Macro ethnography is the main research tool. The unit of analysis consisted of the Thai urban middle class who

are divided into two main groups: upper and lower middle class. The areas of the study are the urban areas located in marginal areas of Bangkok and its periphery, including 5 neighborhoods, namely Kaset-Nawamin, Ngamwongwan-Rattatibet, WipawadeeRangsit, Changwattana and Bangbuathong-Chaiyapreuk. In-depth interviews as well as participant and non-participant observation are used to study the patterns of behavior of the middle class as urban people in terms of the culture of consumption and their lifestyles. Key informants include 10 people of upper middle class, ranked by their education – at least of undergraduate level, social status – middle executives level, and their income of upper 25,000 baht per month and 10 people of lower middle class, ranked by their income of lower than 25,000 baht per month. Snowball and Network techniques are used to access all key informants. The data collection is conducted from February to December 2016. Triangulation, including time, places and persons, are utilized to verify the accuracy and the saturation of the data. The data is analyzed using content analysis. Conceptual framework is set by analyzing urban “habitus” among middle class reflected in their pattern of consumption towards their urban solidarity to consider if they share “collective consciousness” pertaining to sustainable development.

Results and Discussion

Thai Urban Middle Class Lifestyle: Consuming Pattern and Cultural diversity

In recent years, urban culture has become more complex for it represents people’s diverse cultural activities. Urban culture is more and more about the business of cities, with tourist attractions, and their unique and competitive style. The growth of urban culture consumption, including such things as art, food, and fashion, is widespread all around cities. A large number of new immigrants and ethnic minorities have adapted their lifestyle to match this consumption pattern. Also, high culture such as art museum, like MOCA (Museum of Contemporary Arts) and music performance at Bon Marche shopping centre, located on Vipawadeerangsit Road, have been driven to expand and diversify their offerings to attract to a broader public. City boosters compete for tourist currency and financial investments by bolstering the city’s image as a center of cultural practice including restaurants, art and music display, and architectural design. The cultural strategies of urban development is interesting in terms of “multiculturalism” as they have forced the public sphere to change in order to respond to the adaptive culture’s need, especially

for a modern lifestyle. Shopping malls and community malls are adapted to express cultural displays, sometimes with nostalgic feelings, against grassroots pressures from local communities. On the other hand, there are strangers mingling in public space causing violent crime. It is necessary to design public spaces for maximum surveillance. This is contemporary urban culture seen in public areas, including the sites of this study.

Concerning the various kinds of urban cultures, it is important to note how the population has become more mobile and diverse. Social identity is expressed via the pattern of consumption and places. Public spaces are basically the sites of public culture. Also, they are important means of framing a vision of social life in the city. Such vision comprises a vision for those who live there and interact in urban public spaces every day as well as for the tourists and commuters. Public spaces are important as they are places where strangers mix freely. Besides, public spaces negotiate the boundaries and markers of human society. Then, public spaces enable us to conceptualize and represent the city (Sharon 1995). The various groups of people living in cities contribute to the confusion of urban culture meaning, especially the middle class urban culture. Among commodity capitalism, culture is a mass-market phenomenon. Interviews revealed that people gathering together in public space (e.g. cinemas, coffee shops and restaurants) are still 'alone' in terms of their mental separation from those around them. Moreover, the co-working space, which has gradually increased in the area of this study, has become a common place where people can share space, but in the same way as the public space, they can mentally withdraw from others and maintain an inner sense of privacy.

Zukin (1995) notes that in the late 20th century there have been changes in the social context of culture that account for its instrumental importance. More than ever before in commodity capitalism, culture is a mass-market phenomenon. Moreover, there is hope among urban middle classes and elites that culture as a set of aesthetic social practices can reduce the fear that pervades urban life. Cultural strategies of reconstructing the meaning of urban spaces give the appearance of a common public culture. In urban areas, whether in Bangkok or other provinces, people are driven to consume (entering into consumerism). The desire for material goods in rural areas appears to have been transformed into an obsession in the cities, leading to personal debt. Credit cards are more in service as buying on time has become the social norm. Key informants, among upper middle class, have convinced that they usually hold credit cards for their convenience though they could pay by cash. And it goes by the flow as "cashless society", meaning of Thailand 4.0, recommended by the State Government.

Klausner (1997) states that department stores and shopping malls have joined with banks to further fuel the consumption craze by issuing joint affinity credit cards providing discounts and privileges not available to ordinary card-holders. The “mall-shopping” culture in vast complexes has made it easy to happily enjoy one’s material desires. The mega malls, together with community malls, taken to the logical extreme, are found on the outskirts of Bangkok and periphery such as in Nonthaburi and Pathumthani.³ Some of these malls include indoor amusement parks and outdoor activities for customers to enjoy. Malls are served as “all in one” place for people’s variety purposes. By observing a family sitting in a famous Japanese restaurant, sharing their lunch before big brother is asked to pay a mobile bill for his mother at the shop nearby. Some shopping malls are located in wider area that outdoor market is available with local product such as those belong to some ethnic groups which are displayed. In this sense, cultural identities are, thus, performed although by the process of cultural industrialization and “pseudo” arts as seen in current events at the shopping malls. It is shown in the study that people prefer spending more time for shopping and seeing events at lifestyle malls to other places in the area.

Urban cultures in this study include a coffee culture (e.g. Starbucks shops which are widely spread all around the study sites), shabu-shabu with a sukiyaki culture under both brand names and local ones, a buffet culture and a digital culture. All mentioned urban cultures are relevant to their everyday lives. Taste is also a factor when people choose an aspect of culture to consume. In addition, consumer goods and services play an important role in who we are and how we construct and express our social lives. This is in terms of how we use such goods and services and how they relate to other people through such goods and services. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984 cited in Miles 1998) argues, human beings are motivated by the need to reproduce a collective pattern of preferences based on class demarcation. What Bourdieu describes as “cultural capital” is the point indeed, in that different classes are educationally qualified in taking advantage of different aspects of symbolic capital. The dominant classes then demonstrate their superiority through access to high culture and high consumption. It implies then that consumption amounts to a set of cultural resources that underpin consumers’ everyday lives. In addition, Bourdieu points out that signs, symbols, ideas and values are used as a means of distinguishing one social group from another. He sees consumer consumption

³For example: Central Plaza Ladprao, Future Park Rangsit, Central Westgate, Central East Ville, Central Changwattana and several community malls in various areas of Bangkok and periphery

habits as an interaction between the individual and society. In this sense, Bourdieu develops the concept of “habitus”, the everyday knowledge or cultural capital that reflects the routine experience of appropriate behavior in particular cultures and subcultures.

It is found in this study that the shopping mall is a place where urban people can consume all the goods they want or need. The shopping malls of Bangkok and periphery could be seen in constructing an image of what life should be with consumerism. The shopping malls also provide consumers with a sense of community that is perhaps missing in the outside world amidst urban society. For example, shopping malls provide the selected variety of local food and products that correspond with local festivals.⁴ Shops seem to be adopting more sophisticated ways of monitoring shopping habits by issuing the use of loyalty cards through which retailers can build up a comprehensive and invasive computer profile of the consumers. Some supermarkets, like Tops supermarket, Foodland and Villa Market have developed delivery systems where groceries can be delivered directly to customers ‘homes. As Friedberg (1993, cited in Steven 1998) suggests, the shopping mall is symbolic of the global dissemination of late capitalist economies, and there are meanings that are engendered in malls by the people who visit them. Shopping malls offer the consumer a lifestyle experience.

Regarding the Thai urban middle class and their patterns of consumption in this study, it is found that a wide variety of goods and services are available to meet their needs. Cited a few interviewees in the area, they consume to meet their actual needs in everyday life and as a sign that represents their middle class, urban way of life. It is relevant to the study of Phongpaichit and Baker (1998) which states that less than five percent of a city’s everyday household purchases come from large modern outlets. By 1995, the proportion had risen to well over half. Shopping is about a lot more than buying. Shopping has become a celebration of rising incomes, of the power of the pocket, of the conquest over envy of more advanced economies. Shopping has become the major leisure time activity of the city’s monied classes. The joy of seeing so much merchandise available is half of the fun. The huge stores are the new, world-class, fantastic delights of the boom.

The above-mentioned is further related to Thai popular culture or mass culture in that it is an exoticised presentation, as stated in the work of Smith Cornwell (2005). Cornwell

⁴Local food and products are usually displayed for consumers on ordinary weekends or sometimes working days outside local festivals. This is to provide convenience for the urban lifestyle which is likely to consume ready-made products.

identifies patterns amid the chaos, investigating things like grooming and ghost, blind bands and truck art, which Thais often overlook as familiar or *déclassé*. He hits a *zeitgeist* that Thai increasingly find inspiration from street culture as they develop a new pop aesthetic in movies, advertising and design. Such work captures a transitional phase when traditions still affect how Thais express modernity. Thai popular culture seems like a culture of the average Thai⁵, which is of the middle class. Delicate classical Thainess has taken on a harder and commodified edge. The status-aware middle classes tend to distance themselves furthest from old ways. Bourgeois pop turns towards fashionable processed modernity (Cornwell 2005).

Middle class habitus and the provincial “*nouveaux riche*” culture

This part discusses local case studies with the brief arguments of the migration of those in the provinces to cities and their way of life. Most of them are working class people with a diversity of occupations and employment. Here, in this area, it is possible to detect dominant lifestyles and shared dispositions, sustained by local neighboring relationships as well as common experiences. The findings show that the local cultural connection between residents and their sense of belonging to an area is related to the way they share dominant values. It explores the complex relationship between locally embedded habitus and the discursive forms of identity and class awareness.

In Thai society, the concept of middle class is very wide naming, differentiated into 3 levels: lower, middle and upper. In this sense, working class fits into lower-middle class. It has been widely agreed that the working class during the 1970s was characterized by distinctive cultural values and practices that stood outside, and in opposition to, those of the middle and upper class (Savage et al.2005). However, over the past thirty-five years, these distinctions of the working class have declined. Therefore, it is rather difficult to define the nature of the working class culture. Social gentrification among this group of people has been restructured. Its social undesirability as a stigmatized position has resulted in its absence. The class movement has been generated by higher education and empowering the economic status, being more socially recognized. This kind of middle class, then, aligned themselves with various signs of consumption in order to join the middle class. This is different from those in the old days who grew up from noble and /or Chinese roots. Their lifestyle focused on

⁵The average Thai is increasingly urban or suburban. Bangkok may be as atypical of Thailand as any capital is of its country. But being the focus of almost every national activity and over half its wealth, Bangkok imposes its way and tastes on the remotest provincial outpost. In return, rural migrants bring the village to town, where traditional etiquette infuse corporate PR. (Cornwell 2005)

consumerism as an urban way of life to represent their social identity. On one hand, it reveals the consumption inequality that everyone could access. On the other hand, it implies “social solitude” which is in contrast to “solidarity” in that urban people seem to be lonely, anomie and alienated though they are living in crowded cities.

Urban solitude and anomie are eliminated but solidarity or togetherness might be constructed by sharing political participation and social unity, becoming “urban solidarity”. As Coleman (2009) referred to in the study of Chicago’s social geography, the city is remarkable for the number and kinds of people crowded together in physical proximity, without the opportunity and with very little desire for the intimacies and mutual understanding and comprehension which ordinarily insure a common view and make collective action possible. Consumption is one of the ways people choose to get together. That is to say the urban middle class share the same way of shopping, eating, driving and touring. In this sense, solidarity is constructed mainly in consumption as the urban way of life. In the public sphere, where internet wifi is provided (e.g. in coffee shops), people who have a wide variety of interests could get together and/or collaborate. Relationship and mutual understanding is created at that level even though it is not sustainable. The model of working in the office is no longer relevant to the new urban middle class who could spend their time outside the office. That is to say, in the modern world, people can work everywhere if internet access is available. However, the sustainability in life quality development is uncertain because of mass consumption, leading to other problems including health, poverty, and social problems.

Sustainable Urban Quality of Life Development

Urban people are facing new challenges in living with urban life. The growth of urbanization over the past few decades has brought urban and environmental problems. The physical, economic and social developments have an important impact on people’s quality of life. The multifaceted concept of life quality includes not only material aspects of life such as economics or the level of income, but also the availability of physical and social infrastructure, as well as good health, education, life safety and environmental maintenance. How people define quality of life vary according to where they live and work.

As mentioned above, it is assumed that the Thai middle class pay more attention to consumerism as their way of life, reflected in the diverse cultural practices in living their daily lifestyle. However, could it be possible to re-consider that there are other things that the middle class should give more importance to than their daily consumption. In Thai society, inequality is

currently an interesting issue and more widely discussed as it relates to social policy. For example, accessibility in education, health system and life safety are more relevant in increasing quality of life. In the urban Thai context, immediate ecological changes have made the urban life unviable for many people who have been affected and suffered from the effects of climate change. Some cities have struggled to provide important services to their inhabitants including an adequate water supply, physical infrastructure and eco system. Health and human security and safety are potentially severely impacted. Residential development and key infrastructure around Bangkok and its periphery appear to be regularly growing in order to meet people's need for consumption, especially among the modern urban middle class. Thus, it is of value for the middle class, which is composed of a very wide range of people, to reform their 'solidarity' regarding an emerging social movement to gain balance between urban growth and a greater urban quality of life development.

Sustainable development and urban growth management are current contemporary public issues for city governance in Bangkok. During the past several years, strategic plans for city development have focused on quality of life issues. The rapid urbanization growth raises questions about sustainability. Sustainable development has become a major concern for planners, policy makers and developers in managing urban growth (Stimson et al. 1999). The evolution of the concept of sustainable development includes three approaches: the *ecological approach* which views sustainable development in the context of the stability of physical and biological systems crucial to the overall ecosystem (Perring 1991 cited in Stimson, 1999, *ibid.*), the *economic approach* which is based on the concept of minimum flow of income which could be created, and the *socio-cultural approach* which seeks to maintain the stability of social and cultural systems. In the *socio-cultural approach*, people are the central concern for sustainable development, being entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with their environment. In this sense, how the urban middle class could generate sustainable development of their quality of life is an interesting phenomenon, both at the individual level and in regard to their social responsibilities.

Conclusion and recommendations

The urban way of life among the Thai middle class raises issues about sustainability in response to their pattern of consumption. Economically, consumerism demands greater sources of producer and consumer services, and results in problems of unemployment as machines replace human labor. It also raises economic questions about gender, ethnicity, race

and youth pertaining to inequality and unsustainability. Social issues in the urban way of life include housing affordability and provision, household composition, health care, education, community development, crime, poverty, race, gender, transport, shopping facilities and leisure opportunities. All are expressed as middle class needs in daily life within consumerism.

Cities need to be environmentally sustainable, with development and urban planning having to achieve environmental quality and a standard of environmental protection by minimizing the risky and dangerous aspects of urban growth. In regards to social sustainability, there should be equal social justice, services and facilities among the upper and lower middle class in order to reduce social inequalities. The population growth would change the quality of people's lives either negatively through a decreased standard of living and /or worsening environmental problems, or positively through productivity growth, technological change, and associated improvements in per capita wealth and income. It is, thus, giving an economic dimension to the quality of life. Furthermore, quality of life includes financial resources to purchase basic needs as defined by a series of indicators of physical and social well-being and the provision of public and merit goods and services (Stimson,1999, *ibid*).However, self-sufficiency economy as proposed by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the Great, is a moderate way of life pertaining to sustainable development that should be put into more practice, not only in rural areas, but also in the urban context. In living everyday in the present, urban people, especially the middle class, have more alternatives than ever before. Religious practice is more popular among the new generation, indicating that urban people still need psychological therapy in order to cope with their daily life challenges. Many spend too much money, chasing consumerism, while neglecting their spiritual needs. A greater balance is needed.

In conclusion, the urban middle class is powerful in that they are capable of having high money potential to adjust and enjoy themselves in the current modern urban lifestyle. However, they could pay less attention to consumerism, and turn out to be more socially and morally concerned about their collective consciousness and responsibilities. It would lead to social solidarity – even though it might be ‘urban solidarity’, a different form than that found in rural society.⁶The form of such association

⁶ According to Hays (2008), a majority of the Thai population, people in the rural villages of Thailand, have led more simple lives rooted in rich traditions, with less interference from international cultures or capitalism. Urban Thailand, on the other hand, has gained its cultural richness from the diverse social classes, ethnicities, and international cultures. The rural/urban division is still highly salient to most Thais, even though the

is relevant to the way in which the diverse local culture and wisdom is revised, reviewed and re-identified in terms of its “social capital”, and how it relates to the urban context where people from many different cultural backgrounds mingle together. In this study, the outskirts areas of Bangkok and its periphery could be developed in terms of land use management. Agro tourism is more commonly promoted as well as organic food and farming. Learning centers for communities are emerging for people to share their experiences. Also, the movement of people’s participation towards the benefit of their local communities should be supported. All these mentioned should be accessed equally, by déclassé, as pop culture. This would generate social development, leading to sustainability in people’s quality of life. Sustainable urban development generated by the urban middle class tends to lead to overcrowding, but requires less pollution, sanitation and waste disposal with environment protection if they themselves realize their sense of community. In brief, they should be more concerned about the urban crisis caused by globalization and urbanization.

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differences have become gradually smaller due to the media, improved communication and transportation, and the migration of rural Thais to find work in big cities.

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