

Reconsidering the Social Stratification of Hong Kong: A Christian Perspective

(An abstract)

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Class politics was once considered irreverent to the social context of Hong Kong. In recent years, however, class conflict has been increasingly acute. Conflict between the lower class and the middle class is especially apparent, as class-based political activities tend to take place more often than before.

In this article the social stratification theories of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu are reviewed. Marxism analyzes the presence of classes in terms of production means, which divides the society into two main classes: the bourgeoisie who owns the means and the proletariat who does not. This interpretation, however, has the problem of succumbing to economic determinism. It also faces difficulties in accounting for middle class activities. The Bourdieuan concepts of social capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital may provide new perspectives in this respect, but its validity in the context of Hong Kong is not yet well tested. The Weberian approach, on the other hand, defines classes in terms of life chances. It could provide a better explanation for middle class activities. Weber also introduces the concept of status and party, which increase the dimension of analyses. It is Weber's approach that is

adopted in this article.

The lower class in Hong Kong is mainly composed of elderly and unskilled workers, who have been suffering from low and decreasing income. The gap between the rich and the poor is thus widening in the last decades, and members in the lower classes could barely maintain their living. The middle class, composed mainly of professionals and managers, were the beneficiaries of a “middle class myth” in the 1970-80s, so called the hegemonic discourse of the territory. This resulted in a discrimination against the lower class, for the economic depression after 1997 brought immense pressure upon the middle class, which eventually led to the increased tension between the two classes. The middle class, while struggling for their own survival, began to feel the burden of having to feed the lower class as well. It was then that the class came to a more conservative political standpoint.

Social mobilization was limited for the lower class, while the upper classes could resist downward mobility by better education. For those in the higher class, they could maintain their class position by marriage and interpersonal relations.

Christians in Hong Kong come mainly from the middle class. In relating to other classes, however, Christian should go by biblical truth, rather than middle class values. In the Epistle to Philemon, Paul deals with an issue of social stratification of his time, i.e., slavery. We could see that Paul considers slaves as equal to others, and he hints at a humanitarian treatment to slaves. Christians from the middle class should learn from this epistle, and should pursue a harmonic inter-class relationship.