My talk addresses how the discourse about the middle class served to create fast-growing yet orderly market economies in South Korea (1961-1979) and China (1978-2008). I argue that state-sponsored middle class formation served to strengthen a state vision of national development and modernization in both of these countries in spite of their different socioeconomic systems. A number of studies in the social sciences have treated the middle class as a result of economic expansion. Little attention has been paid to how the state deliberately produced specific meanings, symbols, and values that were channeled through the middle class and how the rise of the middle class, in turn, influenced the political dynamics of developmental processes. Drawing evidence from archival data and in-depth interviews, my research demonstrates that the category of the middle class became a channel through which to showcase upward mobility in a time of growing social inequality. By tracing the processes of state-sponsored middle-class formation in these two countries, my research focuses on state ideological projects that successfully created an image of “developmental subjects” practicing disciplined lifestyles and effectively disseminated discipline throughout society. The creation and growth of this new middle class in relatively classless, egalitarian Korea and China could serve as evidence for authoritarian states to promote an improved standard of living and thus appeal to the rest of the population striving to enhance their livelihoods.

Monday, April 29, 2013
9:30 – 11 am
Saunders 624, Harry Friedman Room