

Elitism and the Practice of Architecture: Insights from the Asian Architects Who Have Won the Pritzker Prize from 1979-2023.

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Abstract

Commissioning architects to design buildings has traditionally been done by the elites in the community. When the architectural profession evaluates who they value as great architects and identify them as ‘starchitects’, it looks as if their elite backgrounds may have been a part of the reason. Among numerous such international prizes and value systems, the Pritzker Prize stands out as one of the most highly-respected ones, which also appears to promote elitism. In this context, it is often assumed that the architects from the broader Asian region recognized by the Pritzker Prize are elites. This research ascertains if this is the case.

The study employs qualitative case studies as research methods. Thus, it acquires data from the pritzkerprize.com website, to examine the eleven cycles producing 12 winning starchitects from the broader Asian region. Theories on elitism establish that people become elites through social positions based on access to political power. Thus, two-fold criteria are derived that define the social positions of the starchitects: traditional family backgrounds and occupations of parents. These social positions include governing elite, political class, upper middle class, middle class and working class, in descending order. Applying these, the elite position of each architect is determined: only those belonging to the governing elite and political class are considered elites. The research derives data from the pritzkerprize.com website. For triangulation, it examines 22 other autobiographic accounts to identify the traditional family background and occupations of parents of each starchitect, to establish their social positions, and subsequently their elite positions.

The research was carried out in August 2024. Out of the 12 starchitects, the study establishes that one came from a governing elite background and another from the political class. Another 6 were from a middle-class background. Out of the architects belonging to middle class, 4 belonged to the upper middle class, while another 3 belonged to the working class. Among those who won the Pritzker Prize, only 2 enjoyed elite positions. Consequently, this research points out that this assumption has no proper basis and concludes that the Pritzker Prize does not promote elitism.

Key Words: Pritzker Prize, Asian Architects, Architectural Profession, Starchitects, Elite.

Introduction

The terms elitism and architecture have always gone parallel. In fact, Harwood, May and Sherman (2011), examine this historic relationship between the architects and the elites that commissions them. In this light, Slessor (2014) tells us that architecture amidst other arts, has not been spared by the contemporary insidious trend of elitism. Ellin (1997) on the other hand, defines elitism in architecture as the industry's notion of representing architects as the ultimate authority in assessing the quality of the built environment in general. Betsky (2014) argues that it is this system of elitism that creates progress and keeps architecture alive.

In Ellin's (1997) view, this paved the way for the birth of celebrated architects often called 'star architects' (*a.k.a.* starchitects). Parman (2018) suggests that they account for around 0.1% of the industry. In such a back ground, Parman states that the works of contemporary starchitects attract attention—both acclaim and criticism—for associating notions of 'elitism' to their work. It is said that elitism is maintained in terms of aesthetics, innovation, and especially, grandeur in scale/budget in the buildings starchitects design (Slessor, 2014).

In this light, it is often asserted that the elite status of architecture profession and stardom of architects is indeed maintained by many of the coveted Prizes in architecture. The Pritzker Prize is arguably the biggest of them all. The 'Pritzker' (as it is affectionately known) is a highly-acclaimed annual prize offered to outstanding architects from around the world (Gayantha, 2023), where "[it] has often been called the Nobel Prize of architecture" (britannica.com, 2024).

The prize was established in 1979, not only to encourage and stimulate a greater public awareness on architecture, but also to acclaim talent, vision and commitment of outstanding architects from around the world (Pritzkerprize.com, 2024). When the past winners who are mostly world-renowned architects are considered—from Philip Johnson, Renzo Piano, Rafael Moneo, Aldo Rossi to Louis Barragan etc.—their overarching elitist family backgrounds cannot be ignored. Given this view, Smith (2015) and Cheng (2017) explore how prestigious architectural awards affect architectural careers and trajectories, providing examples from around the world.

This research focuses on the Pritzker Prize-winning architects from the Asian region as a whole in order to assess their elite status. With this understanding, it is first essential to define the geographical area within the Asian region that falls under the scope of this study. Yapp (2014) establishes that the Middle Eastern region is geographically a part of the land mass traditionally considered as Asia. In his view, it encompasses countries located at the crossroads of Western Asia and Eastern Mediterranean. In this light, it is safe to consider the geographic territory that is traditionally known as Asia in conjunction with the Middle East. Smith (2009) also confirms this view. This broader area is referred to in this study as the 'broader Asian region'.

In this background, this research examines if the Pritzker Prize-winning architects are in fact, elites and if the Pritzker Prize promotes elitism. The aim is to contribute to the understanding about the relations that exist between elitism and architecture. The objectives of the study are as follows.

1. To identify the Social Positions held by the families of the Pritzker Prize-winning starchitects (*i.e.* governing elite, political class, upper middle class, middle class and the working class).
2. To ascertain the status of elitism among the Pritzker Prize-winning starchitects who have originated from the broader Asian region between 1979 and 2023 when the prize was last awarded.

Theoretical Framework

Social Stratification

Every society is consisted of a hierarchy of 'social layers' in the form of 'social strata'. As Silva (1999) elaborates, even in the modern societies created with human equality in mind, with time, social stratification has emerged. For him, there are two ways of considering social

stratification in a given society: the ‘objective’ (tangible) and ‘subjective’ (intangible). This notion is based on the measures of how a given society conceives ‘high’ and ‘low’ positions for a given individual. It is believed that although there is a certain degree of convergence between objective and subjective factors in determining social stratification, this however, is not always true. Theories on social stratification enlighten the causalities of social inequalities and their social implications; the most convincing are by Marx and Engels (2019), Webber (2013) and Pareto (1963). While the former two have much to do with social stratification, the latter is largely a theory on elitism.

Elitism: Extant Theories

Over the years, numerous theories have been formulated in relation to defining elites in a manner pertinent to 20th and 21st centuries. While the age-old ideas of physical and moral inequalities in men have been instrumental in the making of such theories, they also rely intimately on the notion of economic ‘class’. Although the ‘class’ bias is symptomatic to theories on elitism, some are more democratically-oriented. Under circumstances where democracy has been a common practice the world over (at least from the beginning of 20th century), such theories appear to be more palatable than undemocratic others (*i.e.* ruling class; power elite; political elite). On the other hand, certain theories that pay homage to above ideas (*i.e.* Intellectuals, managers and bureaucrats) also fail in their many under-assumptions and historical invalidity. The shortcomings of such theories have been overcome through the notions of Pareto (1963) and Mosca (1939), addressed next as the theory of the ‘governing elite and the political class’.

Theory of Governing Elite and the Political Class

Both Pareto and Mosca’s ideas are condensed by Bottomore (1993) into a few easily-conceivable concepts that are very much applicable to the 20th and 21st century scenarios. Their conceptions diverge: Pareto dwells on the psychological notion of ‘residues (sentiments)’ and Mosca explores his ideas through both psychology and sociology. Indeed, they are both equally concerned by the problem of political power. The ideas of governing elite and the political Class—essentially encompassing the notion of the Middle Class—that they have proposed could be noted as the most convincing theory to date (Bottomore, 1993; Wijetunge, 2010, 2011a, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2015, 2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b).

When integrating the ideas of Pareto and Mosca, it can be stated that in every society, elites may manifest either as various ‘functional groups’ or as a ‘political class’. Bottomore (1993) illustrates that in the modern industrial countries, there are numerous groups of important ‘functional elites’ in the form of scientists, technologists, managers, administrators, teachers etc. Through their ‘artists and intellectuals’, these countries are supposed to be creating a ‘civilization’ rather than sustaining a mere ‘commercialized mass consumption society’. However, this particular group lacks in political power, and wields a considerable degree of influence over economic as well as cultural arenas their respective spheres cover. Consequently, their influence is constrained by the extent to which their occupational roles can affect these factors. Further, such groups could also possibly overlap with the so-called middle class. Consequently, in Bottomore’s (1993) view, there is no particular reason for referring to them as ‘elites’ at all. Hence, they could be seen simply as ‘functional’ and largely ‘occupational’ groups within the social division of labour, whose members differ greatly in ability and achievement.

Given this perspective, Bottomore (1993:13) tells us that, “[I] shall use here Mosca’s term, the ‘political class’, to refer to all those groups which exercise political power or influence, and are directly engaged in struggles for political leadership [...]”. The more conspicuous and loosely-defined political class consists of those who occupy the posts of political command as well as those who can in certain ways, exert influence on political decisions via their close proximity to the former. This class undergoes changes in its membership over a period of time, ordinarily by the recruitment of new individual members from the lower strata of society; sometimes by the incorporation of new social groups.

Occasionally, these established elites are replaced completely by a 'counter elite' in situations such as revolutions, in a process referred to as the 'circulation of elites'. Moreover, within the political class itself, there exists an even smaller group, the 'political-elite' or 'governing elite'; consisting of individuals who actually exercise political power in a given society, at a given time. This includes members of the government/of the high administration, military leaders (in certain situations), and in some cases, politically influential families of an aristocracy/royal house as well as the leaders of powerful economic enterprises.

It is not easy to set boundaries for the political class. It may comprise of leaders of political parties who are out of office and representatives of new social interests/classes such as trade union leaders, groups of businessmen, as well as intellectuals who are active in politics. Aristocratic families and royal houses who no longer hold absolute power, but have the potential to do so are no exemptions either (Wijetunge, 2012). In this regard, it is pertinent to argue here that such groups are pushed outside the circle of governing elites (that in turn deprive them of direct political influence), owing to their opposing or alternative political ideologies. Their potentially substantial economic, political, or socio-cultural backgrounds do not help their case. Some in fact, might perhaps be individual groups who had failed to make ranks as the governing elites, despite sharing the same political vision. The Political Class therefore, comprises of a number of groups that may be engaged in varying degrees of cooperation, competition or conflict with one another (Bottomore, 1993).

Commenting on the political influence of elites on their respective societies, Bottomore (1993) confirms that, although the composition of governing elites may be progressively altered, the relative importance of the various groups within the elite stratum may not change. He believes that a society can only survive and prosper if there is true collaboration between these groups in terms of unity of opinions and actions. The biggest downside of this combined doctrine however, is its acknowledgement of the fact that those who play a role in the government constitute a coherent group, which indeed, is antithetical to the true notion of democracy (Wijetunge, 2013a, 2013b, 2015). Considering this, arguably, it is the establishment of the two uppermost echelons of society as elites (*i.e.* governing elite and political class) that in turn, paves way to mark the layers below them.

According to Mosca (1939), elite are not merely elevated above the rest of society; rather, they are closely connected with the masses through the 'sub-elites'. This much-larger group that represents the mainstream intents/purposes of society are known as the new 'middle class'. The term finds its relevance in the 20th and 21st centuries. This particular group not only provides recruits for the governing elite and political class ranks but also plays a crucial role in the governance of the society (Wijetunge, 2011a, 2012).

Within the middle class, we may find 'higher' and 'lower' strata, according to Bottomore (1993). The former group referred to as the 'upper middle class' comprises of those in professional, technical and relatively higher managerial occupations. The lower conversely, extends to more routine clerical and administrative jobs (Wijetunge, 2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). As illustrated by Bottomore (1993), such occupations have been described by many as 'non-manual' occupations. On the other hand, the middle class could also be placed on par with the idea of 'intelligentsia'. As Mosca (1939) clarifies, the stability of a political organism ultimately depends on the levels of morality, intelligence and activity achieved by its middle class. Bottomore (1993) argues that the middle class influences economic development not only through their specialized skills but also through their broad commitment to the modern ways of living. Bottomore (1993) contends that the middle class overlaps with the lower levels of 20th century elite intellectuals, managers and bureaucrats. However, he also maintains that, in terms of both numbers and the breadth of their occupations, the global middle class has expanded significantly in the latter part of the 20th century.

As for Bottomore (1993), below the middle class exists what he calls the 'working class'. The working class is typically engaged in manual industrial work, often involving jobs that require physical effort. Such jobs are typically less managerial or supervisory. This class is characterized by lower levels of education and income compared to the middle class. Historically, the working class has been defined by its roles in manufacturing, construction and

service industries, with members often experiencing economic instability and limited access to resources and opportunities (Marx and Engles, 2019). Given the above, it can be argued that manual labour is the key factor distinguishing the middle class from the working class, with the latter constituting the vast majority of any society. Thus, it can be concluded that both the middle class and the working class generally lack significant political influence. Their impact is limited to voting in democratic elections or participating in social revolutions (Bottomore, 1993).

Criteria for Assessing Elitism

The stratum of governing elites, political class, upper middle class, middle class and working class (in descending order of political power) that the theory of governing elite and the political class propagated—as illustrated by Bottomore (1993)—can also be understood as ‘social positions’. In this light, Bottomore (1993) also tells us that the economic status and socio-cultural heritage of one’s family background—also called the ‘traditional family background’—can impact his or her social position. For him, the traditional family background provides one of the initial advantages or disadvantages.

Further, Bourdieu (1984, 2011) as well as Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) argue that traditional family background is a significant indicator of social positions, as it often reflects wealth, education, social networks and especially, occupation. Therefore, examining the traditional family backgrounds of the architects is a valid criterion for determining their respective social positions within the social hierarchy established by the theory of governing elites and the political class.

On the other hand, Bourdieu (1984, 2011) and Giddens (1984) also tell us that someone's occupation can especially be an indicator of social position. They posit factors such as social status, income and political influence that occupation could wield, elevate one’s social status. In their view, higher occupations typically offer higher earnings, greater social prestige and access to influential networks (arguably political), contributing to upward social mobility. Weber (1946) also talks about prestige that might be associated with occupation. Therefore, examining occupations of parents of the architects is a valid criterion for determining their respective positions within the social hierarchy established by the theory of governing elites and the political class.

The criteria for determining Social Positions therefore are as follows:

- a. Traditional family background
- b. Occupations of parents

Having established these two criteria, it is now essential to justify the necessity of the second criterion for this study. The architects were born into their given respective traditional family backgrounds. The literature review establishes that the historical records of traditional family backgrounds of the majority of the architects, do not go beyond their parents’ time. In this context, if traditional family backgrounds are not historically recorded, occupations of their parents become the next best logical means to ascertain their social positions. If retrospective accounts are not available in literature for the former, the latter is to fill in that gap. If information is available about at least one of the two criteria, then that is sufficient to determine the social position of a given architect.

The Means of Determining Elite Position

According to the theory of governing elite and the political class, if a given architect’s social position turns out to be either governing elite or political class, it could be argued that he or she is an elite in society. If the results wield middle class, upper middle class or working class positions, they are of the none-elite stratum.

However, it is essential to mention here that education—primary, secondary and tertiary—that the architects received is closely linked to their traditional family backgrounds, it is their parents' social/professional status that has sustained the former. Especially, those who

have obtained expensive foreign education from prestigious institutions both in their home countries and abroad, are also likely to benefit from their traditional family backgrounds. On the other hand, after their tertiary studies, many have secured coveted apprenticeships at leading firms in Asia and the West, which in turn have facilitated high-profile commissions when they established their own practices in their home countries or abroad. Then only they have become starchitects. Considering the above, the aforesaid points are omitted from the criteria adopted here.

Review of Literature

Numerous research examines the issue of architects being of the elite class. Harwood, May and Sherman (2015) explore the historic relationship between architects and their elite patrons, detailing the humble beginnings and subsequent rise of the modern architectural profession in 17th-18th century Europe. They also illustrate how elite patrons contributed to the architecture profession's elevation during the 19th-20th centuries. Their arguments are convincingly supported by ample examples from the world over. On the other hand, the elitist stance assumed by the profession of architecture and how it is maintained is discussed by Slessor (2014), Ellin (1997) and Betsky (2014). They all illustrate arguments both in favour and against this practice. Given this, Ellin (1997) and Parman (2018) introduce with ample examples the phenomenon of so-called 'starchitects'. They believe that such figures contribute to the maintaining of the profession's *status quo* throughout the world. Elitism pertaining to the architectural profession as a whole and its implications within the Asian region have been explored by only a few authors, including Wijetunge (2024a; 2024b) and Silva (2005).

The impact of prestigious awards on architectural careers as well as career trajectories is discussed by Smith (2015) and Cheng (2017), who adduces worldwide examples. With this in mind, Gayantha (2023) and Britannica.com (2024) assert that the Pritzker Prize is considered the most prestigious award in architecture. The latter source provides a detailed explanation for its position. The official website of the Pritzker Prize, pritzkerprize.com, elaborates on the award's founding intentions and suggests that it aims to sustain the profession's prominence by fostering star architects on a global scale. In this context, it can be confirmed that no existing studies focus specifically on starchitects from the Asian region who have won prestigious awards, highlighting a significant gap in the current knowledge.

The concept of the broader Asian region that falls within the purview of this study is informed by the explanations and definitions on geographical areas put forth by both Yap (1996) and Smith (2009). Japan, China and the Middle Eastern region from which all case study architects originate from are essential parts of the broader Asian region in their view.

In the context of existing social stratification theories, the perspectives of Marx and Engels (2019), Weber (2013), and Pareto (1963) are crucial. Silva (2005) synthesizes these views to establish a clear two-fold criteria that facilitates the exploration of elitism. Theories of elitism are reviewed by Bottomore (1993) based on perspective by Pareto (1968) and Mosca (1939). He then argues that the theory of governing elite and the political class (delving on access to political power) is the most compelling among them. His choice is underpinned by the theory's recognition of modern democratic ideas as well as its historical accuracy. The extensive research by Wijetunge (2007, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2015, 2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b) on elite architecture supports the application of the aforementioned theory to evaluate social positions and elite positions of the architects studied here.

To derive criteria for assessing the social positions of the case study architects, the observations of Bottomore (1993), Bourdieu (1984, 2011), Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992), Giddens (1984), as well as Weber (1946) are crucial. Bottomore, Bourdieu, Erikson and Goldthorpe argue that traditional family background is a key indicator of one's social position; justifying the first criterion. Conversely, Bourdieu, Giddens and Weber highlight that one's occupation is also a significant determinant of the same factor. This supports the decision to use occupations of parents as the second criterion. They are among the most compelling proponents of this idea.

The justifications to apply to traditional family backgrounds and occupations of parents of case studies to determine social positions are driven from a number of sources. On the one hand, Fei (1992), Elman (2000) and Bai (2002) dispense information on the socio-political context of 19th–20th century East Asia. On the other, Tam (2014) narrates the traditional occupational roles of Asian women, Pipes (2017) discerns that upper class modern Asian women were driven towards the arts as a hobby than a profession. Moreover, Robbins (2019) and Miller (2013) establish that upper managerial level occupations are quite possible without political influence. Hughes (2002) complements this argument by stating that proprietorships such as businesses has the potential of elevating social position.

Research Methodology

The research was carried out in August 2024 (between the 15th and 20th), from the home institution in Oklahoma, USA. The research methodology employed here is qualitative (mono research method), with case studies as the strategy. An ensemble of 11 architects defined as ‘starchitects’ originating from the broader Asian region who won the Pritzker Prize between its establishment in 1979 and to-date (in ten cycles) are considered as case studies.

The most relevant theory of elitism—the theory of governing elite and the political class—is established by reviewing extant theories of elitism. This theory that is based on the factor of political influence in turn, establishes the hierarchy of social positions in society. They are governing elite, political class, upper middle class, middle class and working class in descending order. Then other theories are relied upon to derive the two-fold criteria—traditional family backgrounds and occupations of parents, which is then applied to case studies.

To gather information when applying the two-fold criteria to case studies of this desk-based research, extant literature is utilized. The reliable web source in the form of pritzkerprize.com—the official database of Pritzker prize laureates—is relied upon to determine 12 starchitects from the broader Asian region who won them in eleven cycles between 1979 and 2023. Further, the same web source becomes the basis for affording the key information about the 12 case studies as well as their traditional family backgrounds and professions of parents. In order to supplement information lacking in the aforesaid source, at least 2 other published autobiographical accounts in the form of books are used pertaining to each case study. These 22 publications also fulfil triangulation of data. Moreover, another ten theoretical published pieces are used for justification of architects’ social position when necessary.

The analysis is carried out by using tables. Within the process of analysis, the social position of each case study is first assessed (*i.e.* social position assessment) according to the defined hierarchy outlined by the applied theory (*i.e.* governing elite, political class, upper middle class, middle class and working class, in descending order). Within this process, if a given case study could not yield information for traditional family backgrounds, which of professions of parents is to be considered. The social position assessment is then followed by a second assessment that is conducted to determine whether each case study originated from elite or non-elite family backgrounds. This analysis is then employed to draw conclusions.

Case Studies

Out of 46 laureates, the 12 architects from the broader Asian region who won the Pritzker Prize between 1979 and 2023 who are considered here as case studies, are listed below in chronological order of receiving the award.

1. Leoh Ming Pei (I. M. Pei)
2. Kenzō Tange
3. Fumihiko Maki
4. Tadao Ando
5. Zaha Hadid
6. Ryue Nishizawa and Kazuyo Sejima (joint winners)
7. Wang Shu
8. Toyo Ito

- 9. Shigeru Ban
- 10. B. V. Doshi
- 11. Arata Isozaki

Tables 1-12 feature the 12 case studies for 11 award cycles. The only joint winners (Ryue Nishizawa and Kazuyo Sejima) featured in separate tables (Table-6 and Table-7 respectively) are considered as separate case studies.


Key 01:

Social Position Assessment	Abbreviation and Corresponding Colour
Governing elite	Governing elite
Political class	Political class
Middle class	Middle class
Upper middle class	Upper middle class
Working class	Working class

Key 02:

Elite Assessment	Corresponding Colour
Elite	
None-elite	
Inconclusive	

The above keys apply to Tables 1-12.

Table 01	Case Study No: 01	
	Year of Pritzker Prize: 1983	
	Name: Leoh Ming Pei (I. M. Pei)	
	Year of Birth: 1917	
	Country of Birth: China	
	Birth Place: Guangzhou	
	Nationality: Chinese-American	
	Sources: pritzkerprize.com (2024)	
Criteria	Recorded History	Justification
a. Traditional family background	Pei's family ancestry traces back to the Ming dynasty. Originally from Anhui, China, the family made its wealth in medicinal herbs and later joined the ranks of the scholar-gentry (Stockman, 2013). The transition from trade to scholar-gentry occurred over several centuries, with the family's rise to prominence is particularly noted during the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). By the late 19 th to early 20 th centuries, the Pei family had established themselves in the scholar-gentry class (Pei, 2000). Hence, the family lived in the upper echelons of society due to their ancestors' success (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Stockman, 2013).	In 19 th and early 20 th century China, the scholarly-gentry class was considered elite due to their significant social, political and cultural influence (Fei, 1992). They wielded significant political power by holding important administrative positions. They influenced local governance and policy-making throughout the imperial period, particularly during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties (Elman, 2000). On the other hand, mostly elite families carry recorded family histories known as 'zupu' in China (Bai, 2002). Since the Peis have such records, it places them in the elite class.
Criterion assessment on traditional family background		Political class
b. Professions of parents	Father: Tsuyee Pei, was a successful banker at the Bank of China, and subsequently managed its head office in	Mother: Ying Pei, was a housewife (Pei, 2000).
		In 19 th and early 20 th century modern China, to become a banker managing a prestigious institution such as the Bank of China, one would typically have needed to come from an elite background with substantial political influence (Bai, 2002). In the early 20 th century, it was customary for wives in many Asian cultures to take on the role of homemakers, while men were seen as providers. This expectation was prevalent

	Shanghai (Stockman, 2013)		across various Asian societies, including China, Japan, and Korea, where women's responsibilities largely centred on domestic duties and child-rearing (Zhu, 2017).
Criterion assessment on professions of parents			Political class
Social position assessment			Political class
Elite assessment			Elite


Table 02	Case Study No: 02		
	Year of Pritzker Prize: 1987		
	Name: Kenzō Tange		
	Year of Birth: 1913		
	Country of Birth: Japan		
	Birth Place: Osaka		
	Nationality: Japanese		
Source: pritzkerprize.com (2024)			
Criteria	Recorded History		Justification
a. Traditional family background	Beyond his parents, the Tange family history does not carry evidence of any prominence in society, or feature any widely recognized figures (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Schittich, 2007).		Owing to the lack of evidence, need to rely on (b).
Criterion assessment on traditional family background			-
b. Professions of parents	Father: Tange Tetsuro , had some involvement in China during his career. As a carpenter, Tange Tetsuro worked on various projects, including those in China (Schittich, 2007; Lin, 2010)	Mother: Kikue Tange , was a housewife (Schittich, 2007; Lin, 2010).	The father working as a carpenter tells us that he was engaged in a manual labour profession. In relation to the mother, in the early 20 th century, it was customary for wives in many Asian cultures to take on the role of homemakers, while men were seen as providers. This expectation was prevalent across various Asian societies, where women's responsibilities largely centred on domestic duties and child-rearing (Zhu, 2017). Hence, the father's profession of manual labour along with the mother's role as a home-maker places the family within a working class provenance. The elaboration by Bottomore (1993) that the traditional middle class is largely about engaging in non-manual labour occupations confirms this stratification.
Criterion assessment professions of parents			Working class
Social position assessment:			Working class
Elite assessment:			Non-elite


Table 03		Case Study No: 03	
	Year of Pritzker Prize: 1993		
	Name: Fumihiko Maki		
	Year of Birth: 1928		
	Country of Birth: Japan		
	Birth Place: Tokyo		
	Nationality: Japanese		
Source: pritzkerprize.com (2024)			
Criteria	Recorded History		Justification
c. Traditional family background	The extant Maki family history in literature does not carry evidence of any prominence in society, or feature any widely recognized figures.		Owing to the lack of evidence, need to rely on (b).
Criterion assessment on traditional family background			-
d. Professions of parents	Father: No record exists in extant literature.	Mother: No record exists in extant literature.	Inconclusive
Criterion assessment professions of parents			Inconclusive
Social position assessment:			Inconclusive
Elite assessment:			Inconclusive


Table 04		Case Study No: 04	
	Year of Pritzker Prize: 1995		
	Name: Tadao Ando		
	Year of Birth: 1941		
	Country of Birth: Japan		
	Birth Place: Osaka		
	Nationality: Japanese		
Source: pritzkerprize.com (2024)			
Criteria	Recorded History		Justification
a. Traditional family background	Beyond his parents, the Ando family history does not carry evidence of any prominence in society, or feature any widely recognized figures (pritzkerprize.com, 2024, Pare, 2000).		Owing to the lack of evidence, need to rely on (b).
Criterion assessment on traditional family background			-
b. Professions of parents	Father: Ando Yoshio was a self-employed carpenter (Yashiro, 2001).	Mother: Ando Katsu, Worked as a seamstress. Her role in the family involved managing household responsibilities and contributing to the family's modest income through her work in sewing and tailoring (Pare, 2000)	Both the father and mother engaging in manual labour professions place the family within a working class provenance. The elaboration by Bottomore (1993) that the traditional middle class is largely about engaging in non-manual labour occupations confirms this stratification.
Criterion assessment on professions of parents			Working class
Social position assessment			Working class
Elite assessment			Non-elite


Table 05		Case Study No: 05	
	Year of Pritzker Prize: 2004		
	Name: Zaha Hadid		
	Year of Birth: 1950		
	Country of Birth: Iraq		
	Birth Place: Baghdad		
	Nationality: Iraqi-British		
Source: pritzkerprize.com (2024)			
Criteria	Recorded History		Justification
a. Traditional family background	The Hadid family line, particularly on Zaha Hadid's paternal side, traces back several generations in Iraq. The Hadid family has deep roots in Baghdad, where they were known for their prominence in business and society. While detailed historical records of the family's lineage are not extensively documented, the family has been influential in the region for at least a century or more (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Winter, 2017).		The prominence in business and society places the family at least within the political class.
Criterion assessment on traditional family background			Political class
b. Professions of parents	Father: Muhammad al-Hajj Husayn Hadid was a wealthy industrialist and a well-respected figure in the Iraqi business community, particularly in the import-export sector. Originating from Mosul, he co-founded the left-liberal al-Ahali group in 1932 (a significant political organization). He was also the co-founder of the National Democratic Party in Iraq, and once served as the minister of finance (Hadid, 2009; Tentler-Krylov 2020).	Mother: Wajiha al-Sabunji was an artist from Mosul, and also a member of the Iraqi artistic and intellectual circles. (Hadid, 2009; Tentler-Krylov 2020).	The fact that the father once served as a minister of a modern democratically-elected government itself is testament to the political power the family would have wielded. The direct access to political power and the economic benefits that usually accompanies it places the family well within the governing elite. On the other hand, it is generally true that in many Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, historically, women from elite families were more likely to be encouraged to engage in the arts, often as a hobby rather than a profession. This tendency was influenced by social norms that emphasized the arts as a refined pursuit for elite women, while professional careers were less accessible to them due to societal constraints (Pipes, 2017). This confirms that the mother had to at least hail from the political class, to allow her union with Muhammad al-Hajj Husayn Hadid who also belonged to the same, before his political involvements place the family within the governing elite.
Criterion assessment on professions of parents			Governing elite
Social Position Assessment			Governing elite
Elite Assessment			Elite



Table 06		Case Study No: 06	
	Year of Pritzker Prize: 2010		
	Name: Ryue Nishizawa		
	Year of Birth: 1966		
	Country of Birth: Japan		
	Birth Place: Yokohama		
	Nationality: Japanese		
Source: pritzkerprize.com (2024)			
Criteria	Recorded History		Justification
a. Traditional family background	Beyond his parents, the Nishizawa family history does not carry evidence of any prominence in society, or feature any widely recognized figures (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Fujita, n.d.).		Owing to the lack of evidence, need to rely on (b).
Criterion assessment on traditional family background			-
b. Professions of parents	Father: Nishizawa Shuichi , was an architect who ran a modest architectural firm (Fujita, n.d.); Isokääntä, 2023)	Mother: Nishizawa Yasuko , was a schoolteacher. (Fujita, n.d.); Isokääntä, 2023)	The father's position as the proprietor of a modest architectural firm and mother's role as a school teacher place the family within a middle class provenance. The elaboration by Bottomore (1993) that the traditional middle class is largely about engaging in non-manual labour occupations confirms this stratification.
Criterion assessment on professions of parents			Middle class
Social position assessment			Middle class
Elite assessment			None-elite

Table 07		Case Study No: 07	
	Year of Pritzker Prize: 2010 (joint-winner)		
	Name: Kzuyo Sejima		
	Year of Birth: 1956		
	Country of Birth: Japan		
	Birth Place: Matsu, Shimane Prefectur		
	Nationality: Japanese		
Source: pritzkerprize.com (2024)			
Criteria	Recorded History		Justification
a. Traditional family background	Beyond her parents, the Sejima family history does not carry evidence of any prominence in society, or feature any widely recognized figures (Sejima 2015).		Owing to the lack of evidence, need to rely on (b).
Criterion assessment on traditional family background			-
b. Professions of parents	Father: Sejima Masamichi was a carpenter, and his profession involved working with traditional Japanese woodworking (Sejima, 2015)	Mother: Sejima Yoko , worked as a housewife. (Sejima, 2015; Hays 2016)	The father working as a carpenter tells us that he was engaged in a manual labour profession. In relation to the mother, in the early 20 th century, it was customary for wives in many Asian cultures to take on the role of homemakers, while men were seen as providers. This expectation was prevalent across various Asian societies, where women's responsibilities largely centred on domestic duties and child-rearing (Zhu, 2017).

			The father's position as a worker dispensing manual labour, and mother's role as a house wife place the family within a working class provenance. The elaboration by Bottomore (1993) that the traditional working class is largely about engaging in manual labour occupations confirms this stratification.
Criterion assessment on professions of parents			Working class
Social Position Assessment			Working class
Elite Assessment			None-elite



Table 08	Case Study No: 08		
	Year of Pritzker Prize: 2012		
	Name: Wang Shu		
	Year of Birth: 1963		
	Country of Birth: China		
	Birth Place: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region		
	Nationality: Chinese		
Source: pritzkerprize.com (2024)			
Criteria	Recorded History		Justification
a. Traditional family background	Beyond his parents, the Shu family history does not carry evidence of any prominence in society, or feature any widely-recognized figures (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Lee, 2015; Zhang, 2018).		Owing to the lack of evidence, need to reply on (b).
Criterion assessment on traditional family background			-
b. Professions of parents	Father: According to certain accounts, Wang Yamin was a musician and an amateur carpenter which was taken up more as a hobby. (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Lee, 2015; Zhang, 2018).	Mother: Liu Xia Was a teacher and school librarian in Beijing (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Lee, 2015; Zhang, 2018).	The fact that both parents were engaged in non-manual occupations—his father as a musician and his mother as a school teacher/librarian—suggests that the family was of middle class provenance. The elaboration by Bottomore (1993) that the traditional middle class is largely about engaging in non-manual labour occupations confirms this stratification.
Criterion assessment on professions of parents			Middle class
Social Position Assessment			Middle class
Elite Assessment			None-elite

Table 09	Case Study No: 09		
	Year of Pritzker Prize: 2013		
	Name: Toyo Ito		
	Year of Birth: 1941		
	Country of Birth: S. Korea		
	Birth Place: Keijo		
	Nationality: Japanese		
Source: pritzkerprize.com (2024)			
Criteria	Recorded History		Justification
a. Traditional family background	Ito's paternal grandfather was also a businessman (a lumberjack dealer) (pritzkerprize.com, 2024). Apart from		Owing to the lack of enough evidence, need to rely on (b).

	this fact, the Ito family history does not carry evidence of any prominence in society, or feature any widely recognized figures (Ito, 1995).		
Criterion Assessment on traditional family background			-
b. Professions of parents	Father: Toyo Ito Sr. was a businessman in the textile industry, specifically dealing with the production and distribution of fabrics (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Fong, 2012; Ito, 1995).	Mother: Yoko Ito was initially a housewife. After the father's death, she became the proprietor of a successful miso (bean paste) making factory (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Fong, (2012).	The father's role as the proprietor of a small-scale business, and mother also following suit is suggestive of the family's middle class provenance. The elaboration by Bottomore (1993) that the traditional middle class is largely about engaging in non-manual labour occupations confirms this stratification. However, the entrepreneurial spirit demonstrated by the family arguably elevates it into the upper middle class, in the light of confirmation by Hughes (2002) that such ventures carry the potential to elevate social status.
Criterion assessment on professions of parents			Upper middle class
Social position assessment			Upper middle class
Elite assessment			None-elite

Table 10	Case Study No: 10		
	Year of Pritzker Prize: 2014		
	Name: Shigeru Ban		
	Year of Birth: 1957		
	Country of Birth: Japan		
	Birth Place: Tokyo		
	Nationality: Japanese		
Source: pritzkerprize.com (2024); (Jididio, 2020)			
Criteria	Recorded History		Justification
a. Traditional family background	Beyond his parents, the Ban family history does not carry evidence of any prominence in society, or feature any widely recognized figures (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Ban, 2014).		Owing to the lack of evidence, need to rely on (b).
Criterion Assessment on traditional family background			-
b. Professions of parents	Father: Ban Shigeru was as a wealthy businessman, and also a business executive at Toyota (Ban, 2014)	Mother: Ban Kyoko was a celebrated women's clothing designer involved in <i>haute couture</i> (high-end, custom-made fashion industry involves the creation of exclusive, hand-crafted clothing made to fit individual clients perfectly. Examples are Chanel, Dior, and Givenchy etc.) (Ban, 2014)	The father's position was at the executive level, whereas the mother's involvement was as a reputed designer in an industry catering to the elite. This is suggestive of the family's middle class provenance. The elaboration by Bottomore (1993) that the traditional middle class is largely about engaging in non-manual labour occupations confirms this stratification. However, being in non-manual occupations, and at the same time occupying managerial and free-lancer levels of it, confirm that the family represented the upper middle class stratum. This stratification is reinforces, in the light of confirmation by Robbins (2019) and Miller, 2013), that such upper managerial levels are quite possible without direct political influence.

Criterion assessment on professions of parents	Upper middle class	
Social position assessment	Upper middle class	
Elite assessment	None-elite	



Table 11	Case Study No: 11	
	Year of Pritzker Prize: 2018	
	Name: B. V. Doshi	
	Year of Birth: 1927	
	Country of Birth: India	
	Birth Place: Pune	
	Nationality: Indian	
Source: pritzkerprize.com (2024)		
Criteria	Recorded History	Justification
a. Traditional family background	Apart from his father inheriting two modest businesses from his predecessors, the Doshi family history does not carry evidence of any prominence in society, or feature any widely recognized figures (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Doshi, 1991).	Owing to the lack of evidence, need to rely on (b).
Criterion Assessment on traditional family background		-
b. Professions of parents	Father: Vikram Lal Doshi was a businessman in the textile industry (a textile merchant) and also engaged in the family furniture business. Both the successful businesses were inherited, and he was responsible for their considerable expansion (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Doshi, 1991; Hathaway, 2004).	Mother: Ayesha Doshi helped manage the family businesses, and also played a role as a social worker (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Doshi, 1991, Hathaway, 2004).
		The father's position as an owner of multiple small-scale businesses and the fact that the mother had multiple roles as the manager of family businesses (and also as a social worker) is suggestive of the family's middle class provenance. The elaboration by Bottomore (1993) that the traditional middle class is largely about engaging in non-manual labour occupations confirms this stratification. However, the entrepreneurial and philanthropic spirit demonstrated by the family arguably elevates it into the upper middle class, in the light of confirmation by Hughes (2002) that such ventures carry the potential to elevate social status.
Criterion assessment on professions of parents	Upper middle class	
Social position assessment	Upper middle class	
Elite assessment	None-elite	

Table 12		Case Study No: 12	
	Year of Pritzker Prize: 2019		
	Name: Arata Isozaki		
	Year of Birth: 1931		
	Country of Birth: Japan		
	Birth Place: Ōita		
	Nationality: Japanese		
Source: pritzkerprize.com (2024)			
Criteria	Recorded History		Justification
a. Traditional family background	Beyond his parents, the Isozaki family history does not carry evidence of any prominence in society, or feature any widely recognized figures (pritzkerprize.com, 2024; Arata, 1989).		Owing to the lack of evidence, need to rely on (b).
Criterion assessment on traditional family background			-
b. Professions of parents	Father: Isozaki Iwao was a small-time contractor in the building industry, and a small business holder who ran a successful transport company (Jodidio, 2015; Arata, 1989)	Mother: Isozaki Fumi was a home-maker (Jodidio, 2015; Arata, 1989)	The father's position as an owner of multiple small-scale businesses is suggestive of the family's middle class provenance. The elaboration by Bottomore (1993) that the traditional middle class is largely about engaging in non-manual labour occupations confirms this stratification. However, the entrepreneurial spirit demonstrated by the family arguably elevates it into the upper middle class, in the light of confirmation by Hughes (2002) that such ventures carry the potential to elevate social status.
Criterion assessment on professions of parents			Upper middle class
Social position assessment			Upper middle class
Elite assessment			None-elite

Summary:

In summary, this research reveals that the architects who won the Pritzker Prize from the broader Asian region between 1983-2023, have not all come from elite backgrounds. In fact, the majority of them have come from non-elite backgrounds although they have eventually been recognised as starchitects. Table 13 below shows this clearly.

Table 13: Architects from the broader Asian region who won the Pritzker Prize

Source: Author

Case Study No.	Name of Architect/s	Year of Pritzker Prize	Social Position Assessment	Elite Assessment
01	Leoh Ming Pei (I. M. Pei)	1983	Political class	Elite
02	Kenzō Tange	1987	Working class	Non-elite
03	Fumihiko Maki	1993	Inconclusive	Inconclusive
04	Tadao Ando	1995	Working class	Non-elite
05	Zaha Hadid	2004	Governing elite	Elite
06	Ryue Nishizawa	2010	Middle class	Non-elite
07	Kzuyo Sejima	2010	Working class	Non-elite
08	Wang Shu	2012	Middle class	Non-elite
09	Toyo Ito	2013	Upper middle class	Non-elite
10	Shigeru Ban	2014	Upper middle class	Non-elite
11	B. V. Doshi	2018	Upper middle class	Non-elite

12	Arata Isozaki	2019	Upper middle class	Non-elite
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Conclusions

This paper concludes the following. Architecture has traditionally been an elite profession. It is contended that its elite status is still being maintained the world over via prestigious prizes in architecture. The recipients of such prizes in turn become Starchitects; a small minority among the architectural fraternity.

The objectives of the research were met as follows. The first objective finds confirmation in terms of an impressive number of 12 broader Asian region architects winning the Pritzker Prize in 11 cycles, out of 46 cycles altogether. The second objective was met in the following manner. By assessing social positions of 12 case study starchitects, the study establishes that one architect came from a governing elite background and another from political class, whereas 6 were drawn from a middle class background. Out of the architects belonging to the middle class, 4 in fact belonged to the upper middle class. Moreover, from the considered group, another 3 belonged to the working class. The social position of one architect remained inconclusive. The fairly even distribution of numbers across the upper middle class, middle class and working class here is noteworthy. This justifies the fact that a majority came from a sub-elite middle class backgrounds.

The thirds objective was achieved as follows. The study confirmed that out of the case studies, only 2 architects could be associated to have elite positions (the ones belonging to the governing elite and the political class), whereas the ten others are of non-elite positions. Therefore, the hypothesis of the study was not validated. It is hence concluded that the Pritzker Prize does not directly promote elitism in the profession of architecture. This finding consequently does not supplement the aim the study to establish that the most coveted prizes of world architecture are awarded to Starchitects with an affinity towards elitism.

This study has a number of limitations. First, it excludes considerations of education—primary, secondary, and tertiary—of the architects in question, and does not assess whether they attended prestigious elite schools. Secondly, the study does not consider the prestigious apprenticeships that the architects may have undertaken. Finally, the study does not address the locations where the architects settled and practiced before becoming starchitects. These factors all have been deliberately omitted with justifications. Therefore, additional research is needed to accurately determine the relations between prestigious architectural awards and the elitism of architects. The finding that the majority of Pritzker Prize winners from the broader Asian region are of Japanese origin (9 out of 12 laureates) presents an opportunity for future research to explore the underlying reasons for this phenomenon.

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