This is the version of the chapter accepted for publication in Cooke, Samantha, (ed.), *Non-Western Global Theories of International Relations*, 2022, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 103-132
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84938-2_5
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An East Asian Theory of Democracy

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East Asia, which proudly self-identifies as the "non-West," offers rich empirical evidence to test the validity of Western theories of democracy, and to generate new theories on the contested subject. The region, which comprises of 18 countries/territories,[1] hosts consolidated democracies, pseudo-democracies (or electoral democracies) and resilient authoritarian regimes. Compared to Western countries, the historical root for democracy in East Asia is shallow: the Philippines, Mongolia, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia underwent democratic transition relatively recently: in the 1980s–1990s, a period which Huntington (1991) described as the global "third wave of democratization." Four decades down the road, their democracies are in distress: some are discredited by national corruption scandals, some still struggle to consolidate, others have retrograded to populist authoritarianism or military-led government.

Of course, it is plausible to generalize the low democratic legitimacy in East Asia as part of the global democratic recession in the past decade (Diamond 2015). But this is only a part of the story. The entrenched conservative and pragmatist value system across the region, which is reinforced by a patriarchal style of governance and popular authoritarian nostalgia and legitimated by the enviable economic success of Singapore and China — both make no secret of their disdain of political liberalism — may provide useful clues for why democracy, as in the Western sense of free elections and rights protection, has yet to gain unquestionable acceptance in much of the region.

In addition to asking why the political realities in East Asia do not conform neatly to the expectations of Western theories of democracy, students of international politics should also enquire if there is an East Asian framework of democracy, both in theory and practice. Researching these questions has the potential to shed light on the possible biases, implicit assumptions, and explanatory boundaries of Western theories of democracy. Furthermore, it could contribute vocabularies to make sense of the perplexing politics in a region that is not only the world's fastest growing, but also geopolitically salient.

Adopting a cultural analytical framework, this chapter maintains that there is an East Asian Theory of Democracy, which is embraced by regional elites and ordinary citizens attitudinally. This argument is developed over four sections. The first section provides a historically informed and contemporary overview of the condition of democracy (or the lack thereof) in every East Asian polity. The second section assesses the explanatory purchase of Western theories of democracy in the region. The third section presents the East Asian Theory of Democracy based on analyzing the results of public opinion surveys and the regional elitist and societal discourse on democracy. The fourth section examines leading theories of authoritarian resilience — which were all formulated in a non-Western context –– as institutional and structural explanations of persistent democratic deficit in East Asia.

I. Democracies, pseudo-democracies and authoritarian regimes in East Asia

East Asia is a region of political heterogeneity. It is home to democracies (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Mongolia), pseudo-democracies (Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar), and various types of authoritarian regimes, including: absolute monarchy (Brunei), strong-man dictatorship (Cambodia) and Communist one-party states (China, North Korea, Laos and Vietnam). The categorization of regime types here follows the relevant

[1] In this chapter, East Asia includes 18 polities: 8 in Northeast Asia — Japan, South Korea, North Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, China, Hong Kong and Macao in Northeast Asia; 10 in Southeast Asia — Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

conventions in political science (Dahl 2000; Schumpeter 1976). Democracies are polities with free, fair and regular elections, accompanied by a deep respect for civil and political liberties. Pseudo-democracies have a democratic form but are lacking in democratic substance. There are elections but no meaningful political competition. Major human rights violations exist alongside the protection of rights that are deemed non-threatening to the regime. Authoritarian regimes feature power monopoly by the political incumbent: there are no popular elections at the national level, opposition political parties are outlawed, and grave human rights violation are commonplace. The 2019 Freedom House rankings of East Asian polities are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 The 2019 Freedom House rankings of East Asian polities

Countries/territories	Political rights score (0–40 points)	Civil liberties score (0–60 points)	Total score (0–100 points)	Status
Democracies				
Japan	40	56	96	
Taiwan	37	56	93	Free
Mongolia	36	48	84	
South Korea	33	50	83	
Pseudo-democracies				
Indonesia	30	31	61	
Philippines	25	34	59	
Hong Kong	16	39	55	
Malaysia	21	31	52	Partly free
Singapore	19	31	50	
Thailand	6	26	32	
Myanmar	14	16	30	
Macao	-	-	-	-
Authoritarian regimes				
Brunei	7	21	28	
Cambodia	5	20	25	
Vietnam	3	17	20	Not free
Laos	2	12	14	
China	-1	11	10	

Source: Freedom in the world 2019, Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores

Democracies

The only four East Asian countries rated "free" by Freedom House in 2019 were Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Mongolia. They have significant records of popular elections that lead to peaceful power transfer, as well as a comparatively strong protection of political and civil liberties. However, there is also evidence of democratic deficit. In the Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit in the same year, the four polities were classified as "flawed democracies."

Japan, the oldest democracy in East Asia, experienced centuries of militarism before being defeated at the Second World War in 1945, which ensured the external imposition of democracy. During the post-war period of US occupation (1949–1952), General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, implemented a joint-programme of demilitarization-cum-democratization in the hope of forestalling future Japanese aggression (Williams 1988). The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)

has ruled the country largely continuously since it was founded under US support in 1955. The only feasible political opposition — Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) — won a parliamentary majority in 2009, breaking the LDP's political monopoly. Yet, popularity for the DPJ plummeted in the next four years due to its many serious blunders. Political power returned to the LDP in the parliamentary election in 2012, where it won a landslide victory, leaving the DPJ with a meagre 12% of seats. Other than the relative lack of checks and balances over the LDP, recent challenges to Japanese democracy included "ethnic and gender-based discriminations and claims of improperly close relations between government and business sector" (Freedom House 2020a).

Prior to democratic transition in 1987, South Korea and Taiwan were heavy-handed autocracies that were under the rule of, respectively, the military and the Kuomintang (KMT or the Nationalist Party), for nearly three decades, following independence from repressive Japanese colonialism. Elections in democratic South Korea and Taiwan were always hotly contested, which resulted in regular rotation of powers between rivalrous political parties. The outstanding challenges to their democracies were corruption and cronyism. The severity of these problems was exposed in the scandals that disgraced Park Geun-hye, former South Korean president (2010–2017), and Chen Shui-bian, former Taiwan President (2000–2008), bringing the elected institutions of these polities into disrepute (Chang and Chu 2017). Democracy in Taiwan is under the shadow of extensive anxiety over perceived mainland Chinese attempts of political subversion. The Sunflower Movement in 2014 saw protestors, mostly students, occupying the legislature to demand a full committee review for a trade agreement with mainland China (Rowen 2015).

Mongolia, a client state of the Soviet Union for seven decades, had its first free, multi-party elections after a peaceful democratic revolution in 1990, a time where the Soviet Union was preoccupied with internal turmoil. Corruption has flourished alongside with the discovery of natural resources since the early 2000s, which created a lucrative mining industry. The credibility of the 2016 parliamentary election was tainted by accusations of irregularities. The latest major signal of political tightening was the passage of a controversial law granting some national leaders, including the president, power to dismiss the prosecutor general and head of the anti-corruption agency without justification in 2019 (Sambuu and Menarndt 2019).

Pseudo-democracies

The political systems of Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar can be described as "pseudo-democracies," "electoral democracies," "competitive authoritarianism" or "hybrid regimes."

Hong Kong, a former British colony, and Macao, a former Portuguese colony, reverted to Chinese rule in 1997 and 1999 respectively, becoming China's only two "special administrative regions" (SARs). Both were promised a high degree of autonomy for at least 50 years under the constitutional principle of "One Country, Two Systems." Yet, political rights in the SARs deteriorated over the years as the local governments actively pursued a policy of economic integration with authoritarian China. The erosion of freedom was especially obvious in Hong Kong, where local sellers of books critical of the mainland Chinese regime were disappeared, pro-democracy politicians were stripped of their elected office in 2016, and prominent dissidents were disqualified from contesting in elections ever since. The recent large-scale pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong — Umbrella Movement (aka the "Occupy Central Movement") in 2014 and Anti-Extradition Bill Protest in 2019–2020 — were met with violent police repression (Lam and Cooper 2018; Hale 2019). Compared to Hong Kong, the political opposition

in Macao is significantly more docile. The Macao government has been able to co-opt society with the bustling casino industry, which employed 30% of the population (as of 2019) and contributed significantly to the annual cash redistribution scheme for permanent residents, the value of which in 2019 was $1253, being over half the median monthly income of the local workforce (Kwong 2017).

Singapore, which declared independence from Malaysia in 1965, has been governed by the People's Action Party (PAP) founded by Lee Kuan Yew, who was Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990. The space for political mobilization is severely restricted not only by laws and regulations, but also by the legal activism of the PAP, which routinely sues its political opponents, causing some to bankrupt. Political opposition surged following the death of Lee Kuan Yew in 2015. The parliamentary election held six months afterwards saw every seat contested for the first time in the city-state's history. Despite intense political competition, the PAP won a landslide victory, losing only six seats. In 2017, the sons of Lee Kuan Yew openly criticized their brother, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, for power abuse, and the PAP for "losing its way" (Koh 2020). One of them even endorsed an opposition party — Progressive Singapore Party (PSP) — which was formed by PAP defector, Tan Cheng Bock. The PSP was expected to form a united opposition coalition to challenge the PAP in the next general election (Koh 2020).

In Malaysia, the Barisan National (BN) coalition, which had ruled the country since its independence in 1957, and maintained political monopoly by "manipulating electoral districts, appealing to ethnic nationalism, and suppressing criticism," lost to Pakatan Harapan (PH) — an opposition alliance led by Mahathir Mohamad, BN's long-time leader and Prime Minister (1981–2003) in the 2018 general election (Freedom House 2020b). Voters hoped that PH would democratize Malaysian politics, but it soon succumbed to factionalism. The alliance collapsed in 2020, with Mohamad being ousted, the future of Malaysia's democracy has been shrouded in uncertainty.

In the Philippines, the People's Power Movement — an uprising involving over 500,000 Filipinos — toppled President Ferdinand Marco's corrupt and brutal dictatorship in 1986. However, democracy in the Philippines has never been consolidated. The government was weak, corrupt, and manipulated elections. Violent crimes were commonplace; terrorist attacks were on the surge. Rodrigo Duterte, an illiberal populist who promised to provide public safety through a violent anti-drug campaign, was elected president in 2014, winning support from the elites and middle class. The campaign resorted to extrajudicial means, killing 12,000 Filipinos, mostly poor, to date (Thompson 2016; Human Rights Watch 2019).

Democratic transition in Indonesia was triggered by the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, which led to massive unemployment. Six months into the crisis, the Indonesian rupiah was already devalued by 80%. The economic troubles culminated to a serious split in the leadership and the May 1998 riots, which ended the three-decade dictatorship of President Suharto, who, by some estimate, set the record of the world's most corrupt political leader. Post-Suharto Indonesia is a classic example of "oligarchic democracy": entrepreneurs entered politics through election manipulation and crony ties, which allowed them to bypass bureaucratic elites to tap into state resources directly (Fukuoka 2012).

Thailand has been trapped in a "vicious election/coup cycle," alternating between "weak democracy and dictatorship," since shortly after it transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in 1932 (Tonsakulrungruang 2019). The 2014 coup — which, by some estimate, is the 20th of the country — ousted the democratically elected Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. Back in 2006, her brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, who was also democratically elected to be Prime Minister, was likewise displaced by a coup. They were both convicted of corruption and were in self-imposed exile. After the 2014 coup, the military delayed general election, which was finally held in 2019 in

accordance to the amended constitution in 2017, which institutionalized significant military participation in Thai politics. Hence, pundits referred to the elected government as a "parliamentary dictatorship." (Tonsakulrungruang 2019).

The military has dominated Myanmar's politics since 1962, and begun political liberalization in 2010: releasing Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) after 15 years of house arrest, granting amnesties for over 200 political prisoners, and liberalizing media control. The NLD won the 2015 general election, being the first openly contested election of the country since 1990. Aung San Suu Kyi became the State Counsellor as a result. Widely celebrated as an icon for democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi was a huge disappointment to the international community. She defended regime-sponsored atrocities towards ethnic and religious minorities in the Kachin, Rakhine and Shan states. The brutality against the Rohingya minorities in the Rakhine state led to more than 300,000 refugees fleeing to neighbouring Bangladesh. It was condemned by the United Nations as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" (UN News 2017).

Authoritarian regimes

Absolute monarchy

Brunei, a small oil-dependent nation with a population of only 459,500 (as according to official estimates for 2019), is an absolute monarchy that dates to 1363. No elections have been held since 1984. It is often said that "the sultan is the state and the state is the sultan." The hereditary sultan, who rules by sharia law, is the prime minister, defence minister, finance minister and minister of foreign affairs. He also appoints legislators (Dosch and Sidhu 2019, 204–205).

Strong-man dictatorship

In Cambodia, a UN intervention in 1993 resulted in multi-party elections, funding for civil society organizations, and a liberal constitution. However, democracy has gained little traction. It has, as Un (2019: 1) observed, "perpetuated a state dominated by clientelism and rent-seeking, producing a government with weak administrative capacity but strong in coercive capacity." Political power has been monopolized by the Cambodia People's Party (CPP) since 1993. In 2017, Cambodia's "electoral authoritarianism" deteriorated to what Un (2019) referred to as "hegemonic electoral authoritarianism" as the CPP outlawed the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), its principal political rival, ensuing a complete victory in the parliamentary election in the subsequent year.

Communist one-party states

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has governed China since founding the country as a communist people's republic and forcing the KMT to flee Taiwan in 1949. There are eight "democratic parties" in China, all pledge support to the leadership of the CCP, and serve an advisory function in government policymaking. Since the adoption of market reforms in the early 1980s, periodic direct elections have been held at the grassroots level — village committee elections in villages and residents' committee elections in cities. These elections should not be mistaken for transfer of power, as the elected were responsible for implementing the CCP's policies, and for community surveillance (Guan and Cai 2019). Xi Jinping, CCP General Secretary and state President, has revived heavy-handed authoritarian tactics to govern China since 2012. These included the launching an aggressive anti-corruption campaign, mass detention of Uyghurs minorities in Xinjiang, mass arrest of human rights lawyers, and the demolition of Christian churches. (Economy 2018).

North Korea, which is notorious for its missiles, has been ruled by the communist Worker's Party of Korea (WPK) since the mid-1940s. It is a dynastic totalitarian dictatorship monopolized by the family of Kim II-sung, the first leader of the country. There has been some limited economic liberalization under Kim Jong-un, grandson of Kim II-sung, since 2011. However, citizens are still denied of basic freedom, placed under mass surveillance, and are forced to worship Kim II-sung, who was propagated as a demi-god (Buzo 2018).

Laos has been under the communist Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) since 1975, which is the sole legal political party in the country. Growing economic freedom since the 1980s has not translated to political freedom. The political strength of the LPRP government was buttressed by "the lack of credible opposition; the virtual absence of student, labour or other forms of grassroots activism; the close connections between business and party elites; and government control of information. While grievances over corruption are growing and the public is sceptical of state pronouncements, the absence of alternative political organizations and attendant political constraints has prevented the translation of grievances into social protests'" (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2006, 114, cited in Creak and Barney 2018, 698).

Compared to Laos, there is a much greater degree of political pluralism in Vietnam, which threatens to challenge the hegemony of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), the country's only authorized party that has been in charge since 1945. In his book about contentious politics in Vietnam, Kerkvliet (2019: 93-94) argued that market reform in Vietnam has "reduced authorities' hold over people's lives and contributed to an increasingly varied civil society;" moreover, in recent years, popular perception that the CPV is conceding to China's interests has become "a huge aggravation to numerous dissidents."

Key concepts

1. Democracies, pseudo-democracies, and authoritarian regimes are the three regime types in East Asia, according to the level of political rights and freedoms citizens enjoy, from most to least. The subtypes of authoritarian regimes in East Asia are absolute monarchy, strong-man dictatorship, and communist one-party states. They reflect various levels of concentration of political powers in the hands of one, several or a small group of individuals. One-party states have the highest level of power-sharing among political elites in the regime.

2. Democratic transition refers to the process in which former authoritarian regimes liberalize their political system to allow for organized political competition. Increases in human rights protection accompanies this process. Democratic consolidation refers to the entrenchment of democracy as the only legitimate form of government. Despite popular dissatisfaction toward government performance in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, their democracies are consolidated to the point that authoritarian reversal is unlikely.

II. Western theories, eastern realities?

The review of the political situation of East Asian countries above demonstrates that democracy has yet to become the dominant political system in the region. This section shows that the most influential Western theory of democracy — modernization theory — has limited success in explaining East Asian democratization. It begins with an examination of the evidence supporting and challenging the applicability of the modernization theory in the region. It is demonstrated that the income inequality model, an outgrowth of the modernization theory, provides plausible explanations for why many East Asian countries failed to achieve democratic transition or consolidation. Other explanations of why

East Asian countries defy the expectations of the modernization theory, including oil abundance, ethnic and religious divisions, consumerism and state-led economic growth, are also considered.

Modernization theory expects a strong positive correlation between economic development and democracy. As stated by Lipset (1959, 75), "the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy." Economic growth alters the social structure from the shape of a pyramid –– in which the lower class is the majority — to that a diamond — in which the middle class forms the majority (Muller 1997, 134, cited in Chen 2013, 151). The middle class is expected to be democracy supporters, either out of a pursuit of postmaterialist values — which is made possible because their survival needs have been satisfied (Inglehart and Flanagan 1987), and out of a desire to defend their collective self-interest, such as taxation and property rights, through influencing the government (Moore 1966). There are also other reasons why the middle class is considered to be uniquely placed to be torchbearers of democracy: compared to the lower class, they have significantly more resources — money, time, knowledge and social capital — to participate in politics. Unlike the upper class, they seldom have direct benefit from collusive ties with the regime, hence pre-empting a potential conflict of personal interest.

So, the question becomes, can modernization theory explain democratic transition or the lack thereof in East Asia? Let's begin with an examination of the supporting evidence. First, three of the four democracies in the region — Japan, South Korea and Taiwan — are high-income countries. Second, four of the six East Asian countries that became democratic during the "third wave of democratization" — Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea and Taiwan — enjoyed unprecedented economic growth since the 1960s, which saw a significant expansion of the size of their middle class (World Bank 1993). Third, nearly all East Asian countries, except Japan, have experienced GDP growth in the past decade, the majority of which hold popular national elections regularly, though some are more competitive than others. Brunei, China, Vietnam, Laos and North Korea are the only exceptions to this pattern. All these seem to demonstrate a positive relationship between economic growth and democratization.

Yet, modernization theory fails to explain the enduring political anomalies in the region. First, high-income Brunei and upper-middle-income China and Vietnam are authoritarian. Arguably, the lack of democratic transition in Brunei and the democratic reversal in Mongolia can be explained by their oil abundance — something that displayed strong, negative correlations with democratization throughout the Middle East and Africa (Ross 2001). However, this explanation does not apply to China and Vietnam, which are not oil-rich countries. Second, democracy in Singapore, Hong Kong and Macao — all high-income economies — is not consolidated. As pointed out by Diamond (2012, 7), Singapore is the "most economically developed non-democracy in the history of the world." Third, the authoritarian regimes are robust in East Asian countries that have reached Huntington's (1984) "democratic transition zone," where the GDP per capita lay between \$1000–\$7000. China, which entered the zone back in the 1980s, remains to be an authoritarian regime. Regarding the Chinese anomaly, Pei (2006, 19) commented: "contrary to the assumption that high economic growth can generate more favourable conditions for political opening, rising prosperity can actually remove the pressure for democratization."

Currently, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are in the transition zone. One might argue that Myanmar is a supporting case for modernization theory because of the political liberalization it carried out in the past decade. However, how can we explain the grave human rights violations under Aung San Suu Kyi, which invited an outpour of international criticisms, but did not seem to have bothered the middle class there much? It was likely that the Burmese middle class' apathy towards the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya minorities had to do with deep-seated ethnic and religious divisions in the country, which

are proven to obstruct democratic consolidation as much as state-building (Horowitz 1993). However, even if there is a satisfactory explanation for the attitude of the Burmese middle class, how can we account for the democratic apathy of the middle class in the vast majority of East Asian countries?

There are two general explanations of why the middle class fails to defend democracy. First, Chua (2010) finds that the middle class tend to stay loyal to the state, whether it is democratic, insofar as their "consumption desire can be satisfied." The East Asian middle class perceives their ability to consume to be dependent on the state's ability to generate growth, given the presence of one or more of the following features in the national economy: the implementation of a national industrial policy, the use of state subsidies to build up major conglomerates as internationally competitive "national champions" in strategic sectors, and a substantial state sector. These features are largely legacies of the developmental state model adopted by the high-growing East Asian economies during the Cold War, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia (Stubbs 2009). A large state sector and centralized economic planning are the hallmarks of socialist and post-socialist regimes, including China, North Korea, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar (Eaton 2016). Given the predominance of the state in the economy of these countries, it is truly the case that their middle class depend on the state to satisfy their consumption desire. In other words, the East Asian middle class have traded political freedom for economic well-being.

Second, the attitude of the middle class towards democracy is "contingent upon some salient socio-economic conditions…such as dependence on the state, perceived socioeconomic wellbeing, political alliance with other classes, internal fragmentation, etc." (Chen 2013, 6). Another Western theory of democracy, which updates the modernization theory with a game theoretic model to study the effect of multiple decision-makers interacting strategically, may offer the answer. According to Acemoglu and Robinson (2000), democratization is more likely only if the expansion of the middle class does not take place alongside a massive increase in social inequality. If society is highly unequal, the prospect of democracy can look extremely threatening to the middle class, who are likely to fear that mass enfranchisement will empower the poor, thus threatening their privileged position.

For example, the Thai middle class have acquired a reputation of an "anti-democratic force" in the Western press. In 2006, the middle-class residents of Bangkok, the country's richest city, overwhelmingly supported the military coup that displaced the elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra, who was well-loved by the poor not only for his charisma, but also his redistributive policies. Once again, in 2014, the Thai middle class supported the military coup to oust Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister who pursued the political agenda of her exiled brother (Chachavalpongpun 2017).

In the case of China, Wright (2010) found that its socialist legacies, which privileged citizens with an urban residence registration over those with rural residence registration, engendered deep-seated and institutionalized class divisions. Since the beginning of the post-Mao economic reforms in 1978, the majority of rural-registered citizens have mass-migrated from villages to cities to take up low-skilled jobs. While they have provided the much-needed labour to support China's export-oriented growth, their presence has also contributed to the over-congestion of cities. Governments in cities have denied rural migrant workers to access public resources there. It is no wonder why the Chinese middle class, whose residence registration are urban, view the potential expansion of the rights and freedoms of their rural counterparts with scepticism. These sentiments help explain why the middle class in China are extremely unlikely to unite with the lower class to fight for democratic change.

III. An East Asian theory of democracy

As we have seen in the first two sections, democracy faces outstanding challenges in East Asia. Given that democracy is a contested concept, it is wise to take a step back to ask how East Asians understand democracy in the first place. After all, if their perceptions of democracy deviate from that of the West significantly, it would make little sense to expect Western theories of democracy to have much analytical utility, if at all, in the region. This line of reasoning is within the rubrics of political cultural studies, which expects cross-cultural variations in beliefs, values and attitudes as the norm, rather than exceptions (Almond and Verba 1963). Based on analysing the results of public opinion surveys and local discourse on democracy, this chapter presents an East Asian Theory of Democracy. It finds that an East Asian Theory of Democracy prioritizes public goods provision over representative institutions and rights protection, and is underpinned by conservative cultural values supported by state patriarchalism, authoritarian nostalgia, and the economic success of Singapore and China.

Instrumental support for democracy

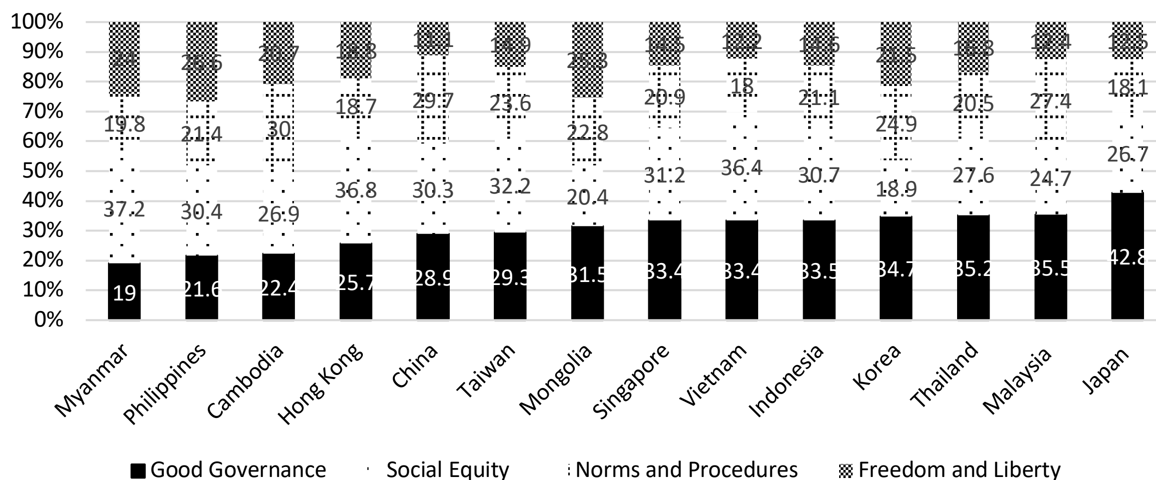
Asian Barometer is the most comprehensive public opinion survey that focuses on East Asia to date. Four waves of surveys, which interviewed East Asian nationals in 14 different East Asian countries — including democracies, pseudo-democracies and authoritarian regimes — were conducted in 2002–2003, 2005–2007, 2010–2011 and 2014–2016. A puzzling finding was consistently discovered: Respondents from authoritarian regimes — that is, polities without election and with grave human rights violation — rated the democratic performance of their autocratic regimes highly. By contrast, respondents from democracies — that is, polities with free, fair and regular elections, and robust rights protection — expressed disappointment at the quality of democracy at their home countries. Some may reconcile this apparent contradiction by pointing out that citizens from an authoritarian setting were socialized into expressing regime-supporting attitudes, while citizens from democracies were able to speak their minds freely. However, since these biases were rigorously addressed in the design and implementation of Asian Barometer, their impact on the survey findings were mitigated to a large extent in reality. This shows that the perceptions of democracy among East Asians indeed varied according to regime types. Notwithstanding this divergence, it was found that there were also significant similarities in how East Asians, from all regime types and age groups, understood democracy.

Based on open-ended questions, Asian Barometer researchers discovered four components in the East Asian conception of democracy, being: good governance, social equality, norms and procedures, and freedom and liberty. “Good governance” refers to the provision of political goods, such as quality public services and public order efficiently and without corruption. “Social equality” stands for the narrowing of the wealth gap between the rich and poor, and the protection of the disadvantaged and lower social class, such as unemployment benefits, a minimum wage, etc. “Norms and procedures” algin closely to the procedural definition of democracy proposed by Schumpeter (1976), which features free and fair elections for government leaders, competitive multiparty elections, a legislature that has oversight powers over the government, etc. “Freedom and liberty” reflect the substantive definition of democracy summarized by Dahl (2000), which emphasizes robust protection of human rights, the rights of minority groups in particular.

The democracy indexes that are compiled by Western organizations, such as Freedom House, Economist Intelligence Unit and the Polity IV project, focus almost exclusively on “norms and procedures” and “freedom of liberty,” implying an intrinsic/normative commitment to democracy, where democracy is seen as desirable as an end in itself. The Asian Barometer surveys found that this Western perspective of democracy is shallow in East Asia, where an instrumentalist perspective of

democracy focusing on good governance and social equality prevailed. The support of East Asians for democracy was conditional on the delivery of desirable public goods. This was demonstrated very clearly in the fourth wave of Asian Barometer. As presented in Graph 1 below, to the exception of Cambodia, over 50% of respondents from all countries in East Asia believed “good governance” or “social equality” were more important than “norms and procedures” and “freedom and liberty” when asked what they thought the “essential characteristics of democracy” were.

Graph 1: How do East Asians Understand the Meaning of Democracy



Source: Asian Barometer Survey, http://www.asianbarometer.org/survey/survey-timetable

Conservative cultural values

The instrumentalist support for democracy in East Asia has its roots in conservative cultural values, which were bolstered by state patriarchalism, authoritarian nostalgia, as well as the success stories of Singapore and China. To begin with, the prevailing cultural system in East Asia originates from Confucianism, “an ethical system and humanistic worldview that places great emphasis on forms of conduct within relations, and on personal virtue, obedience to authority, family loyalty, social harmony end education” (Barr 2002, 5). Confucianism refers to the hierarchical moral doctrines expounded by Confucius (551–479 BC), the revered ancient philosopher. It views state and society as one harmonious entity, in contrast to the Western liberal notion of state-society relationship, which conceives of society as a “bulwark against the state” (Breslin 2003, 172).

Roderick MacFarquhar (1980, 72) wrote that Confucianism is “essentially a philosophic justification of government by benevolent bureaucracy under a virtuous ruler.” He called East Asians “heirs to Confucianism,” and compared their reliance on Confucianism as an “inner moral compass” to the “admonitions of the Sermon of the Mount” in the West. Examples of Confucianism being put in practice are commonplace in East Asian society and can include three generations of a family living under one roof, the family (rather than the state or market) being the chief source of welfare provision,

a high level of household saving, a strong respect for knowledge and intellectuals, and harmonious corporate relations.

Drawing heavily on Confucianism, East Asian leaders — beginning with Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohammad, the long-lasting Prime Ministers of, respectively, Singapore and Malaysia — advocated the concept of "Asian values." Lee stated: "…we were an Asian-Oriental-type society, hardworking, thrifty and discipline, a people with Asian values, strong family ties and responsibility for the extended family which is a common feature of Asian cultures, whether Chinese, Malay or Indian" (cited in Barr 2002, 3). While the political manipulation of "Asian values" was not without its critics (famously, Sen 1997), it is hard to dispute that East Asian leaders were adept at using "Asian values" to inculcate a strong sense of civic duties, and to sugar-coat their non-democratic governance as meritocratic managerialism that is non-partisan and strive for the greatest benefit for all.

State patriarchalism

Callahan (2006, 75) reasons that pursuing democracy according to "Asian values" amounts to a "grand decolonial project of imagining Asia as a community separate from the West." The nationalistic imperative was essential for building national unity, which was essential as most East Asian countries were faced with a difficult period of state-building in the post-war period, after enduring prolonged Western colonialism. Ironically, the attitudes of patriarchy embedded in how colonial governments ruled their colonies were sustained in the East Asian Theory of Democracy, which was used by the East Asian elites as a "cultural governance device" to "buttress a patriarchal state that feminizes and youth-izes society: transforming citizens into capricious 'women-and-children' who cannot be responsible for their actions" (Callahan 2006, 75).

It was under the influence of this patriarchal attitude, whether self-consciously, that many East Asian governments and citizens rejected liberal democracy. It was criticized for its "degenerative effects," being the precursor of moral decay, political infighting, and chaos — all could compromise economic growth and public goods provision, which East Asians valued very highly, as revealed by the Asian Barometer surveys. Therefore, it was unsurprising that the Laotian government contrasted Laos' political stability with the contentious politics of neighbouring Thailand and Myanmar (Creak and Barney 2018, 698). Amidst protracted political gridlock between the pro-Thaksin "red shirts" and anti-Thaksin "yellow shirts," Thai General Prayut Chan-o-cha said in 2014 that his military coup was necessary "for the country to return to normality quickly, and for society to love and be at peace again" (Hodal 2014).

Also couched in a language of stability and order was the Chinese Party-state's massive propaganda campaign to discredit Hong Kong's large-scale pro-democracy protests in 2014 and 2019–2020, which were smeared as irrational, counter-productive, and poisonous to the society and economy. Their message resonated with many mainland Chinese citizens. An outpour of condemnation against the Hong Kong protestors, and self-righteous critiques of Western liberal democracy, dominated the content of Chinese social media websites throughout the entire duration of the protests. Between September to December in 2019, in an apparently spontaneous and self-mobilized fashion, mainland Chinese students studying in Europe, the United States and Oceania organized counter-protests to demonstrate support for the Hong Kong police for restoring law and order to the politically restless city (Power 2019). It is noteworthy that the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong alienated not only mainland Chinese, but also Singaporeans, who were likewise weary of chaos, and questioned the wisdom of confronting the government (Lok 2019). All these seemed to hark back to an influential remark made by Lee Kuan Yew more than two decades ago: "In the East the main object is to have a

well-ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms. The freedom can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy" (Zakaria 1994, 111).

Authoritarian nostalgia

Besides a strong preference for stability and order under the influence of Confucianism/Asian values, conservative cultural values in East Asia were also sustained by widespread authoritarian nostalgia (Chu, Chang and Park 2007). In East Asian countries, citizens recall the rapid industrialization in the region from the mid-1960s to early 1990s, a period of authoritarianism, with fondness, especially in view of the deficiencies of their post-authoritarian governments, whether pseudo-democracies or democracies.

The latest Korea Democracy Barometer (KDB), a public opinion survey conducted in 2010, reported solid support for Park Chung-hee's military dictatorship (1944–1963) in South Korea. Park nurtured a group of family-run business conglomerates, including the world-famous Samsung, Hyundai, LG and Lotte, by limiting the number of companies per industry, using state subsidies to reward high-performers, and imposing stringent conditions to control capital flight (Amsden 1989). More than one-third of the KDB 2010 respondents said Park's government was the best government in South Korea after the 1960s. Nearly 95% of respondents believed that he played a positive role for South Korea's economic growth, a figure placing him well ahead of the scores of the elected governments of Kim Dae-jung (57%) and Roh Moo-hyun (59%). The Park Chung-hee nostalgia helped the election of his daughter, Park Guen-hye, as the first female president of South Korea in 2012 (Kang 2016, 51–53).

In Southeast Asia, nostalgia for military strong-men, Suharto and Marcos, were strong in Indonesia and the Philippines respectively. In the run-up to the 2014 Indonesian presidential election, tycoon Aburizal Bakrie, presidential nominee of Suharto's old Golkar party, launched a campaign on the basis of Suharto nostalgia, petitioning emphatically for a rehabilitation of Suharto's legacy, including granting him the "national hero" status posthumously (Strangio 2017). Bongbong Marcos, son of the Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos, successfully won local elections from 1992–1995, and again from 2007–2010. He lost only by 0.6% in the 2016 national vice-presidential election. When demanded by his political rivals to apologize for the political abuses of his father's regime, which put the country under martial law from 1972–1982, he replied: "Will I say sorry for the thousands and thousands of kilometres [of roads] that were built? Will I say sorry for the agricultural policy that brought us to self-sufficiency in rice? Will I say sorry for the [facilitates that Marcos built for] power generation? Will I say sorry for the highest literacy rate in Asia? What am I to say sorry about?" (Macraig 2015). While authoritarian nostalgia does not lead to democratic reversal automatically, the prevalence of these anti-democratic sentiments is certainly obstructive for democratic consolidation.

Success of Singapore and China

To many, whether from East Asia or not, the economic success of Singapore and China shows that a meritocratic and paternalistic one-party system can be preferable over democracy as a governance model for achieving political stability, economic growth, efficient policymaking, quality public goods, and global prestige (Ortmann and Thompson 2016).

Despite being a small city-state, Singapore is able to play a hugely influential role in the regional organization, the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), largely because regional states

have a deep respect for its remarkable development, which is recognized as crucial for promoting regional economic integration. The harmonious co-existence of multiple ethnic and religious communities in Singapore is world-famous, distinguishing it from numerous culturally diverse democracies. Singapore's public housing scheme, a flagship policy of the long-ruling PAP, was highly regarded as "phenomenally successful," contributing to home ownership for more than 90% of its residents (Phang 2007). All these characteristics earn Singapore, which sets strict limits on political and civil liberties, the title of an extraordinarily well-governed technocratic state.

The China Model refers to a pragmatic and depoliticized approach of development that emphasizes on "constant innovation and experimentation," "sustainable growth and even wealth distribution," as well as "self-determination," all under the unquestionable authority of the CCP, a staunchly nationalistic party that claims to represent the Chinese nation (Ramo 2004). When its human rights performance came under scrutiny, the CCP often drew attention to its poverty alleviation record, which has won international acclaim. According to Kwakwa (2019) from the World Bank, poverty alleviation under the CCP, which pulled 850 million Chinese citizens out of poverty since the early 1980s, was "unprecedented in its speed and sale." She said, it also had global significance, given that "China alone accounts for three-quarters of the reduction in global poverty from the 1980s to today." In a commentary widely circulated by the Chinese state media, Xiaohong Wang, a CCP-affiliated academic, wrote: western democratic systems had brought "endless power transitions and social chaos" in the former Soviet Union, Africa and the Middle East, while China's political system "has overcome all sorts of problems" (cited in Huang 2018).

Key concepts

1. In East Asia, an instrumental support for democracy suggests that citizens do not support democracy per se, but as a means toward good governance and social equality, which they value more highly than democratic procedures and human rights protection. The high level of instrumental support for democracy in the region reflects a weak democratic culture.

2. Deep-rooted cultural conservatism in East Asia is a main reason for the instrumental support for democracy in the region. It reflects the Confucian heritage of Northeast Asian countries and the legacy of late state-building and development under nationalistic and authoritarian governments after the second world war. Cultural conservatism has also been bolstered by regional states' attraction to the prosperity of Singapore and China, both of which promote the idea that meritocracy is a superior alternative to democracy.

IV. Theories of authoritarian resilience

While the weak performance of liberal democracy in East Asia defies the expectations of Western theories of democracy, it seems normal in the vast non-Western context. Of the 210 countries and territories rated by the Freedom House in 2019, over 60% were either pseudo-democracies or authoritarian regimes. The endurance of authoritarianism was also evident from the modest harvest of the Arab Spring. Of the 21 authoritarian Arab League member states, only six (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and Syria) experienced concerted challenges; in only four of them (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya) were the autocrats overthrown (Brownlee 2013). In view of the global context of democratic recession, this section examines the main theories of authoritarian resilience that were generated based on non-Western political realities, including the theory on authoritarian parties and western influence, both enjoy a far higher explanatory leverage in East Asia than do Western theories of democracy.

Comparative political scientists have argued that the party machinery has a positive effect on regime resilience. Brownlee (2007) demonstrated that ruling parties facilitate political co-optation, generate incentives for long-term loyalty and marginalise the opposition by, firstly, anchoring in an institutional setting that dispenses benefits for members of the coalition, and, secondly, regulating the pursuit of individual ambition within comprehensible rules. Svolik (2012) maintained that ruling parties are "effective instruments of authoritarian control" due to their three core institutional features: hierarchical assignment of service and benefits, political control over appointments, and selective recruitment and repression. Within ruling parties, the benefits of party membership concentrate at the senior ranks. To access these benefits, junior party members must first prove their political loyalty by performing costly and often lengthy service for the party. Svolik (2012: 163) argued that this serves to exploit the "opportunism and career aspirations of party members to create a stake in the perpetuation of the regime among the most productive and ideologically agreeable segments of the population." This effect is clearly discernible from China's CCP, Vietnam's CPV, Laos' LDRP, North Korea's WPK, Japan's LDP, and Singapore's PAP, all being one-party systems.

For example, the CCP machinery in China is often considered crucial to regime resilience for two main reasons. First, the Party exercises complete control over leadership appointment at all bureaucratic levels through the nomenklatura system of personnel management. Svolik's comparative analysis of authoritarian regimes suggests that the CCP's nomenklatura system represents "the most systematic form of administrative formalisation of benefits to party membership and service" (2012, 169). Specifically writing of the post-Mao context, Landry (2011) maintains that the nomenklatura system allows the Party centre to retain tight political control despite extensive fiscal and administrative decentralisation. Until the abolition of term limit for the state chairperson in March 2018, leadership succession in the CCP-state was perceived to have become increasingly norm-bound. It started with Deng Xiaoping imposing a term limit for the state President and an age limit for members of the Political Bureau of the Standing Committee of the CCP Central Committee (PBSC), the elitist organization at the apex of political power in China. Nathan (2003) found these rules to have bolstered regime resilience by increasing the importance of meritocracy (as distinguished from factional considerations) in leadership succession. Svolik (2012, 194) argued that the observance of these rules under state Presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao evinced the institutionalisation of collective leadership in the Party, which was conducive to credible power-sharing.

The theory of Western linkage and leverage, introduced by Levitsky and Way (2010), suggested that "competitive authoritarian" or "hybrid" regimes — that is, pseudo-democracies — are much more likely to transition into democracies if they maintain dense ties to the West, and that the West has strong leverage over them. This theory helped explain the democratic transition and consolidation of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, all being American allies. It also suggested that the rise of China, which offers an alternative source of political patronage, foreign investment, market access and financial assistance to the pseudo-democracies in East Asia, many capital thirsty, would undermine their receptivity to Western leverage, thus impedes their democratic consolidation. This is a highly plausible explanation for the lack of democratic consolidation in Hong Kong, Macao, Cambodia, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar. It also helped explain why Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen pursued the "New Southbound Policy" to promote trade with Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Australia, in order to dilute Taiwan's economic dependence on China (Marston and Bush 2018)

V. Conclusion

Democratic consolidation requires "broad and deep legitimation," such that "all significant political actors, at both the elite and mass levels, believe that the democratic regime is the most right and

appropriate for their society, better than any other realistic alternative they can imagine" (Diamond 1999, 65). Despite the high hopes on East Asia, which witnessed six authoritarian regimes embracing democratic institutions during the global "third wave of democratization" in the 1980s to 1990s, the region remains to be a stronghold for authoritarianism, where democracy is far from the "only game in town" (Linz and Stepan 1996, 15). In the region, the four democracies (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Mongolia) struggle with democratic legitimation, alongside with the eight pseudo-democracies (Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar), which display signs of democratic fragility. It does not seem like the six authoritarian regimes in the region (Brunei, Cambodia, China, North Korea, Laos and Vietnam) will democratize in the near future.

As a leading Western theory of democracy, modernization theory has limited ability in explaining the democratic performance in East Asia. Yet, this by no means suggests that all Western theories of democracy are useless in the region. In particular, the Western democratic theory which maintains a strong negative relationship between income inequality and democratization seems to be well-suited in explaining East Asian political realities. Having said that, in order to gain a more rounded understanding of the lack of democratic transition and consolidation in East Asia, it is necessary to go beyond Western theories of democracy by looking within East Asia, and by considering theories of authoritarian resilience, which are generated in a non-Western context. The former exercise reveals that East Asians have an instrumentalist view of democracy, which is underpinned by a set of conservative cultural values bolstered by state patriarchalism, authoritarian nostalgia, and jealousy at the success of Singapore and China. The latter exercise suggests that the ruling parties in East Asia are durable machines to sustain authoritarianism; furthermore, the rise of China weakens Western democratic influence on East Asian countries, therefore undermining their prospect of democratic consolidation.

Study questions

1. What are the similarities and differences of the political systems in East Asian countries?
2. What are the conditions for democratic consolidation, and are these conditions present in East Asia?
3. To what extent are Western theories of democracy applicable to East Asian countries?
4. How do East Asians understand the concept of democracy, and why do they understand democracy the ways they do?
5. Should we speak of a single East Asian Theory of Democracy, or are there multiple theories of democracy in East Asia?
6. Why do authoritarian regimes persist in East Asia?

Classroom activities

<u>Activity 1: Evaluating the effectiveness of different regime types in handling the Covid-19 pandemic</u>

The Covid-19 pandemic is a litmus test to government effectiveness in crisis management. In light of the instrumental support for democracy in East Asia, it is possible that perceptions of government mismanagement of the pandemic will undermine public support for democracy, while perceptions of effective government management will lead to the opposite effect. The same can also be said for support for the relationship between perceptions of government management of the pandemic and support for authoritarianism in authoritarian regimes.

Divide the class into groups, which each group "adopting" a country representing different regime types and subtypes across East Asia. Each group researches into 1) how each country responds to the Covid-19 pandemic, 2) evaluates the extent to which their response was an outcome of their regime type, and 3) how the pandemic may lead to stronger/weaker support for their regime type. Each group reports their findings and take questions from other groups. The class then develops an overall evaluation of the performance of different regime types and subtypes in the pandemic and how East Asian politics may look like in the post-Covid-19 world.

Activity 2: Contentious politics in East Asia

Although there is strong support for pseudo-democratic and authoritarian forms of government in East Asia, it is also home to mass protests calling for political reforms. Some prominent examples in recent years include the mass protests in Taiwan (2014), Hong Kong (2014; 2019–2020), Indonesia (2019), Thailand (2020) and South Korea (2014–2017), all revealing gaps in public support for the government and perhaps even the regime types.

Divide the class into groups, which each group "adopting" the mass protests of a particular polity for in-depth study. Each group 1) researches into the demands of the protestors, the causes of protests, how they ended, and how the government responded, 2) evaluate the extent to which the protests challenged or confirmed the East Asian Theory of Democracy. Each group reports their findings and take questions from other groups. The class then evaluates the similarities and differences in the causes and outcomes of these protests at a regional level and their possible implications to the East Asian Theory of Democracy.

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