

IN THE SHADOW OF CHINA: GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY AND DEMOCRACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

A distinctive geography of democracy has emerged in the region that defies conventional explanations, argues **Benjamin Reilly**

The link between economic development and democracy is one of the key tenets of modernisation theory. In Northeast Asia, South Korea and Taiwan are often cited as exemplars of this link: after a long period of economic development under authoritarian rule, which led to the growth of a large middle class demanding a greater say, the ruling regimes themselves undertook a process of political liberalisation that transformed both countries into democracies. Along with Japan, East Asia's oldest democracy, these three cases are amongst the wealthiest and most developed in Asia, thus lending support to basic modernisation theory.

By contrast, in Southeast Asia this neat link between economic and political development fails. Indeed, politics in Southeast Asia confounds almost all attempts at generalisation. The region contains an unusual diversity of regime types ranging from nominally Communist one-party states in Vietnam and Laos, dominant-party autocracies in Cambodia, quasi-democracies in Malaysia and Singapore, military rule in Thailand (since 2014), an absolute monarchy in Brunei, the transitional case of Burma, and finally three cases of multi-party democracy, with varying degrees of effectiveness, in Indonesia, the Philippines and East Timor.

Conventional explanations that focus on domestic social, economic and political factors to account for democracy's success or failure cannot explain this diversity. For instance, democracy is thought

to be more likely in smaller, more homogenous states than large, diverse ones. It is often regarded as particularly problematic in societies with deep ethnic or cultural divisions. It is thought to be less compatible with some religions—particularly Islam, possibly due to the difficulty in separating church and state under Islamic law. And around the world it is strongly correlated with broader advances in human development such as educational levels, literacy, maternal health and other public goods.¹

Yet Southeast Asia's standout democracy, Indonesia, is a Muslim-majority country of over 240 million people, with hundreds of different linguistic and ethnic groups. Like its two democratic neighbours, the Philippines and East Timor, it combines electoral democracy with acute problems of governance and state effectiveness. These countries are also amongst the poorer states in Southeast Asia, with per capita GDPs well below the US\$6,000 that Adam Przeworski and others consider a threshold for democratisation.²



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Southeast Asia's most developed state, Singapore, also represents an anomaly for modernisation theory with a per capita GDP of US\$56,000 (more than the United States). As a longstanding soft-authoritarian 'semi-democracy', Singapore has been dubbed 'the most economically developed non-democracy in the history of the world'.³ Malaysia too represents a challenge, combining high levels of human development and per capita income of over US\$11,000 with an increasingly illiberal soft-authoritarian regime. While both Singapore and Malaysia allow opposition contestation in elections, they use internal security acts and threats of defamation to cow critics, and have yet to experience a change of government in the modern era.⁴

These cases are not the only democratic anomalies in the region. Mainland Southeast Asian states such as Vietnam and Cambodia have also seen rapid economic growth and a burgeoning urban middle class, but remain de facto or de jure one-party regimes with deeply illiberal politics and little tolerance for pluralism, despite Cambodia's brief experience with democracy as part of the 1993 United Nations intervention. The middle classes there—as in Singapore and Malaysia—have remained largely 'indifferent to democracy'⁵ while in Thailand the Bangkok-based middle class has become actively hostile to majority rule, at one stage occupying the main international airport to campaign against one-man, one-vote democracy.

Southeast Asia therefore seems to contradict some of the best-established theories of democratisation, not just the so-called preconditions literature but also the literature on democratic transitions. Some regional experts have attempted to explain this anomaly through the lens of inter-elite competition, particularly the relationship between business and government elites.⁶ Others have examined the interaction of class formation and the role of Chinese merchant minorities.⁷ The legacy of colonial rule, a hierarchical and paternalistic elite culture, and a deeply-held rejection of pluralism have been claimed to explain the resilience of autocracy in Indochina at least.⁸ But few have attempted a cross-national account of democracy and its alternatives.⁹

A simpler explanation may be found by looking at the broader patterns of history and geography—particularly in relation to the core regional state, the Peoples Republic of China (PRC). As Figure 1 below shows, the distribution of electoral democracy in Southeast Asia today displays a striking geographic pattern: all the maritime states (bar Brunei) are democratic, all the clearly mainland states are autocratic (although Burma may change this), and the semi-democracies are geographically in-between. The fact that this relationship has now been stable for a decade—only Thailand has changed its status over this period—suggests that it is not just a temporary phenomenon, but one with deeper roots. This article therefore offers an alternative explanation for the presence or absence of democracy across Southeast Asia that is based not on domestic, social or even political factors but rather on international influence, geography and history—in particular, a country's proximity to and history of relations with China.

Figure 1: The Geography of Democracy in the Asia Pacific



China's long shadow: the interaction of history and geography

The deep historical legacy of China's 'tribute' relations with its southern border neighbours—in contrast with the relatively limited historical influence of China in the more distant island realms of present-day Indonesia and the Philippines—offers one way of understanding the spread of democracy in Southeast Asia. Spatial proximity and historical legacies may therefore help to explain both the patterns of autocratic resilience in China's near border and the freer political evolution of more distant maritime regions.

Under the Ming dynasty, China's near neighbours were enmeshed in the 'tributary' system, which also served as a transmission belt for Chinese ideas about hierarchy, bureaucracy and governance. In the contemporary era, expressions of this influence include Chinese support for communist revolutions in post-colonial Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, China's nervousness about the possibility of a democratic (and potentially US-aligned) Burma along its southern border, and the rapid economic integration of southern China with its borderland states. Today, China's combination of unparalleled economic development under a market economy with a centralised authoritarian political system may potentially provide a new governance model—the so-called China model—that is essentially post-democratic.

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The resilience of autocracy

Consider the three 'China-lite' states of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. All are former French colonies, located next to one another and, Cambodia aside, sharing a land border with southern China. All witnessed the rise of Communist parties to power in the mid-1970s, a process that was either actively or passively supported by China. These parties remain in power in Vietnam and

Laos, which are one-party states. In Cambodia, the Communists transformed themselves into the Cambodian Peoples Party, which has enjoyed a similarly unbroken run in government, despite the UN electoral intervention of 1993. More recently, all three countries have seen rapid economic growth on the back of massive foreign investment and aid, mostly but not exclusively from China. They also tend to support China in international forums to greater (Cambodia) or lesser (Vietnam) extents.

Historically, all these states were once part of the Chinese 'tributary' system by virtue of their location, and hence developed a different kind of political culture than those further away from Chinese influence. Since at least the Ming dynasty, China's Southeast Asian neighbours were co-opted into its sphere of influence, first by expanding China's own borders to include Yunnan, Fujian and Guangdong, and then by coercing present-day Vietnam, Laos and parts of Burma into China's tributary system. An inherently and explicitly unequal bilateral relationship ensued in which peripheral states were forced to make loyalty oaths to the Chinese emperor and regular provisions of exotic produce to demonstrate their fealty to the 'kingdom of Heaven'.

This asymmetric relationship enabled the transmission of ideas about the appropriate relationship between the rulers and the masses. Scholars have shown how Ming China exported aspects of China's bureaucratic culture and politics, replicating them across a range of Southeast Asian tributary polities during the 15th and 16th centuries.¹⁰ Diffusion of Chinese governance and bureaucratic norms was a key element of this process. The gradual replacement of traditional rulers in those areas with 'circulating officials' from the Chinese bureaucracy left lasting ideas about the relationship between the rulers and ruled. If we are to adopt the label of Confucianism as a shorthand for these ideas, then as Doh-Chull Shin notes in analysing how East Asians view meritocracy:

Confucianism rejects the democratic notion of government by the people because in the Confucian view, 'the people' are not cognitively capable of understanding the complexity of public

affairs . . . The Confucian model of meritocratic government contrasts sharply with the liberal democratic model of good government in both its ends and means.¹¹

This model has proved resilient in what Shin calls Confucian Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos and Singapore).

By contrast, in more distant maritime realms far from China's borderlands, tributary relations and the transmission of imperial or Confucian governance models were weak or absent. Again, this follows the historical pattern. Maritime Southeast Asia has always posed a much greater barrier to the extension of Chinese influence than the near abroad, in large part because China's bilateral relations with the region were historically much less developed. Of all the countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines have been least likely to accept Chinese hegemony. Indonesia was not subject to the kind of bilateral trade regime with China that developed between China and Vietnam, or Thailand, or Burma. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, bilateral trade relations with China took place under Spanish rule.¹²

The afterlife of the tribute system

The tribute system fell apart with the advent of aggressive European penetration into East Asia, including not just Southeast Asia but also, in the aftermath of the Opium Wars, China itself. Traditionally, China had adopted a kind of dual policy combining the carrot of trade opportunities with the stick of military punishment to its southern and western borders. But the co-optation of Southeast Asian rulers as 'pacification commissioners' who would keep the peace broke down with the scramble for Asia amongst the new European entrants. Sniffing the wind, previously loyal tributary states such as Siam (present-day Thailand) rejected repeated Chinese demands for tribute and in 1882 repudiated any tributary obligations. The colonisation and annexation of Indochina by the French and Upper Burma by the British in the late 19th century added to this loss of China's protective ring of tributary states.

While the formal tributary system collapsed, its legacy lived on. With the Japanese defeat in the Second World War and the communist consolidation of control over the PRC, China began to re-establish the form if not the content of a tributary system in its neighbouring states. One illustration of this was Chinese support to the non-democratic regimes along its southern border. China actively backed Communist parties in Laos and Vietnam while also giving military and financial assistance to the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.¹³ The legacy of these relationships in the contemporary era are one-party socialist political systems which share, rhetorically at least, a common ideology with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

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Despite Xi Jinping's famous quote that 'China does not export revolution', that is exactly what it did during the Mao years. Chinese support for the Communist takeover of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—the three 'China-lite states' discussed earlier—and its sponsorship of the very existence of North Korea are two examples. The PRC also directly or indirectly supported revolutionary movements such as Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, Laos' Pathet Lao and Nepal's Maoists. Less successful examples of 'exporting revolution' include the Malayan Emergency, the Huk Rebellion in the Philippines (and the ongoing war against the New Peoples Army which continues today), and the increasing involvement with Communists by Sukarno of Indonesia from the late 1950s until his 1965 overthrow.

Following the end of the Cold War, China even attempted to fashion its politically like-minded neighbours into an Asian Socialist Community (ASC) in which 'each regime seeks to preserve one-party rule based on the legitimacy of the party

in the struggle for national independence, resistance to foreign intervention, and commitment to building socialism' and which 'share a common external threat—pressure to democratise society, to allow political pluralism and to implement internationally acceptable standards of human rights'.¹⁴ While the ASC did not last, a contemporary consequence of this approach is the present-day prevalence along China's southern border of single-party socialist systems in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia with the same rhetorical commitments as the CCP.

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Similarly, not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Burma's first bloody suppression of pro-democracy supporters in September 1988, followed by China's Tiananmen Square massacre the following year, had the unintended effect of bringing the two closer together:

Both were brutal attacks on popular movements calling for greater democracy; both caused considerable loss of life; and both were strongly condemned by the international community. Neither joined the chorus of condemnation of the other, however. On the contrary, each lent the other support in its hour of ostracism. In the early 1990s, Beijing began supplying large quantities of heavy weapons and other military equipment to the Burmese regime.¹⁵

This military support has continued until the present day, which is one reason why Burma's current political openings have worried the Chinese. Beijing finds it easier to influence autocratic governments comprised of a small group of inter-connected elites than the larger coalitions present

in genuine democracies.¹⁶ This focus on autocracies becomes self-reinforcing: it is precisely in small autocratic states that Chinese influence has been most effective and consequential. Thus the landslide November 2015 victory for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy is seen as having undermined the foundations not only of a close partnership between like-minded authoritarian regimes but also China's core strategic interests.

China's present-day approach to its neighbours reinforces this impression, heightening the importance of the 'swing states' in the mid-zone between mainland and maritime Asia. This is particularly the case in Thailand, with its military regime courting new autocratic allies in the wake of the clear American disapproval of its latest assumption of power. China has every interest in a military government in Thailand moving closer to Beijing to offset Washington's treaty alliance. Indeed, it may become increasingly difficult for 'swing states' like Thailand to exercise autonomy in terms of their foreign policy. It also makes the current political developments in Burma even more important. With Thailand's generals increasingly in China's pockets, a truly democratic Burma would represent a radical change in a part of Southeast Asia where China once sought deference. However, China's recent invitation to Aung San Suu Kyi to visit Beijing shows it is prepared to be flexible even on this issue.

Conclusion

Both the historical and contemporary record of China's relations with Southeast Asia provides an explanation for the marked distribution of democratic and non-democratic regimes along the mainland-maritime fulcrum. Mainland states, particularly those nearest China, were subject to bureaucratic transfer of ideas during the tributary era, and received support from China for their autocratic political models in the postcolonial era. In each case, the readiness of mainland states to accept this kind of relationship stands in contrast to the resistance by Indonesia and the Philippines, where attempts to spread Communism were violently—and successfully—resisted.

But what of the future? Worldwide, democracy is in decline, according to the latest comparative rankings.¹⁷ Asia has actually suffered less of a democratic withdrawal than other regions. But the geopolitics of democracy is becoming more important in Asia. The rapid integration of mainland Southeast Asia into a China-centred regional economy is inevitably having political as well as economic impacts, making it increasingly difficult for countries seeking to (re)transition to democracy, such as Thailand and Burma, to exercise their full sovereignty within the context of a regional ‘great game’ for supremacy in Asia.

Conversely, resolutely authoritarian states like Vietnam feel under pressure to liberalise their political system and address human rights issues in part because of their growing rapprochement with the United States—itself driven by concerns about China. Similarly, North Korea’s totalitarian regime continues to be propped up by China partly because of China’s aversion to the idea of a united (and pro-US) Korea on its doorstep. More than ever, it is hard to disentangle democracy’s domestic context from its international one.

Endnotes

- ¹ The classic work on the relationship between democracy and development is Seymour Martin Lipset, ‘Some Social Requisites of Democracy’, *American Political Science Review* 53 (1959), pp. 69-105.
- ² Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, Jose Antonio Cheibub and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- ³ Larry Diamond, ‘China and East Asian Democracy: the Coming Wave’, *Journal of Democracy* 23:1 (January 2012), p. 7.

- ⁴ On ‘competitive authoritarianism’, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- ⁵ William Case, *Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), p. 249.
- ⁶ As above.
- ⁷ John Sidel, ‘Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy Revisited: Colonial State and Chinese Immigrant in the Making of Modern Southeast Asia’, *Comparative Politics* 40:2 (2008), pp. 127-147.
- ⁸ See Martin Gainsborough, ‘Elites vs Reform in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam’, *Journal of Democracy* 23:2 (2012), pp. 34-46.
- ⁹ There have been few attempts by regional experts to explain this anomaly. A notable recent exception is William Case. See his opening chapter ‘Democracy’s Mixed Fortune in Southeast Asia: Torpor, Change and Trade-offs’ in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratisation*, ed. William Case (Routledge, 2015).
- ¹⁰ See Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen (eds), *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor* (Singapore and Hong Kong: NUS Press and Hong Kong University Press, 2010).
- ¹¹ Doh-Chull Shin, ‘How East Asians View Meritocracy’ in *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, eds. Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), pp. 266-7
- ¹² Martin Stuart-Fox, *A Short History of China and Southeast Asia: Tribute, Trade and Influence* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), p. 238.
- ¹³ As Stuart-Fox notes, ‘Mao’s defence policy combined the protection of friendly (North Korea, North Vietnam) or neutral (Burma, Laos) buffer states to keep challengers at bay . . . Beijing hardly needs to remind the Lao or Burmese of the “punishment” meted out to Vietnam in 1979’. As above, p. 228.
- ¹⁴ Carlyle A. Thayer, ‘Comrade Plus Brother: The New Sino-Vietnamese relations’, *The Pacific Review* 5:4 (1992), p. 402.
- ¹⁵ Stuart-Fox, p. 213.
- ¹⁶ Julia Bader, *China’s Foreign Relations and the Survival of Autocracies* (Routledge, 2015).
- ¹⁷ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2015: Discarding Democracy: The Return to the Iron Fist* (New York: Freedom House, 2015).