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COLLEGE OF
**LIBERAL ARTS AND
SOCIAL SCIENCES**
人文社會科學院

Benjamin REILLY
Dean
Sir Walter Murdoch School of Public Policy and International Affairs
Murdoch University

**Democracy and development in Southeast Asia:
China's Long Shadow**

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Democracy and development in Southeast Asia: China's Long Shadow

Benjamin Reilly

Dean, Sir Walter Murdoch School of Public Policy and International Affairs

Murdoch University

Abstract

Southeast Asia represents a profound puzzle for students of democracy and democratization. Democracy is weak or absent in the region's wealthiest states – Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia – but present, to varying degrees, in three of its poorest ones, Indonesia, Timor-Leste and the Philippines. Democracy also appears to be unrelated to human development such as educational levels, literacy, maternal health and other public goods, given the standout performance of quasi-authoritarian Singapore and Malaysia, and the rapid development of Indochina. All of this challenges the key tenets of democratic theory, and indeed modernization theory more generally. In this paper, I present 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 the People's Republic of China.

Democracy and development in Southeast Asia: China's Long Shadow

Benjamin Reilly

Comparative studies of democratization have produced two types of generalizations: those having nearly universal application, and those applying more particularly to a given region.¹ The long-established relationship between economic development and democracy is perhaps the standout example from the first group, while the Southeast Asian experience highlights the profound differences to be found in the nature of democracy from region to region.

Northeast Asian cases such as Korea and Taiwan often appear in the political science literature as exemplars of this link between political and economic modernization: after a long period of economic development under authoritarian rule, which engendered a large and increasingly restive middle class, the ruling regimes in both countries themselves undertook a process of political liberalization which transformed both countries into democracies. Along with Japan, East Asia's oldest democracy, these three cases are amongst the richest and most developed in Asia, thus lending support to basic modernization theory.

When we turn to Southeast Asia, however, this neat correspondence between economic and political development fails. Indeed, politics in Southeast Asia confounds almost all attempts at generalization. It 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, a military in Thailand, an absolute monarchy in Brunei, the transitional but still military-dominated case of Myanmar, and finally three cases of multi-party democracy, with varying degrees of effectiveness, in Indonesia, the Philippines and East Timor.

This diversity of regime types seems unrelated to conventional structural explanations for democracy's success or failure. For instance, democracy is thought to be more likely in smaller, more homogenous states than large, diverse ones. It is often thought to be particularly problematic in highly diverse societies with deep ethnic or cultural divisions. It is often considered to be less compatible with some religions -- particularly Islam, possibly due to the

¹ Valerie Bunce, 'Comparative Democratization: Big and Bounded Generalizations', *Comparative Political Studies* 2000, 33: 703-734.

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.²

These various 'preconditions' for democracy possess considerable explanatory power in most world regions. But they fail dismally in Southeast Asia. The region'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. All three countries are amongst the poorer states in Southeast Asia, with a per capita GDP of around \$4000, well below the \$6000 that Przeworski et al consider a minimum threshold for democratization.³

On the other hand, the region's most developed state, Singapore, also represents a massive anomaly for scholars of democracy, with a per capita GDP of \$55,000 (more than the US). As a long standing soft-authoritarian 'semi-democracy', Singapore is, according to one prominent scholar, "the most economically developed non-democracy in the history of the world".⁴ Malaysia too represents a significant challenge for democratic theory, combining high levels of human development and per capita income of almost \$15,000 with an illiberal competitive authoritarian model of regime. As standout examples of "competitive authoritarianism", both Singapore and Malaysia allow opposition contestation in elections but have yet to experience a change of government in the modern era.⁵

By contrast it is in *maritime* Southeast Asia that we find Southeast Asia's only genuine democracies: Indonesia, the Philippines and East Timor. The relative success of democracy in 'island Asia' is surprising in many ways, especially in terms of democratic preconditions: not

² 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), 69-105.

³ Adam Przeworski et al, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴ Larry Diamond 2012, 'China and East Asian Democracy: the Coming Wave', *Journal of Democracy* 23 (1), p. 7.

⁵ On 'competitive authoritarianism, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

only are the socio-economic characteristics of these three countries less than propitious for democracy, but they are also amongst the region's most ethnically and religiously diverse states, and more threatened by communal violence, ethnic identity and militant Islam than anywhere outside Southern Thailand.⁶ Yet it is these same states of Indonesia, the Philippines and Timor-Leste that, alone in Southeast Asia, have seen multiple peaceful and lawful changes of government power via the electoral process, an important threshold of democratic development.⁷

These cases are not the only democratic anomalies in Southeast Asia. Mainland Southeast Asian states such as Vietnam and Cambodia have also seen rapid economic growth and a burgeoning middle class, but remain de facto or de jure one-party regimes with strikingly illiberal politics and little tolerance for pluralism, despite Cambodia's brief experience with democracy as part of the UN intervention in 1993. The middle classes there and in Singapore and Malaysia too have until recently remained "indifferent to democracy" (Case, p. 249), while in Thailand, the Bangkok-based middle class have confounded democratic theory by showing themselves to be actively hostile to majority rule, since the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai party rewrote the rule book for winning elected office.⁸ Myanmar too has until very recently failed to conform to democratic expectations: once the richest Southeast Asian state with British colonial heritage and widespread literacy, it has for most of the past 40 years been a laggard on virtually every measure of political, economic and human development, although changes are now occurring in the run up to the 2015 elections.⁹

Southeast Asia thus represents a profound puzzle for students and theorists of democracy and democratization. Indeed, the region seems to contradict most of the best-established theories of democracy and democratization, not just the so-called 'preconditions' literature but also the

⁶ For more on the idea of 'island Asia', see Bruce Vaughn (ed), *The Unravelling of Island Asia?: Governmental, Communal, and Regional Instability*, Praeger, Westport CT and London, 2002.

⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

⁸ David Martin-Jones, 'Democratization, Civil Society and Illiberal Middle-Class Culture in Pacific Asia', *Comparative Politics*, 30(2) 1998, 147-169.

⁹ On the strong empirical relationship between British colonial heritage and democracy, see Myron Weiner 1987, 'Empirical Democratic Theory' in M. Weiner and E. Ozbudun (eds), *Competitive Elections in Developing Countries*, Duke University Press, Durham NC.

literature on democratic transitions. But there have been surprisingly few attempts by regional experts to explain this anomaly.¹⁰ One of the most detailed attempts to examine democratization throughout the region, Case's *Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less*, interprets variation in regime types through the lens of inter-elite competition, particularly the relationship between business and government elites.¹¹ Sidel takes a historical-sociological perspective, arguing that the interaction of class formation and the role of Chinese merchant minorities that helps explain the success and failure of democracy across the region.¹² Others see the legacy of colonial rule, a hierarchical and paternalistic elite culture, and a deeply-held rejection of pluralism as explaining the resilience of autocracy in Indochina at least.¹³ But few attempt a synoptic cross-national account of democracy and its alternatives.

In this paper, I develop some earlier work on the distribution of democracy across Southeast Asia that is based not on sociological or even political indicators but rather on geography, and the historical patterns that ensue.¹⁴ As Figure 1 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, and the semi-democracies are geographically in-between. More broadly, most of mainland East Asia is non-democratic; and almost all of maritime Asia is nominally democratic.¹⁵ When it comes to Southeast Asia

¹⁰ A notable recent exception being William Case (ed), *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization*, Routledge 2015 and its editor's opening chapter 'Democracy's mixed fortunes in Southeast Asia: Torpor, change and trade-offs'.

¹¹ William Case, *Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less* (RoutledgeCurzon 2002).

¹² 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, 127-147.

¹³ See Martin Gainsborough (2012), 'Elites vs. Reform in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam', *Journal of Democracy*, 23(2): 34-46.

¹⁴ Benjamin Reilly, 'Southeast Asia: In the Shadow of China', *Journal of Democracy*, 24(1), 2013, 156-164.

¹⁵ "Freedom House's term "electoral democracy" differs from "liberal democracy" in that the latter also implies the presence of a substantial array of civil liberties. In the survey, all Free countries qualify as both electoral and liberal democracies. By contrast, some Partly Free countries qualify as electoral, but not liberal, democracies." – from 2012 FH report.

specifically, this mainland-maritime democratic divide has been stable now for over a decade, ever since the Philippines, an electoral democracy since the “People Power” revolution of 1986, was joined by the democratic transition in Indonesia in 1998 and the consequent emergence of an independent and democratic East Timor In 2001.

The fact that this relationship has now been stable for a decade suggests that this is not just a temporary phenomenon but has deeper causal roots. Only Thailand has shifted its basic regime type from democracy to non-democratic in this century.



Fig 1: “Electoral Democracies” in East Asia

China's shadow

The deep historical legacy of China's 'tribute' relations with its southern border neighbors, in contrast with the relatively limited historical influence of China in more distant island realms of present-day Indonesia and the Philippines, offers one pathway to understanding the spread of democracy in Southeast Asia. Spatial proximity and historical legacies thus explain both the patterns of autocratic resilience in China's near border and the freer political evolution of more distal maritime regions. More recent expressions of this influence includes Chinese support for communist revolutions and Leninist political structures in contemporary Laos and Vietnam, China's nervousness about the possibility of a democratic (and potentially US-aligned) border states such as Myanmar, and the rapid economic integration of southern China with its borderland states. This combination of historical and contemporary political, strategic and economic factors may thus illuminate what democratic theory cannot.

Consider the three "China lite" states of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. All are former colonies of France, 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 actively or passively supported by China, and 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 a similarly unbroken run in government, despite the UN electoral intervention of 1993. More recently, all three countries have seen rapid economic growth in recent years on the back of massive investment and aid, mostly but not exclusively from China, and tend to support China in international fora to greater (Cambodia) or lesser (Vietnam) extents.

Explanations for the resilience of autocracy in these cases, and in the other Chinese borderland state of Myanmar, often focus on the interests of patrimonial elites.¹⁶ But a simpler explanation may be that all these states were once part of the Chinese "tributary" system by virtue of their location, and hence developed a very 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 – in contrast to the many centuries of war on China's northern border against the Mongols and other powerful nomadic empires. There was no Great

¹⁶ See Martin Gainsborough (2012), 'Elites vs. Reform in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam', *Journal of Democracy*, 23(2): 34-46.

Wall in the south. Rather, over a period of centuries, the neighbouring kingdoms in the south and southwest were assimilated into the Chinese socio-cultural hierarchy, first by expanding China's own borders to include Yunnan, Fujian and Guangdong, and then coercing present-day Vietnam, Laos and Burma into China's tributary system. This was an inherently and explicitly unequal bilateral relationship, in which peripheral states were coerced into making loyalty oaths to the Chinese emperor and regular provisions of exotic produce, to demonstrate their fealty to the "kingdom of Heaven".

This asymmetric relationship provided the basis for the transmission of ideas about the appropriate relationship between the rulers and the masses. Wade and Sun 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.¹⁷ Diffusion of Chinese governance and bureaucratic norms was a key element of this process. While these are complex, it bears remembering that over its long and complex history China has had different regime types – aristocracy, various periods of warlordism, many centuries of imperial rule, a brief republican phase, and the current 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' – none of them democratic.

Indeed, some China scholars argue that there is deep antipathy to the idea of representative democracy that can be traced back to imperial history.¹⁸ While support for the term "democracy" is high in public opinion polls, this seems to refer to the idea of wise leadership rather than the fundamentals of political contestation and mass participation.¹⁹ These continue to undermine prospects for democracy in China today, where long-standing concerns about China's "national character" and a political culture formed over many centuries of imperial rule continue to dominate many intellectuals' misgivings about the prospects for representative democracy in China.²⁰ Numerous scholars have also highlighted how China's combination of unparalleled

¹⁷ See Geoff Wade & Sun Laichen, eds. *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor*. Singapore and Hong Kong: NUS Press and Hong Kong University Press, 2010.

¹⁸ Zhengyuan Fu, *Autocratic tradition and Chinese politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁹ See Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin (2010), *How East Asians View Democracy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

²⁰ Andrew J. Nathan, *China's crisis: dilemmas of reform and prospects for democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p.196.

economic development under a market economy with a centralized political structure provides a new governance model for the developing world that is essentially 'post-democratic'.²¹

For our purposes, however, the significance of this apparent antipathy to democracy in Chinese thought is their influence outside China, on the Southeast Asian borderlands, over the centuries. During the Ming dynasty, an integral aspect of the expansion of Chinese power was the gradual replacement of traditional rulers in those areas with "circulating officials" from the Chinese bureaucracy. Ideas about governance, hierarchy, and authority were central to this bureaucratic transfer. If we are to adopt the label of Confucianism as a short hand for these ideas, then as Doh-Chull Shin notes, "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 their ends and their means."²² These ideas have proved exceptionally influential in what he calls Confucian Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos and Singapore).

By contrast, in more distant Southeast Asian realms, particularly those outside the Asian mainland, tributary relations and the transmission of imperial or Confucian governance models have been 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 of Southeast Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines stand out in recent history as least likely to accept Chinese hegemony:

"No bilateral relations regime has historically linked Indonesia and China. ... Thus independent Indonesia could look back on no long historical kingdom-to-empire bilateral relations regime of the kind developed between China and Vietnam, or Thailand, or Burma. Even less could the Philippines, whose significant trade relations with China

²¹ For a contemporary account of China's antipathy to democracy, see Li, Eric X. 'The Life of the Party: The Post-Democratic Future Begins in China', *Foreign Affairs* 92. 1 (Jan/Feb 2013): 34-46.

²² Doh-Chull Shin, 'How East Asians View Meritocracy' in Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li (eds), *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, CUP, 2013, pp. 266-7

(apart from Sulu) post-date the arrival of the Spanish and were conducted under their auspices".²³

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 threat of military punishment to its southern and western borders. But the cooptation 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 colonization 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. This was a disaster for China: "for the first time, a serious security threat existed along previously peaceful, if poorly defined frontiers with cooperative tributary states" (SMF, p. 122).

While the formal tributary system collapsed, the legacy of this kind of relationship lived on. With the Japanese defeat in the second world war and the communist consolidation of control over the People's Republic of China, China began to re-establish the form if not the content of a tributary system in its neighbouring buffer states. One illustration of this was Chinese support to the profoundly non-political systems of its southern border states, China actively supported communist parties in Laos and Vietnam while also giving military and financial assistance to the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.²⁴ 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.

Despite Xi Jinping's already famous quote that "China does not export revolution", that is exactly what it did during the Mao years. The communist takeover of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were all dependent on the support of China, as was the very existence of North Korea and, in a rather different way, the Burmese road to socialism under Ne Win. Revolutionary movements

²³ Martin Stuart-Fox, *A Short History of China and Southeast Asia: Tribute, Trade and Influence* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), p. 238.

²⁴ 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" (p. 228).

such as Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, Laos' Pathet Lao, and Nepal's Maoists were all supported directly or indirectly by the PRC. Maoist policies of agrarian socialism and cultural revolution, spiced with Marxist philosophy ingested in Paris, were the foundations of Pol Pot's disastrous Year Zero policies in Cambodia, which purged the nation of its teachers, artists and intellectuals and emptied its cities, resulting in the Cambodian genocide. Less successful examples of "exporting revolution" included 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.

On the back of the PRC's support, the three "China lite" states of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam witnessed the rise of Communist parties to power in the mid-1970s, a process that was actively or passively aided by the CCP, and found its most obvious success in such parties' unbroken rule Vietnam and Laos. In Cambodia, the communists transformed themselves into the Cambodian Peoples Party, which has a similarly unbroken run in government, despite the UN electoral intervention of 1993. All three countries have also seen rapid economic growth in recent years on the back of massive investment and aid, mostly but not exclusively from China, and tend to support China in international fora to greater (Cambodia) or lesser (Vietnam) extents. As Stuart-Fox says, "Beijing works hard to ensure a ring of friendly powers along its frontiers through diplomatic overtures and incentives".²⁵

China's active support for communist parties in Southeast Asia throughout the 1950s and 60s, and maintenance of organizational ties to them thereafter, was a key aspect of its international relations with ASEAN states.²⁶ Following the end of the Cold War, China 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 democratize society, to allow political pluralism and to implement internationally acceptable standards of human

²⁵ Stuart-Fox, p. 228.

²⁶ See Ba, Alice D. (2003) 'China and ASEAN: re-navigating relations for a 21st century Asia', *Asian Survey* 43(4): 622–47.

rights”.²⁷ While the ASC did not come to any meaningful fruition, the basic ideas behind it – of resolutely non-democratic governments standing in unison against international pressures – has remained a common ideational touchstone for China and its socialist neighbours.²⁸

A current consequence of this approach is the present-day prevalence along China’s southern border of single-party socialist systems complete with the same rhetorical commitments as the CCP. As Alice Ba notes:

Chinese power has greater significance for continental states that are more affected for better and worse by their proximity to [China]. For countries like Vietnam, proximity to China has critically shaped its evolution and ... offered Vietnam a model of governance, of revolution and of post-socialist development.²⁹

Similar observations could be made about Laos and, in a rather different way, Cambodia as well. Even the state-sponsored socialism of Ne Win’s Burma was closer in form and spirit to the CCP than to anything emanating from the West.

Similarly, the suppression of pro-democracy supporters in Burma (via the military’s bloody power seizure in September 1988), followed by China’s Tiananmen Square massacre the following year, had the unintended effect of bringing Burma and China 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.”³⁰ This is one reason that the political openings in Burma since 2010 have so disturbed the Chinese: Their

²⁷ Carlyle A. Thayer, ‘Comrade plus brother: The new Sino-Vietnamese relations’, *The Pacific Review* 5(4), 1992 pp. 402-6 at 402.

²⁸ Moreover, even in non-socialist Burma and Thailand there is a willingness to make use of ‘family’ metaphors in referring to their relations with China in a way that would not come at all naturally to more distant Indonesia and the Philippines. See Stuart-Fox, p. 6.

²⁹ Alice D. Ba, “A New History? The Structure and Process of Southeast Asia’s Relations with a Rising China,” in Mark Beeson, ed., *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2009), 193.

³⁰ Stuart-Fox, p. 213.

Sein's process of liberalization is seen as having undermined the foundations not just of a close partnership between authoritarian regimes but of China's core strategic interests.

China's present-day approach to its neighbours reinforces this impression. It heightens the importance of the "swing states" in the mid-zone between mainland and maritime Asia. While moves towards more competitive politics in Malaysia and Singapore appears congruent with broader trends in maritime Asia, Thailand appears to be heading in the opposite direction, with its military regime courting new autocratic allies in the wake of the clear disapproval of the US with its latest assumption of power in 2014. Indeed, it may become increasingly difficult for 'swing states' like Thailand to exercise autonomy in terms of their foreign policy. As Thitinan Pongsudhirak observes:

Bangkok's relationship with Beijing has solidified to the extent that of all of the United States' treaty allies in the region, Thailand enjoys the closest diplomatic ties with China. While its stock of multilayered connections with the US remains dense and diverse, especially in military-to-military aspects, the flow of Thailand's relations and contacts is increasingly towards China, forging the rise of a bloc that might be dubbed 'CLMT' (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand). These countries are strategically central to what is fast becoming a great game of sorts in mainland Southeast Asia.³¹

It also makes the current political developments in Myanmar even more important. A democratic Myanmar, given its long land border with China, would be a radical change in this picture and would also likely create major strategic anxieties within China itself.³² As Bronson Percivall puts it, "Mainland Southeast Asia is China's backyard, also often called its 'soft underbelly'. In this part of Southeast Asia, China once sought deference. Now Beijing's support for authoritarian regimes and economic assistance, as well as the pull of a booming economy and China's sheer looming presence as the giant to the north, give Beijing the most influential voice in mainland Southeast Asian capitals."³³

³¹ Thitinan Pongsudhirak, 'Thailand's Foreign Policy in a Regional Great Game', *The New Geopolitics of Southeast Asia*, IDEAS Reports: London, 2012.

³² See Kleine-Ahlbrandt, S. and Small, A. 'China's new dictatorship diplomacy', *Foreign Affairs*, 87(1), 38-56.

³³ Bronson Percivall, *The Dragon Looks South: China and Southeast Asia in the New Century*, Praeger, 2007, p. 51.

The most recent study of China's support for autocracy is by Julia Bader.³⁴ She looks at China's foreign relations through the prism of selectorate theory, arguing that Beijing finds it much easier to influence autocratic governments comprised of a small group of inter-connected elites, as in Cambodia and Myanmar, than the larger coalitions present in genuine democracies. Hence the focus on autocracies becomes self-reinforcing: it is precisely in small autocratic states like Cambodia that Chinese influence is most effective and consequential. As Andrew Nathan notes, "it is often easier for Beijing to do business with narrow authoritarian regimes than to navigate within complex democratic systems".³⁵

Comparative cases

At first blush, it may seem fanciful to many country experts to claim that a country's level of democracy is related to so abstract a factor as geographic proximity or distance from another state. But here are good theoretical reasons for pursuing this unconventional line of explanation. The same geographic clustering of democratic and non-democratic regime types that we see in contemporary Southeast Asia also occurs on a global basis. Kristian Skrede Gleditsch has shown that conventional explanations cannot account for the distribution of political democracy over time and space globally.³⁶ Rather, the likelihood of democratic transitions is strongly related to a country's neighbours and neighbourhood. Similarly, the extent of democracy within the region is strongly associated with how democratic an individual state is. The regional context is key.

Subjecting this insight to cross-national statistical analysis, Gleditsch and Ward conclude that "the regional context of political institutions and structure exert strong effects on regime changes ... There is a marked tendency for cases to change in ways similar to their regional context over time, and transitions in one country often spill over to other unconnected states ... Like Monet's water lilies that look like random dots up close and only acquire shape with a change of perspective, the randomness of democratization may lie in the eye of the beholder". They find that a random country had a 75% chance of being democratic if its most of its neighbours were

³⁴ Julia Bader, *China's Foreign Relations and the Survival of Autocracies*, Routledge 2015.

³⁵ Andrew Nathan, 'China's Challenge', *Journal of Democracy*, 26(1), 2015, p.157.

³⁶ Gleditsch, Kristian Skrede, 2002. *All International Politics is Local: The Diffusion of Conflict, Integration, and Democratization*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

democracies, but only a 14% probability if most are autocracies.³⁷ More specifically, Levitsky and Way have argued that ‘linkage’ to the West – that is, the density of a country's ties to the United States, the European Union, and Western-led multilateral institutions -- is key for new democracies to succeed.³⁸

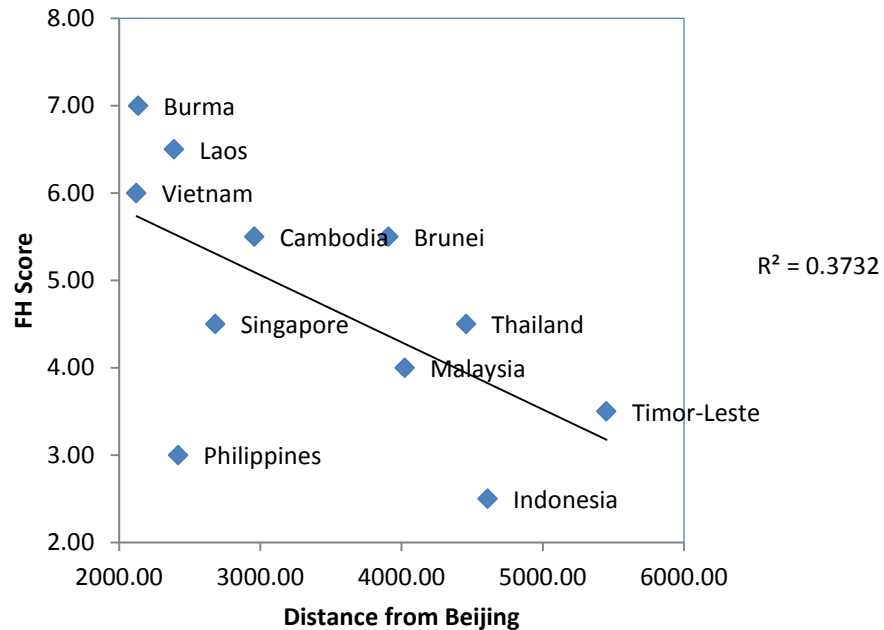
The highly regionalized expression of democracy across East Asia lends support to both arguments. Geographic clustering is clear: all electoral democracies – from Japan, Korea and Taiwan in the north to the Philippines, Indonesia and East Timor in the south – are insular states or peninsula archipelagic states. However, in a twist on Levitsky and Way's arguments, states appear more likely to be democratic the further they are from the gravitational pull of the region's historic core civilization of China. The distribution of democracy and autocracy therefore displays a striking centre-periphery pattern. Indeed, of the 14 countries which border China, only two – Mongolia and India – are democratic. The rest range from one-party autocracies (such as Laos and Vietnam) and sultanistic pseudo-democracies (in the case of Central Asia), to deeply repressive family dynasties (such as North Korea).

One way of illustrating this relationship is by some basic correlation analysis. Figure 2 seeks to quantify what is, I think, already a pretty clear geographic demarcation of Southeast Asian regime type by showing the basic correlation relationship between democracy levels, as measured by Freedom House, and each country's distance from Beijing in miles. The correlation suggests that over a third of the variation in democracy levels in Southeast Asia today can be explained by the distance of each country's capital from Beijing.

³⁷ Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Michael D. Ward, ‘Diffusion and the Spread of Democratic Institutions’ in Beth A. Simmons, Frank Dobbin and Geoffrey Garrett (eds), *The Global Diffusion of Markets and Democracy*, Cambridge: CUP, 2008. p. 293.

³⁸ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, ‘International Linkage and Democratization’, *Journal of Democracy* 16.3 (2005) 20-34.

Fig 2: Democracy and Distance from China in SE Asia



The crudeness of this indicator actually understates the strength of this correlation: Singapore, as a Sinitic society, is much “closer” to China than the distance measure suggests, while the Philippines, while physically closer to Beijing than Singapore, is the opposite. Of course, physical proximity is not in itself an explainer, but rather a simple way of capturing the vagaries of historical, cultural, ideational and strategic factors that I explore in this paper. And, as already mentioned, it is hard to escape the conclusion that proximity to or distance from China may offer a better explanation than more conventional political science analyses for what could be called Asia’s distinctive ‘geography of democracy’. As Alice Ba notes, “geographic proximity makes more salient the power disparities between China and Southeast Asian states. Not only do China’s geographic size and proximity to Southeast Asia make China more difficult to ignore than those

who exist in its shadow, but they also make China relatively more interested in what happens in Southeast Asia as part of its ‘backyard’.³⁹

Studies of other regions have shown how powerful the gravitational influence of such a bright or dark star can be. The “bad neighborhood” effects of particular regions with poor democratic records, such as Africa or the Middle East, is one example. Others have looked at the flip side of the same coin, such as the pulling power of highly democratic regions such as Europe. Looking at variations in political and economic liberalization across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, for example, Kopstein and Reilly have shown that levels of both political and economic freedom in post-Communist Europe and Asia varied depending on geographic proximity to the EU, a relationship which held up under a variety of statistical tests. Their conclusion has particular relevance for this paper:

“All of the big winners of postcommunism share the trait of being geographically close to the former border of the noncommunist world. Even controlling for cultural differences, historical legacies, and paths of extrication, the spatial effect remains consistent and strong across the universe of postcommunist cases. This suggests the *spatially dependent nature of the diffusion of norms, resources, and institutions* that are necessary to the construction of political democracies and market economies.”⁴⁰

My work suggests that these same “spatially dependent” arguments may apply to China’s relations with Southeast Asia and indeed the broader East Asian region.

Conclusion

In sum, both the historical and contemporary record of China’s relations provides some path-dependent explanations for the current distribution between democratic and non-democratic Southeast Asia along the current mainland-maritime fulcrum. Mainland states, particularly those nearest China, were subject to bureaucratic transfer of ideas about governance during the tributary era, and received support from China for their non-democratic political models in the post-colonial era. In each case, the readiness of mainland states to accept this kind of relationship stands in

³⁹ Ba 2009, p. 193.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey S. Kopstein and David A. Reilly, ‘Geographic Diffusion and the Transformation of the Postcommunist World’, *World Politics*, 53:1 (Oct., 2000), pp. 1-37 (p. 1).

stark contrast to the resistance by Indonesia and the Philippines to such arrangements, where Chinese influence has never been as strong and where both historical tributary relations and more recent support for Communism were either absent or violently resisted.

But what of the future? Beijing's efforts to both protect its regime and pursue its interests abroad have undermined democracy in a number of ways: China's power of example, burnished with an increasing international propaganda arm, both promotes authoritarian values and helps other authoritarian states learn new techniques of oppression.⁴¹ But China has also learnt from Southeast Asian states such as Singapore in some ways, particularly in using the legal system to silence or deter critics. Other studies of China's role as an 'autocracy promoter' come to more measured conclusions, mostly arguing that China does not directly interest itself in questions of regime type. However, the closer one gets to China's borders, the more this conclusion starts to fracture.

Worldwide, democracy is today in decline, according to the latest comparative rankings.⁴² Asia has actually suffered less of a democratic withdrawal in this regard than other regions. But the geopolitics of democracy is also becoming more important in Asia. The rapid integration of mainland SE 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 Myanmar, to exercise their full sovereignty within the context of a regional "great game" for supremacy in Asia. China, for instance, has every interest in a military government in Thailand moving closer to Beijing to offset Washington's treaty alliance.

Conversely, resolutely authoritarian states like Vietnam are under pressure to loosen their political model and address human rights issues in part because of their growing rapprochement with the United States – itself driven, of course, by concerns about China. Similarly, North Korea's totalitarian regime continues to be propped up by China — in part 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.

⁴¹ Nathan 2015, op cit, pp. 156-170.

⁴² Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2015: Discarding Democracy - the return to the Iron Fist, Freedom House, New York, 2015.

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Professor Mark R Thompson

Southeast Asia Research Centre

The City University of Hong Kong
83 Tat Chee Avenue
Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong SAR
Tel: (852) 3442 6330
Fax: (852) 3442 0103
<http://www.cityu.edu.hk/searc>