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Democracy with Asian Characteristics

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In the last three decades, a number of Asian thinkers supportive of, or opposed to, authoritarian rule have developed culture-based theories of democracy that challenge, or buttress, a liberal, "Western" understanding of democratic rule. The most famous expression was the "Asian values" discourse of government-linked intellectuals in Singapore and Malaysia, but there has also been a "political Confucianist" critique of "Western democracy" in China as well as claims that only "Thai-style democracy" is appropriate in Thailand. Less well known is a pro-democratic stance in Asia rooted in the region's major religious traditions. These apparently contradictory discourses have been dialectically related in the post–Cold War era: authoritarian rulers reacted to universalist claims about democracy with assertions of cultural particularism which, in turn, triggered a reaction by Asian democrats who pointed to the liberal character of world religions practiced in the region. While the civilizational critique of "Western" democracy (the origins of which can be traced to Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan) has contributed to democratic decline in the region, there has also been push back by offering an interpretation based on East Asia's major religious traditions to show that "Asian values" are not incompatible with democracy.

The 1990s debate over "Asian values" initiated by then prime minister, the late Lee Kuan Yew and backed by government-linked intellectuals in Singapore such as Kishore Mahbubani (Emmerson 2013) as well as, to a lesser extent, by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and regime-friendly thinkers in Malaysia, signaled the post–Cold War rise of civilizational critiques of "Western" democracy in East Asia.[1] A related tendency has been the call by "political Confucianists" (Bell 2010; Fan 2012; Jiang 2013) to replace Western-style parliamentarianism with an elitist system of representation

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[1]It is often mistakenly assumed that the "Asian values" discourse disappeared after the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98. While put on the defensive—critics sarcastically pointed out that family-based "Asian values" now seemed responsible not for the economic rise but rather the prevalence of cronyism in the region—Asian advocates of this illiberal discourse transformed it into a culturalist notion of "good governance" that has remained influential in the region (Teehankee 2007; Thompson 2015). Having fallen victim to the pervasive neoliberal discourse (Jarvis and Carroll 2014) that criticized Asia's poor business culture, there was understandably considerable *schadenfreude* when the 2008–9 Western Lehman Brothers crisis occurred, showing that "the U.S. and other 'advanced' economy emperors whom we previously believed to be fully clothed in their pinstripe suits were actually stark naked and didn't know how to run a financial system either" (Pais 2013).

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based more on merit than popular participation. That there is interest in Communist Party circles in such "Confucianist" arguments is shown by the increasing focus on the "Singapore model," including a culturalist justification of authoritarianism (Ortmann and Thompson 2014). An earlier anti-liberal culturalist argument was propagated by the authoritarian regime of Sarit Thanarat in Thailand ("Thai-style democracy") in the late 1950s, which has reemerged in some anti-electoral "yellow" discourses since the political turmoil that followed the toppling of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006 and the reimposition of military rule (Ferrara 2015; Hewison and Kengkij 2010; Thak 2007).

Besides meeting opposition in liberal democratic circles in the West, this discourse has also been challenged within Asia itself. Asian democrats claim that democracy is not just a "Western" concept but also finds indigenous expression. Drawing on Buddhist, Confucianist, Christian, and Muslim traditions, they argue that liberal ideas of popular participation and the justness of opposition to despotic rule are principles deeply rooted in these respective religions. Kim Dae Jung (1994) rebutted Lee Kwan Yew in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, arguing that Confucianism had strong democratic tendencies. In Southeast Asia, prominent oppositionists such as Myanmar's Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (1995) formulated a rebuttal to an "Asian values"–style critique of democracy in Buddhist terminology. Anwar Ibrahim—still a leading opponent of one-party dominant rule in Malaysia despite his recent reimprisonment—argued in favor of democracy in Islamic terms (Anwar 1996), as did Muslim democrats in Indonesia in opposition to Suharto's dictatorship (Hefner 2000; Uhlin 1997). In the Philippines, prominent opponents of the Marcos dictatorship used Catholic Christian imagery as part of their critique of authoritarian rule.

Advocates of "Asian values" and proponents of "Asian democracy" stand in a dialectical relationship to one another. Several prominent authoritarian thinkers in the region warned of the attempt by Western countries—freed of geostrategic constraints after the collapse of European communism—to impose their values, including democracy, on non-Western countries despite differences in culture. Cultural particularism was used to counter supposed universal norms. But throughout East Asia during the late Cold War and early post–Cold War period, domestic oppositionists attempted to increase political space or even bring about democratic transition in a number of countries in the region: the Philippines in 1986, South Korea in 1987, Taiwan in the late 1980s through 1996, Mongolia in 1990, Thailand in 1992, Indonesia in 1998, Malaysia in 1998, and Singapore since the 1980s. The "Asian values" discourse was also employed in the effort to fend off these domestic pressures to introduce democracy (Connors 2012; Thompson 2001). This attack put pro-democracy campaigners on the defensive, leading them to reinterpret culturalist arguments to favor their struggle for political liberties. While these two competing but related discourses cannot be reduced to mere instrumentalist aims, such an analysis helps illuminate why both authoritarian apologists and democracy advocates found it useful to express their arguments in culturalist terms. Although done within their respective national contexts (with varying degrees of international resonance), collectively and cumulatively these discourses can be seen as part of a struggle over the normative meanings that can be derived from culture for opposed political projects. This was less a "clash of civilizations" between Asia and the West than an intraregional conflict between illiberal and democratic Asian interpretations of their own political cultures.

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Civilizational Critique

Advocacy of "Asian values" by authoritarian leaders and government-linked elites in Singapore and Malaysia provoked a (brief) international debate about the appropriateness of democracy in non-Western countries in the early 1990s (Emmerson 1995; Neher 1994; Robison 1996; Rodan 1996; Sen 1997).[2] This culturalist line of argumentation in East Asia is strikingly similar to earlier efforts to shield authoritarian cultures from the demands of universal democratic civilization, particularly in Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan, as will be discussed below. "Asian values" can be understood as a culturalist discourse that suggests that individualist, competitive, "Western"-style liberal democracy is inappropriate in more collectivist and consensual Asian societies. It is not a claim "about the absoluteness of Asian values, but about their appropriateness given the circumstances in which Asian societies exist" (Connors 2012, 264). Thus a key premise in the "Asian values" discourse is cultural relativism (Barr 2000, 310). Norms proposed as universal, particularly related to human rights, are, upon closer examination, actually "Western" in origin and applicability. Asia is radically divergent from the West because of its distinct historical and cultural background. National cultures are unique, incomparable with any other, and not subject to universal (read "Western") norms. The basic premise of this authoritarian culturalist discourse about democracy is that there is no general standard of democracy but only culturally specific ones, including a kind of "democracy with Asian characteristics," to paraphrase the Chinese Communist Party's still official socialist ideology. What is commonly proclaimed as the universal character of democracy is in fact a "Western" version of it involving bridled freedom and selfish individualism. This runs counter to Asian collectivist and hierarchical cultural traditions. The dangers of imposing Western culture in Asia underline the importance of establishing a culturally appropriate form of rule.

The "Asian values" discourse can be best summed up as a series of dichotomies: cultural particularism versus universalism, the nation-cum-family versus individualism, social and economic rights over political rights, and noninterference in a country's domestic affairs rather than the enforcement of international norms (Hoon 2004, 155). Jeffrey Herf (1984) has argued that such dichotomies were prominent among late nineteenth-century German thinkers concerned to distinguish collective, hierarchical German culture from individualistic, libertarian French civilization. Conservative proponents of German "culture" versus French "civilization" rejected what they claimed was an attempt to impose supposedly universal values on Germany, a point made by Norbert Elias (1997) in his influential study of the "process of civilization" (Thompson 2000). By not democratizing despite economic development, Germany had followed a different "path" from not just France, but also Britain and the United States, something German ideologues of Imperial Germany were keenly aware of and emphasized as a virtue rather

[2]Other authoritarian developmentalist rulers in Asia had earlier resorted to this line of argumentation. In South Korea, Park Chung-hee declared in 1970 that loyalty to the state was of greater importance than popular participation: "[I]t is commonly recognized that democracy as practiced in the United States, France or England is not appropriate to Korea" (cited in Knight and Heazle 2011, 170). But during the Cold War these arguments were less important as *realpolitik* dictated Western support for authoritarian rule against the "communist threat."

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than as a deficiency in their country's modernization (Smith 2008). The *Sonderweg* (special or separate path) was widely considered by historians to be a key factor in Germany's authoritarian "revolution from above" (Moore 1966) and a reason for the Nazis' rise to power (Smith 2008). By distinguishing between Western civilization and German *Kultur*, ideologists were able to claim that industrialization did not necessarily lead to democratization, for democracy was alien to German culture.

After systematically studying several Western countries, the leaders of Meiji Japan adopted the "German model" (Martin 1995), including its culturalist arguments about modernity (Thompson 2010). Scholars have demonstrated that the Meiji reformers preferred the example of the Prussian state to English parliamentarianism because of the former's illiberal politics, executive autonomy, state-centered economic planning, and top-down social welfare measures (e.g., Lehmbruch 2001; Martin 1995; Pyle 1974). The Meiji reformers also adopted the Prussian apologists' discourse of cultural particularism with its critique of "Western civilization." The Meiji-era slogan *wakon-yōsai* ("Japanese spirit, Western technology") (Carr 1994) summed up this attitude. In the interwar period, the controversial "Kyoto school" philosophers argued that modernity could be "overcome" by a reliance on Asian, and particularly Japanese, cultural values (Harootunian 2002; Heisig 2001; Williams 2004).[3] In doing so, they were echoing the civilizational critique of conservative German culturalists.

The imperial German critique of Western civilization helps us better understand the nature of the "Asian values" debate by showing that the real issue involved is not "Asia" versus the "West," but rather authoritarian versus democratic modernity. Imperial Germany was a European country whose ideologues denied that it belonged to Western civilization. But this claim to cultural difference merely disguised a dispute about the way in which the modern world should be constructed. Conservative thinkers in Imperial Germany, like today's "Asian values" advocates, tried to prove that authoritarianism could go hand-in-hand with an advanced form of modern living. As mentioned above, in Meiji Japan, which at the outset of its modernization project had opted for a "German" path of authoritarian modernization after studying various Western models (Martin 1995), it was common to stress values indigenous to *Toyo* (Eastern Ocean) and reject *Seiyo* (Western Ocean) norms. In this sense, advocates of "Asian values" are drawing on a familiar authoritarian culturalist repertoire when denouncing Western norms as being inappropriate in a modernizing Asian context. This has led Kanishka Jayasuriya (1998) to compare the "Asian values" debate with Jeffrey Herf's (1984) description of Imperial Germany's "reactionary modernism."

Confucian Values in China

Many Chinese authors writing about Singapore consider the city-state's authoritarian political system and its record of "good governance" a regime form more suitable to China than the Western model of liberal democracy (Ortmann and Thompson 2014).

[3]This has led to the criticism that the Kyoto school's stress on non-Western, Asian norms is plagued by Japanese nationalism. The Kyoto school has long been accused of helping justify Japan's military aggression in the name of "Pan-Asianism" (Davis 2014; Williams 2004).

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Since Singapore's population is mainly ethnic Chinese, these scholars consider Singapore the country most culturally similar to China, sharing with the mainland conservative "Asian values" that are inborn and unchangeable (Li 1997; Zhang 2006). Following the arguments of Lee Kuan Yew, they deny the universal applicability of liberalism, considering it unsuitable not only during the developmental process but even when the country is fully modernized. Asian countries will always depend on the strong rule of a small elite and restrict the freedoms of its citizens in the interest of economic growth and political stability. Instead of checks-and-balances and multi-party democracy, the Asian form of "democracy" emphasizes strong government with values shaped by moral leadership and society subjugated to national concerns. Political opposition is seen as detrimental to the state and society. For authoritarianism to be truly effective, leaders need to act in the interest of the people, which can be accomplished through the reinforcement of Confucian values, which are distinct from liberal, "Western" ones.[4]

After the bitter attacks of the Mao years, a neo-Confucian discourse emerged in China beginning in 1978. The same year that Deng Xiaoping launched economic reforms, the Symposium on Confucianism was held at Shandong University (Berger 2004). The influence of Lee Kuan Yew on this "Confucian turn" in China was evident with Lee's appointment as honorary chairman of the China-sponsored International Confucius Association in 1994. In the meantime, Lee had befriended Deng when he visited Singapore in 1978, offering advice on China's authoritarian development, which helped ignite "Singapore fever" in China (Peh 2009).

The effort to revive Confucianism with the decline of communism as a guiding ideology in China has been enthusiastically supported by several leading intellectuals (Bell 2010; Fan 2012). One influential variant of this has been the "political Confucianism" advocated by Jiang Qing (2013). His alternative to political equality is a trilateral parliament that confines popular representation to only one house, which is flanked by the *Tongru Yuan* (House of Exemplary Persons), which represents the Confucian legacy, and the *Guoti Yuan* (House of the Nation), made up of ethnic and cultural representatives. The hope of these conservative Confucianists is that the return of this traditional thought, with its emphasis on hierarchy, will enhance the obedience of the people to the government and avert the desire for more individualist values such as those found in liberal democracy. While the political Confucianist vision is viewed critically in orthodox party circles because of its critique of communism and advocacy of (limited) parliamentarianism, these views put forward by thinkers such as Jiang suggest a growing intellectual interest in conservative Confucianist "solutions" to China's problems of modernization (Bell 2010).

[4]Ironically, many of the lessons these Chinese observers believe they have learned from Singapore can be traced back to Lee Kuan Yew's interest in the "Meiji model" of authoritarian developmentalism. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Lee exhorted his country's citizens to "learn from Japan." In particular, he drew culturalist lessons from the Japanese experience, helping to inspire the "Asian values" discussion in Singapore as "appropriate for economic growth and societal cohesion" but also inspiring the implementation of a "Japanese style system for internal security, surveillance and control" (Ramcharan 2002, 12). Chalmers Johnson (1995, 47) has suggested that authoritarian elites in Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan developed and propagated "ideologies to convince the public" that "culture" and "history" were decisive, not "political decisions," a practice clearly emulated by Singapore's Lee.

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The significance of the Chinese interest in developing a culturalist justification for nondemocratic rule is that it is part of the ideological struggle for China's soul. This battle is complicated by the fact that a (neo-) Maoist faction of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to resist the introduction of Confucianism into broader Chinese society, as symbolized by the mysterious nighttime removal of a large statue of Confucius near Tiananmen Square in April 2011 (Jacobs 2011). But Pang Qin (2013) has suggested that while powerful factions in the central state have resisted "Confucianizing" the CCP, local governments acting as "ideological reformers" have moved to co-opt a growing and already widespread urban middle-class interest in reviving Confucianism in order to strengthen the local party's legitimacy. Advocacy of political Confucianist ideas by intellectuals and its growing influence in civil society make it potentially a much more significant ideological force than the semi-official, but societally shallow advocacy of "Asian values" in Singapore.

"Thai-Style Democracy"

One of the most surprising manifestations of the critique of "Western" civilization in the name of local culture occurred over the last decade in Thailand. Thailand has one of the longest democratic traditions in the region, with both the monarchists and military leaders claiming that they intended to introduce democracy at the time of the 1932 coup that ended the country's absolute monarchy.[5] While democratically elected governments alternated with military rule throughout much of post–World War II Thailand, by the late 1990s there was a growing sense among Thai intellectuals—culminating in the 1997 constitution, widely considered the most liberal in the country's history—that democracy was gradually becoming the only game in town (Kuhonta 2008). But a civilizational critique of democracy, originally made in the late 1950s, was revived by groups opposed to Thaksin Shinawatra in the name of protecting the monarchy, suggesting that the rules of the game in Thai politics had rapidly changed. With the most recent military coup of May 2014 seen as the most repressive since the mid-1970s, Prajak Kongkirati (2015) has spoken of the end of the democratic "transition paradigm" in Thailand.

The military regime of Sarit Thanarat (1957–63) propagated "Thai-style democracy" to justify its pro-monarchy, paternalist rule (Thak 2007). This discourse was revived during "yellow shirt" (pro-monarchy) circles after protests against Thaksin Shinawatra began in 2005 (Ferrara 2015; Hewison and Kengkij 2010). This variant of a civilizational critique of Western democracy was linked to what Somchai Phatharathananunth (2006) has termed "elitist civil society" to characterize ideas that emerged from an elite reformist movement in Thailand in the 1990s. Prawase Wasi and other prominent public

[5]An interesting exercise in this regard is to visit the Prajadhipok Museum in Bangkok, with its exhibit about the Bangkok Kingdom's seventh king, Prajadhipok, or Rama VII, and its narrative that the king, who was displaced by (and later abdicated because of) the 1932 coup, had begun introducing democracy into the kingdom. However inaccurate most historians consider this claim to be, it is also striking that the "Democracy Monument" in the middle of Bangkok, erected by the military rulers in the 1930s, was a rallying point in 1973 of student protesters who called on the king to restore democracy (Prajak 2012).

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intellectuals in Thailand began articulating a paternalist ideology in their capacity of "royal liberals" (Connors 2008) within the "network monarchy" (McCargo 2005) of key elites in the Thai establishment led by the monarchy, the military hierarchy, as well as leading businessmen and bureaucrats with close ties to both. In the Thai context, "the elite civil society concept emphasizes cooperation between the state and social organizations," claiming that both "are components of 'civil society.'" Tellingly, such an "elitist" symbiotic view downplayed the importance of "civic mindedness" at the grassroots level. On the contrary, Prawase "believed that building civil society from below had no future in Thailand" (Somchai 2006, 7). In part this was due to the defeat of the Thai Communist Party in the late 1970s. But it was also because of an ideology of "partnership" that, in order to avoid confrontation, Prawase proposed between the state, businesses, NGOs, local elites, and intellectuals. In an effort to achieve "good governance," civil society should be led by "good" and "capable" elites in order to carry out necessary reforms.

Revelations by close friends turned enemies and major financial scandals were triggers that led to civil society mobilization against the government of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2005. In Thailand, the military overthrow of Thaksin in 2006, backed by "tank" (i.e., pro-military) intellectual supporters, was criticized as being a "coup for the rich" against Thaksin's pro-poor policies (Ungpakorn 2007). But military rule was weak and incompetent, leaving new elections as the only way out. After a pro-Thaksin successor party won at the polls (after his earlier populist party had been banned), "civil society" protests against Thaksin and his supporters were revived, culminating in the occupation of Bangkok's international airport until the pro-Thaksin government was removed from power in an indirect coup in December 2008. But it was not only civil society's tactics that had radicalized: it abandoned any pretense of defending liberal democracy, calling for a sweeping "new politics" that would involve an undemocratic restructuring of the political order, with 70 percent of the seats in parliament to be appointed.

People's Alliance for Democracy leaders openly and repeatedly said that "representative democracy is not suitable for Thailand," calling instead for a form of "democratic" governance appropriate to Thai culture. More recently, in protests that began in late 2013 against an elected government headed by Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, pro-royalist protester and former Democrat politician Suthep Thaugsuban called for an unelected "people's council" to replace the "Thaksin regime" (*Nation* 2013). His justification was that, on the one hand, the "tyranny of the majority" keeps winning elections despite its alleged corruption, and on the other hand, he has renewed the Democrats' longstanding accusation that Thaksin is "anti-monarchy" and "un-Thai" (Chairat 2013). Sarinee Achavanuntakul (2013) comments on this phenomenon, invoking a vulgar Thai expression often used in this context: "Many PDRC [People's Democratic Reform Committee] supporters do not deny this plan amounts to a temporary suspension of democracy. That's alright, they say; Thailand has a unique culture and a unique set of circumstances; we do not need to 'follow the white man's ass' [*tam gon farang*] as a popular idiom goes." In this regard, Federico Ferrara (2015) has argued that "Thainess" must be recognized as a modern political ideology rather than mistaken for a timeless expression of cultural values. He also points to its recent origins and self-serving character. This pro-royalist discourse portrays "Western democracy" as incompatible with the Thai identity, which goes far in explaining Thailand's unstable mixture of attempts at

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establishing democratic rule and authoritarian overthrow since the 1932 coup ended the country's absolute monarchy (Ferrara 2015). The military government that seized power in a May 2014 coup promulgated a repressive interim constitution and, as of this writing, is writing a new constitution that will change Thailand into an electoral authoritarian regime with a fully appointed senate and most power invested in nonelected "independent institutions" justified in the name of rule by "good people" who understand the true character of Thai values (Puangthong 2014).

Democrats and Culture in Asia

Many democrats in Asia began articulating a cultural defense of democracy as a reaction to the authoritarian critique of "Western civilization." Drawing on the precedents and justifications found in the region's major religious traditions, they argued that democracy and human rights are not exclusively "Western" but have deep roots in local cultures. In contrast to Asian authoritarians who denounce "Western democracy" in the name of cultural particularism, democracy advocates in Asia find universal democratic values embedded in religious culture. The most high-profile example of this phenomenon was Kim Dae Jung's answer to Lee Kwan Yew entitled "Is Culture Destiny? The Myth of Asia's Anti-Democratic Values," published in the prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs*, and widely read in policy circles (Kim 1994). In this essay, he offered a culturalist defense of democracy based on participatory elements in Confucianism and Confucian-influenced Korean history.[6] In Southeast Asia, Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid denounced the attempt to use cultural relativism to undermine democracy in the region while invoking the democratic lessons that can be learned from Islam, as did Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia (Hoon 2004). Aung San Suu Kyi (1995) formulated a rebuttal to the "Asian values"–style critique of democracy in Buddhist culturalist terms, a strategy adopted by oppositionists elsewhere in the region as well.

These advocates of democracy in Asia claim that democratic rule cannot be dismissed as a Western cultural phenomenon because it finds indigenous expression in religious values. Drawing on Buddhist, Muslim, or Christian arguments, it is claimed that popular participation and the justness of opposition to despotic rule are principles deeply rooted in the region's many religious cultures. Anwar Ibrahim, now the leading opponent of one-party rule in Malaysia, made a pro-democratic argument in Islamic terms in Malaysia (Anwar 1996), as did Muslim democrats in Indonesia in opposition to Suharto's dictatorship (Hefner 2000; Uhlin 1997). In the Philippines, the assassination of oppositionist Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. was quickly put in the folk cultural context of Christ's passion (*pasyon*) (Ileto 1985). Aquino—like the country's national hero Jose Rizal, who was

[6]A very old question beyond the scope of this paper is whether Confucianism should be understood as a "religion" or an ethical, cultural tradition in East Asia. Interestingly, conservative advocates of Confucian-style "democracy," such as the "political Confucianists" discussed above, stress the particularistic cultural character of Confucianism that distinguishes it from Western traditions. Democracy advocates such as Kim Dae Jung, by contrast, point to the universal nature of Confucian teachings that parallel those of the West: "There are no ideas more fundamental to democracy than the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Tonghak [a native Korean religion]. Clearly, Asia has democratic philosophies as profound as those of the West" (Kim 1994, 191).

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executed in 1896 by the Spanish for advocating reform in the colony—was seen to have a Christ-like willingness to sacrifice himself for the freedom struggle of his nation.

In her writings, Aung San Suu Kyi has argued that culture does not determine politics. "A nation may choose a system that leaves the protection of the freedom and security of the many dependent on the inclinations of the empowered few; or it may choose institutions and practices that will sufficiently empower individuals and organizations to protect their own freedom and security" (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995, 53). But she has also contextualized this fight for democracy in Burmese Buddhist culture, emphasizing how the meditation practice of *vipassana* (insight contemplation) stresses the universality of human freedom. She invoked this practice of Buddhist meditation both as a personal response to the regime's repression and as a key instrument in her country's democracy struggle against military rule (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991; Houtman 1999).

Conclusion

A civilizational critique of "Western" democracy (the origins of which can be traced to Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan), denouncing individualism and claims to universalism in favor of collectivist "Asian" cultural norms, has been opposed by a cultural affirmation of democracy in Asia, invoking religious justifications of and finding precedents for popular political participation. These apparently contradictory discourses have been dialectically related in the post–Cold War era: authoritarians reacted to universalist claims about democracy with claims of cultural particularism, which triggered a defense by Asian democrats who pointed to universal lessons of world religions practiced in the region.

"Asian values" were championed by (Westernized) officials and intellectuals in Singapore and Malaysia at a time when the West was engaged in "end of history"–style democracy promotion after the end of the Cold War and pro-democracy movements in both countries were challenging electoral authoritarian rule. In this context, Singapore's then prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, decried "Western" democracy, a free press, foreign television, and pop music, "which could bring the country down" (*Economist* 1992, 46–47). As an antidote to all that was wrong with Westernization, an "Asian values" discourse could be used to justify both draconian laws regarding personal behavior and the crackdown on political opposition. It created an ideology to combat both individualism and democratic tendencies. At about the same time in Malaysia, Prime Minister Mahathir defended "Asian" notions of governance and accused the West of "ramming an arbitrary version of democracy" down the country's throat (Vatikiotis 1992, 17). Similar to the People's Action Party's argument in Singapore, the Malaysian government used such culturalism to discredit demands for liberal democracy and individualism. Like in Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan, the real issue was not about supposed inherent differences in political culture but between authoritarian and democratic versions of modernity.

China began studying the "Singapore model" in earnest in the 1990s, and its interest in tiny Singapore notably increased during the recent power transition in China in 2012. Xi Jinping has shown particular interest in following Singapore's lead, which is seen to be a key inspiration for his anti-corruption campaign, the centralization of the national party's powers, and the crackdown on dissent (*Bloomberg* 2015; Liu and Wang 2015). The Chinese Communist Party has also been experimenting with various forms of political

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Confucianism propagated by conservative intellectuals as part of a new state ideology. Although controversial in some central CCP circles, a Confucian discourse was co-opted by some conservative leaders and local party elites as a justification for continued one-party rule by the CCP.

Furthermore, in the cycle of protests that have rocked Thailand since 2005, an anti-Thaksin, pro-monarchy, "yellow" discourse has articulated a paternalist ideology that in order for Thailand to achieve "good governance," the country should be led by "good" and "capable" elites in order to carry out necessary reforms. Renewed protests against the "Thaksin regime" that began in late 2013 and culminated in the May 2014 coup openly denounced "Western-style" electoral democracy as the "tyranny of the majority," which is "un-Thai." The country's current military rulers are using "Thai-style democracy" cultural arguments to justify what is now arguably the most repressive regime the country has had in a generation.

By contrast, many advocates of democracy within Asia claim that democratic rule cannot be denounced as "Western" because it finds indigenous expression in Asian religious traditions. Drawing on Buddhist, Christian, Confucianist, and Muslim traditions (based on the dominant world religion in each of these East Asian countries), it is argued that popular participation and the justness of opposition to despotic rule are principles deeply rooted in these religions. While the civilizational critique has contributed to "democratic recession" in the region, there has also been push back by offering an interpretation based on East Asia's major religious traditions to show that "Asian values" are not incompatible with democracy.

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