Triumph of the West?
The Politics of Legitimacy in Asia

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China's increasing economic prosperity has raised questions regarding its regional and global political ambitions. Assuming the continuing economic rise of China, some diagnose a 'China Threat', arguing that China's deployment of economic, military and 'soft' power will inevitably challenge American hegemony.¹ Others dissent, claiming that China's rise will pose no threat because it has been sustained by an international economic and political architecture that will also constrain its imperial reach.² Some go further, however, arguing that the recent dominance of the west has been an historical aberration, and that the rise of China will return us to the historical balance of the Central Kingdom. Relying on the notion of contending 'civilisations', they claim we are at the end of the western era and at the threshold of an Asian 21st century.³

In this article I question whether the increasing economic, political and cultural importance of China, and Asia more generally, will in fact lead to an Asian 21st century. Though 'East' and 'West', 'Oriental' and 'Occidental', 'Europe' and 'Asia', can sometimes be useful as short-hand descriptions, their specific technical use by civilisation and world historians tends to obscure the complex intellectual and political interrelationships that inform these terms. My reference to the west will be much more specific – it is to those ideas that have their origins or were developed historically in the west but claimed to have universal validity; a rejection of classical and pious approaches to political thought and practice, in favour of human independence, self-sufficiency and enlightenment that came to be comprehended under the general formulation of 'modernity'. My argument is that the continuing dominance of modernity in the region, specifically of those ideas that can trace their origins to the west, means that the rise of Asia will be articulated in 'western' terms, thereby reinforcing the importance of modern ideas and the practices shaped by them. The rise of China and the increasing influence of Asia in international politics will not

¹ For claims that due to economic limitations, environmental degradation and domestic political instability China will be unable to sustain its current prosperity see Beeson (2009); Bijian (2005). On the 'China Threat' see Yee and Storey (2002); Broomfield (2003). For an overview see Friedberg (2005). Mearsheimer (2006) makes the strongest case for potential conflict, but see also Cohen (2007).

² See, for example, Ikenberry (2004; 2008); Shambaugh (2005); Christensen (2006);

³ See, for example, Jacques (2009); Huntington (1996); Desnoyers (1997). These views are not confined to the west. Zhang (2004) argues that the Chinese have a 'Central Kingdom Complex', 'generated by the ancient history when China was the center of East Asian civilization, implying that the Chinese elites see the country's rise now as recovering something lost in the past and not grabbing anything new.' Compare this assessment with Spakowski (2009), who notes the importance of nationalism in Chinese accounts of world history. For a detailed overview of contemporary Chinese theoretical engagement with modern liberal thought see Metzger (2005).

therefore inaugurate an Asian century, but will rather confirm the continuing influence of modernity's political conceptions and practices.

In the discussion that follows I first examine the civilisation scholars' approach to understanding the rise of China and Asia, especially their conception of the 'state', for evaluating their claims regarding China's rise and its implications for the region and for world politics more generally. I then outline the modern origins of the concept of the state, and how it was readily taken up by Asian nations, thereby defining the character of international legitimacy in the region. In the final section I explore the extent to which modern concepts of legitimacy, such as performance, nationalism and democracy, are influential in determining domestic legitimacy in the region. My overall conclusion is that both internationally and domestically, the concept of political legitimacy reveals the continuing influence of modern ideas in Asia, suggesting that the success of China and Asia will not introduce a new type of 'Asian' politics, or restore a more ancient kind, but simply confirm the dominance of modernity in shaping contemporary thought and practice.

Triumph of Civilisations?

The best known recent account of the comparative analysis of civilisations is Huntington's (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. But as Huntington (1996, 40) observes, his research draws on an extensive scholarship on world history and comparative civilisations by distinguished historians, sociologists and anthropologists.⁴ The starting point for these scholars is the premise that human history is best understood in terms of 'civilisations' or 'cultures', defined especially by religion. Though there is broad agreement among civilisation scholars regarding the major civilisations in history, such as the 'Sinic' or 'Western', the total number of civilisations in world history remains contested.⁵ There is also some dispute regarding the character of the dynamic interaction of these civilisations.

There is something compelling about comparative civilisational history. Its insightful recognition of cultural, societal and mythic aspects of life, and its comprehensive claims that provide a coherent account of the world and its changing

⁴ Modern debates are influenced by early civilization scholars, such as Spengler (1932), who predicts the end of the west, and Toynbee (1970), who posits a new study of historical comparative 'societies' or 'civilizations'. For more recent works see Krejčí (2000); Duara (1991); Mazlish (2001); Cox and Schechter (2002).

⁵ For an early account of the 'historiologists' who have pursued the theme of civilisation as well as an enumeration of their different forms of civilisation see Wescott (1970).

orders are only some of the strengths of such an approach. But the very grandeur of civilisation seems oblivious to the detailed, specific and contingent that do not accord with its overarching narratives. Its epochal focus seems to put its claims beyond immediate or quotidian contestation or refutation. Importantly, it seems curiously deaf to those claims based on might and right, of power and virtue, of force and justice. It seems, in short, indifferent to politics. Accordingly it would appear that in adopting a political approach, where we examine Asian politics in terms of the state and political legitimacy, we will be unable to confront or even repudiate civilisational claims of an Asian 21st century. The two approaches, it seems, do not meet or engage each other; they talk past each other. This fundamental difference in approach cannot be resolved by undertaking a politics-based critique of the civilization perspective that challenges the accuracy of its definitions and its methodological rigour.⁶ We are therefore confronted with a formidable intellectual impasse.

One way of overcoming such an obstacle, I suggest, lies in a deeper understanding of the nature of the world history approach. In their view of the primacy of history, of 'culture' and civilisations, of the potential conflict between these civilisations, all civilisation or world history scholars are indebted to Hegel's historicism. Though these scholars may disagree as to the characterisation of civilisations, whether they clash or build on each other, whether they suggest a 'decline' or 'ascent', all nevertheless concur on one point – they reject Hegel's view that the modern state is the perfected culmination and terminus of world historical progress.⁷ Even if this anti-state or anti-modernity bias, which is in effect a moral repudiation of modernity, has disparate sources, it provides a *via negativa* that directs world historians to all those powerful and appealing aspects of the civilisation approach – its openness to comprehensive notions of 'culture'; its grand narratives of historical change; and the serious possibility of telos or eschatology and theodicy.⁸ Thus 'civilisation' is fundamentally a modern critique of modernity, especially

⁶ For an example of such critiques see Yamazaki (1996). On macro-paradigms see Spohn (2003). For an indicative critique of Huntington's approach see O'Hagan (1995); Matloch (1999). For earlier challenges to Toynbee's approach: see, for example, Watnick (1947).

⁷ Even Fukuyama's (1992) Hegelian and Kojévian account of history, succumbs to Nietzschean reservations ('Last Man').

⁸ Cf Spengler's (1932) rejection of modernity, derived from his Nietzschean rejection of modern nihilism, with Toynbee's religious telos of history as 'Man's Fellowship with the One True God' (Hall 2003, 396), and the neo-Gramscian foundations of Cox and Schechter's (2002) reinterpretation of 'civilisation'.

regarding the status of the modern state. It is on this basis, therefore, that politics and world history can critically engage each other.

Accordingly in the discussion that follows I draw upon the political concept of the modern state, and related ideas such as legitimacy, performance, nationalism, and democracy, to provide a more complex account of the implications of the rise of China. Of course how modernity, with intellectual and historical origins in the ‘West’, shaped the ‘East’ and was in turn influenced by it is a long and complex story (see, for example, Hobson 2004). For this reason we will limit our discussion to a specific, contemporary account, to the reception of the political concept of the ‘state’ by Asian nations after the founding of the United Nations following the end of the Second World War.

State Legitimacy

How has modernity influenced Asian politics? An examination of the concept of the state, and its influence in Asia reveals the extent to which Asian political thought is articulated within a modern western framework. The origin of the modern state is usually traced to the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which ended the Thirty Years War by instituting a new European political order founded on sovereign states. The Peace of Westphalia recognized the principles first laid down at the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, that the prince had the right to determine a state’s religion, and that subjects practising non-established religions had the right to worship freely. It also settled boundaries between principalities and recognised *de jure* the sovereign independence of each. As is evident from the theoretical architects of the modern state, such as Bodin, Hobbes and Grotius, the ‘state’ was a radical innovation.

These theoretical innovations took place within the larger context of the evolution of modern international law of the state, usually presented in terms of theoretical changes made possible by influential scholars, such as Vitoria, Suárez, Grotius, Pufendorf, and Vattel, and major political milestones, such as the Peace of Westphalia, and more recently, the First and Second World Wars and the end of the Cold War.⁹ According to international law, the fundamental or primary legal subject of the international community is the state (Shaw 2003; Cassese 2001). The criteria for statehood in international law are: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined

⁹ On state and sovereignty see Vincent (1987); Hashmi (1997); Spruyt (2000).

territory; (c) government; (d) capacity to enter into relations with other states (Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States, 1933, Art 1). States have fundamental rights, such as the right to exercise jurisdiction over their territory and permanent population, and therefore the right to engage in self-defence. A corollary of such a right is the duty not to intervene in the internal affairs of other sovereign states. Legal equality of states – that is, equality of legal rights and duties – is the other fundamental international law principle. For example, irrespective of size or power, states have the same legal capacities and functions and are entitled to one seat and vote in the UN General Assembly. Thus the concept of ‘sovereign equality’ captures an important aspect of the international legal character of the modern state.

The concept of the state will continue to evolve to meet the changing demands of international politics, and certainly the growing international power of Asian nations will mean they will have greater influence in determining the new formulations in statehood. But such new formulations will unavoidably build on a concept that traces its origins to the West.¹⁰

Legitimacy of the State in Asia

Asian nations readily adopted the concept of the modern state. We can see this most clearly in their support for the newly instituted United Nations, which established an international system founded upon the concept of state sovereignty and therefore legitimacy.¹¹ UN membership represented international recognition of national independence and state sovereignty and therefore prestige and authority.¹² Asian states’ support of the international system could also be seen in their participation in major international conventions and treaties, such as the UN Convention on the *Law of the Sea* (1982), as well as their contribution to regional organisations, such as ASEAN, APEC, and ARF.

Asian nations understood that state status provided significant legal and political advantages. As we have seen in international law statehood conferred territorial sovereignty, equality and rights of non-intervention. Each of these legal

¹⁰ The contemporary debates regarding the state reveal a tension between a western willingness to reconceive the modern state (see for example claims concerning the ‘right to protect’ and humanitarian intervention: Kegley et al (1998); Donnelly (2002); Sørensen (2007)) and an Asian resistance to such innovation, defending the original Westphalian conception of state sovereignty.

¹¹ Founding members included China (1945), Philippines (1945), Thailand (1946), Myanmar (1948).

¹² The importance of UN membership can be seen in the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) attempts since 1949 to represent China at the UN by displacing Taiwan (see Spence 1999, 598).

dimensions proved to have far-reaching political consequences which were welcomed by Asian nations that had been subjected to colonialism, or had uncertain or contested borders. The principle of non-intervention proved to be particularly valuable, precisely because it effectively removed from international scrutiny contentious domestic issues of human rights and democratic governance. Though the principle of non-intervention especially favours highly authoritarian states, such as Myanmar and North Korea, it is equally useful to other nations in the region. China continues to insist on the ‘sacredness’ or inviolability of sovereignty, though its practical application of the principle is more complex (see Li and Zheng 2009; Carlson 2004).

In addition to sovereignty and non-intervention, ‘sovereign equality’ has given unprecedented influence to smaller and less powerful nations in the region that otherwise would have very little diplomatic power in international relations. One consequence has been the possibility of middle-power states inaugurating their own regional fora such as ASEAN (cf Martin Jones and Smith 2007, 184; Narine 2005). For the smallest states in the region, especially the Pacific states with very small populations, limited natural resources, and relative isolation, sovereign equality has been an important means for the pursuing their national interest (Stringer 2006). UN membership (except for Niue and Cook Islands), as well as membership of other international bodies such as the International Whaling Commission (IWC), has allowed these micro states to exercise their voting rights in ways that advance their political and economic interests. Though the legitimacy of such vote-buying has been questioned, the larger question concerns the benefits of such diplomacy – whether it exposes these states to greater control and exploitation by powerful nations.¹³ But as Stringer (2006) demonstrates, the situation is complex, and these Pacific island microstates are not simply pawns in Pacific rim diplomacy. For example, they have benefited from the PRC-Taiwan rivalry in the region, which has as its source Taiwan’s attempt to reassert its legitimacy in the international community through trade and economic assistance.¹⁴ The case of Nauru is instructive. It had since 1985 supported Taiwan but in 2002, with the promise of substantial economic assistance, it signed a joint communiqué establishing ties with China, only to reverse its policy again in 2005 (Stringer 2006, 562-564).

¹³ For critiques see Gillespie (2001); Miller and Dolšak (2007); Petersen (2002, 227). On whaling see Heazle (2006).

¹⁴ On PRC-Taiwan rivalry in the Pacific see Biddick (1989); Zhang (2007); Breslin (2009).

Contesting Asian Political Legitimacy

This brief overview of the nature of international relations in Asia shows the dominance of the modern concept of state, and its associated principles, in the region. But perhaps Asian nations adopted these concepts because they had no choice: the powerful make the rules and consequently western military, political and economic dominance inevitably shapes the nature – and terms – of international politics. The corollary to this argument is that once this power balance shifts, for example with the rise of China, the victors will make new rules. Perhaps the best way to examine this claim is to see how seriously states in the region have adopted western ideas. To what extent was statehood a necessary façade and to what extent did its influence reach deeper into the domestic politics of each country? An examination of the political legitimacy of countries in the region provides a useful means for answering this question.

Political legitimacy, like most political science concepts, is complex and contested.¹⁵ Barker (1990, 11) defines political legitimacy as ‘the belief in the rightfulness of the state, in its authority to issue commands, so that the commands are obeyed not simply out of fear or self-interest, but because they are believed to have moral authority, because subjects believe they ought to obey.’ Barker’s definition brings out an important aspect of legitimacy, which is not simply about compliance, but includes a moral aspect of consent. We need not enter here into a theoretical debate regarding legitimacy – all that is required is to see in what terms countries in the region understand and define it. Such an approach is intended to reveal how each country understands itself by examining the terms it deploys to determine domestic legitimacy contests. What, then, is the character of political legitimacy debates in Asian nations? Traditional forms of rule, including monarchic or ceremonial offices, ethnic and religious mandates, and historical circumstances are obviously powerful foundations of political legitimacy for countries in the region. Consider, for example, the Thai trinity of ‘nation, religion, king’ (*chart, sasana, phra mahakasat*); or the importance of Confucianism in China. Yet recent research examining Asian countries as diverse as China, Vietnam, Singapore, Burma, Indonesia and Malaysia confirms

¹⁵ On the theoretical limitations see Alagappa (1995), Kane and Patapan (2009).

the dominance of three major contending basis of legitimacy in the region: performance; nationalism; democracy (see Kane et al 2010).

Performance – in its simplest formulation the security, stability and prosperity of a nation – is of fundamental importance for the political legitimacy of all countries. But the increasing prosperity of nations that adopted western technological, commercial and institutional initiatives has made performance a major challenge to traditional forms of legitimacy in Asia. The story of Asian economic success is well known. The extraordinary prosperity of Japan set the standard for the ‘Asian Tigers’, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and also for China’s modernisation initiatives. Other countries in the region, notably Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, are now pursuing the same path of development and modernisation that has transformed their Asian neighbours. But the more these changes are adopted, the more performance legitimacy ultimately directs countries in the region to the west, which is widely regarded as the original model for such performance.¹⁶ The increasing stability and economic prosperity of Asia is therefore a testament to Asia’s willing embrace of high standards of living, made possible by the adoption of western ideas and institutions. Though some decry the debilitating aspects of this form of globalisation, its continuing and extensive influence in these countries testifies to the foundational role of modernity in Asia.

A similar case can be made regarding nationalism. All Asian nations, confronted with challenges to their legitimacy, have turned to some form of nationalism to counter such claims. Nationalist claims can be founded upon ethnicity, language, history or tradition and are employed to create a sense of solidarity among often quite disparate populations. But ethnic nationalism tends to be divisive, with separatist tendencies. It is for this reason that countries such as Indonesia and Singapore stress the multi-ethnic makeup of their state, appealing to the concept of a ‘neutral state’. Nationalism can also be employed effectively against other nations, in situations of tension or conflict, with the intention of promoting internal unity or pursuing certain domestic or foreign policy objectives. What is important for our purposes regarding the resort to nationalism, whether domestically or for international purposes, is the fact that nationalism can trace its theoretical origins to the western idea of the ‘nation-state’. Though nation may be understood as an ‘imagined

¹⁶ Compare this with Breslin (2009), who notes that Ramo’s *Beijing Consensus* did much to promote the idea of ‘the uniqueness of the Chinese development model’.

community', in the well-know formulation of anthropologist Benedict Anderson (1991), its modern expression is based on the political idea of a sovereign people, and is therefore linked to the modern concept of the state. Accordingly, the temptation of nations in the region to secure the political legitimacy of their state by resorting to nationalism confirms, once more, the dominance of western political conceptions in Asian politics (see Spakowski 2009, 494).

Democracy represents the most recent challenge to political legitimacy in Asia. All countries in the region use the term democracy and thereby appear to endorse its principles, if not its practices. Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and more recently Indonesia, show the potential for implementing democratic principles in Asia. Other countries, especially Thailand and Malaysia, reveal the inherent difficulties in sustaining democratic initiatives. The case of China, Singapore, Vietnam is more complex – they have sought to embrace western performance without necessarily adopting large-scale democratic reforms. Of course Burma and North Korea are at the other extreme of democratic governance initiatives. The extent to which Asian nations are becoming democratic is certainly an important indication of the power of the idea of democracy in the region. But the intention here is not to evaluate the democratization of Asia – rather, it is to show how democracy as an idea has become a powerfully pervasive aspect of Asian politics. The importance of the idea of democracy in the region is due no doubt to the significant financial, economic and political advantages that accrue to countries that accede to international demands for democratisation. Yet such international compulsion is not the only aspect of the increasing importance of democratic ideas in the region. Demands for democratic reforms are now consistently made in Asian countries, sometimes with considerable success. There are significant democratic pressures at the sub-national level in China, Vietnam and Malaysia.¹⁷ Singapore of course prides itself in holding regular elections, and Burma will be attempting to rectify its repudiation of the 1990 general election with a new round of voting in 2010. All these countries apparently accept the principle of democracy, even if their interpretation and application betrays an unwillingness to implement its measures in full. Therefore, whatever the future of Asian democracy, it is clear that the concept itself, just as performance and nationalism, informs and shapes politics in the region.

¹⁷ Supported, no doubt, by the ASEAN Charter's explicit commitment to democracy.

Politics of Modernity

What conclusion can we reach from our discussion above regarding political legitimacy in Asia? Though political legitimacy is contested, though it confronts traditional and modern conceptions, what is evident is that western ideas, such as technological and material progress, nationalism, and democracy are now an unavoidable and ineradicable part of Asian political debates. It is now very difficult, if not impossible, to remove these modern concepts and ideas from the intellectual landscape in Asia. Consequently, there is no reason to think that the rise of China, if it can be sustained, will lead to a fundamental abandonment of those modern ideas, or their variants, such as the international law principles of state sovereignty, and political concepts of legitimacy, that have to date been so influential in the region.

Importantly, our examination of the long-term implications of the rise of China has also revealed a theoretical aspect of this debate. For some the rise of China portends a fundamental challenge to ‘modernity’, an enterprise initiated in Europe more than five hundred years ago. Fearing the triumph of western modernity, and united only in their opposition to modernity’s reshaping of humanity, civilization scholars look to the ‘East’ in hopeful anticipation of an Asian civilisation that will repudiate the ‘West’ with the promise of a new politics and history. As we have seen, however, this very hope has its source in modernity, thereby confirming modernity’s dominance. Yet in a certain respect this hope reveals and confirms an important aspect of modernity – its contradictions and contestations. It is in this sense that the ‘Triumph of the West’ ironically uncovers the limitations and incompleteness of an otherwise ascendant modernity.

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