

## ASIA

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In recent years political dynamics in Asia can increasingly be understood in terms of the ways in which nations have negotiated and responded to wider processes of economic and cultural globalization. Globalization has represented an encompassing phenomenon characterized by increasingly rapid movements of both economic capital (such as money, goods and corporations) and cultural products (such as media images and films) across national boundaries. On one level, this increasing integration produced specific events of global economic significance in the form of the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s. On another level, domestic political responses to globalization have varied. Images of Asia's new middle classes engaging in forms of consumption practices of commodities such as cell-phones and McDonalds have co-existed with the rise of religious nationalist movements that have equated globalization with westernization and resisted cultural processes of globalization.

In fact globalization has not produced a form of cultural or political homogenization within Asia. Modern nation-states within Asia are marked by significant historical variations in their political, economic and cultural systems. Such variations mean that global processes are managed in varying ways in domestic contexts. Moreover, domestic political processes are usually contingent on local contexts and particular histories. Thus, for instance internal processes of democratization and of ethnic and religious violence are shaped by broader processes of globalization but are not merely pre-determined products of global forces. Such complexities make generalizations about a vast continent such as Asia a difficult task. Nevertheless, certain patterns of political processes and central areas of intellectual inquiry can be analysed. Three important areas which scholars have focused on include (1) transitions in the political economy of Asia, (2) processes of and possibilities for political democratization and (3) the politicization of cultural identities such as religion and ethnicity.

One of the most significant events in recent years was the unfolding of what has come to be called 'the Asian economic crisis'. This global financial crisis that began in July 1997 in Thailand and soon spread to other countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, Indonesia, and the Philippines marked a significant break in the ways in which both political scientists and public analysts had categorized the

political economy of Asia. It was precisely the 'Asian tigers,' the term long used by analysts to characterize the economic efficiency and competitiveness of the economies of East and Southeast Asia that constituted the heart of this crisis. These nations witnessed large losses of foreign capital, significant devaluations in their national currencies and steep declines in their stock markets, problems with debt repayment, and banking crises (Pempel 1999).

In the wake of the Asian economic crisis, political scientists and other analysts have been grappling to understand the causes of this transition in the economic situation of nations which were once upheld as models of economic development for other 'Third World' contexts. In the aftermath of the crisis, public commentators and analysts contributed to an image that the crisis was a specifically Asian phenomenon. In essence, from such a perspective, early images of 'the Asian miracle' which some analysts often attributed to idealized notions of Asian cultural values such as the Confucian work ethic were replaced by generalized notions of Asian corruption and cronyism. Both perspectives, despite their opposing assessments, tend to produce a static definition of a homogenous Asian culture as an explanatory variable of economic success and failure. Such analyses often implicitly reproduce older historical traditions of colonial forms of knowledge which produced images of Asia or 'the Orient' (Said 1978) in terms of particular forms of cultural stereotypes of Asia as exclusively passive and disciplined cultures or essentially corrupt and despotic. For instance, one dominant perspective that emerged early on was that the crisis was a product of a particular form of Asian 'crony capitalism'. On one level this term refers to a situation where collusion and relations of patronage, for instance between the state and domestic businesses and financial institutions in Asia, led to deep-seated forms of financial mismanagement. On another level it refers to networks between firms which constitute business groups in countries such as South Korea and Japan. Gary Hamilton has noted that accusations of cronyism arise from 'the common practice of firms in a group owning each other's shares and loaning each other money, creating a web of interlocking ownership and indebtedness' (1999: 46). While aspects of corruption and collusion can be found in particular contexts in Asian nations, scholars have challenged the notion that a particular Asian form of crony capitalism can be viewed as a primary variable in explaining the economic crisis. Thus, scholars have analysed a range of both domestic and international and both economic and political factors that contributed to the crisis (Godement 1999; Pempel 1999). Hamilton has argued that in contrast to arguments that emphasize the problems of crony capitalism, alliances between firms represent a modern type of capitalism that is not derivative of intrinsic Asian cultural differences but of a distinctive system of manufacturing (Hamilton 1999: 60). In fact, the effects and responses to the economic crisis in Asia have varied in important ways. As T. J. Pempel has argued, the phrase 'the Asian economic crisis' itself masks such significant variations (Pempel 1999: 10). Thus, for instance, while on the one hand Thailand and Indonesia were badly affected by the crisis (MacIntyre 1999), on the other hand the negative economic effects for countries such as China and Taiwan were significantly less.

Such variations raise a deeper point regarding the varying ways in which countries within Asia have been incorporated within and have responded to processes of globalization. Both the effects and responses to the Asian crisis rested in part on the extent and nature of this form of economic incorporation. In some instances, lower

degrees of financial openness sheltered some countries such as China from some of the worst economic effects. Moreover, different states also responded to the crisis in differing ways. Malaysia, for instance, responded by increasing state controls and rejecting foreign aid whereas South Korea turned to lending from the International Monetary Fund linked to a programme of the restructuring of the South Korean economy. Such variations in the effects and responses to the crisis are linked in critical ways to domestic political processes and the particular contexts of individual nations in Asia. The broader question at hand then for an understanding of contemporary politics in Asia is one that examines the ways in which nation-states are affected by and respond to broader processes of globalization. The Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s represents one case where the political dynamics and variations around a particular economic transition can be examined.

A major theme in the study of the political economy of contemporary Asia prior to the events of the Asian economic crisis was the success of the newly industrializing countries of East and Southeast Asia. Countries such as South Korea, Japan and Singapore were held up as models for late industrializing countries in other regions in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The economic success of these 'Asian tigers' was embodied in the production of cultural images of what Robison and Goodman (1996) have called 'the new rich' in Asia. High levels of sustained economic growth in East and Southeast Asia produced new forms of social mobility and the rise of what have been termed the new middle classes usually associated with private sector white collar employment and new forms of consumption practices. Social mobility in the context of such growth was not only linked to economic measures of income levels but to status markers linked to the consumption of new commodities ranging from cell-phones and refrigerators on the one hand to designer brand clothing on the other (Beng-Huat 2000). These middle classes, in effect, represented the beneficiaries of economic globalization and have also served as the public visual symbols of the success of modernization in Asia. The Asian economic crisis has significantly shaken but not dislodged this cultural image of the rising middle classes in Asia.

In fact, the role of the middle classes has been an important question in scholarly debates over political and economic transitions in contemporary Asia. Older paradigms of modernization theory for instance had argued that there was a correlation between economic modernization and political democratization. Thus, in the study of comparative economic and political development, a central argument was that economic development in the form of modernization would lead to democratic political change. This correlation has been refuted in a variety of contexts in which modernization has been undertaken by authoritarian states or politically repressive regimes. In Indonesia, for instance, Jun Honna has pointed out that under President Suharto's regime, modernization ideology gave the military the justification for asserting that political stability rather than democratization was a precondition for development (Honna 2001: 55).

The underlying assumption that is present in approaches that assumed that economic development would further political democratization was that the emergence of the urbanized middle classes would play a central role in the development of civil society and the resulting democratic transition. David Martin Jones has noted that this assumption has been present in two intellectual approaches (1998: 148). The

first is associated with Seymour Martin Lipset's work (1963) which argued that an educated and strong middle class was a necessary condition for a transition to democracy. The second approach has argued that the middle class plays a transformative role after an authoritarian regime has initiated a phase of democratization (Przeworski 1992).

A comparative perspective on contemporary politics in Asia demonstrates that the middle classes have played a contradictory role in the context of processes of democratization. On the one hand, events such as the Tiananmen Square student pro-democracy protests in China in 1989 were an instance of middle-class based efforts for political democratization. The middle classes also played an important role in political processes of democratization in South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand in the 1990s. On the other hand, in other contexts the middle classes have often been dependent on state patronage and thus supportive of the state rather than of the emergence of an autonomous civil society resistant to the state. This dependence has taken a number of forms. In Malaysia, for instance, the Malay middle class was produced through particular state policies of the government led by Malaysia's dominant political party, the United Malay Nationalist Organization (UMNO) particularly the 'New Economic Policy' implemented in 1970. As Maila Stevens has noted, this policy, developed after the rise of ethnic tensions between Malays and Chinese, was focused on redistributing wealth to the Malays through affirmative action and education (Stevens 1998: 95) with the objective that by 1990, 30% of the Malaysian economy would be Malay-owned (Stevens 1998: 119). As Stevens notes, the development of an entrepreneurial Malay middle class was integral to this programme of economic development (1998: 119). Such links between the state and the middle classes are not unique to the Malaysian case. They also characterize other contexts where state bureaucracies and state-managed enterprises in countries such as India and Indonesia have benefited segments of the middle classes through the provision of employment, housing and other benefits. Such links between the state and middle classes have also taken the form of the nationalist orientations of the middle classes in Asia. Support for religious nationalism has often been based amongst urban middle classes. The rise of Islamist movements in contexts such as Indonesia and Malaysia for instance has often drawn on support from the middle classes in rural and urban areas. Meanwhile, in post-colonial India, the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s culminating in a coalition government led by the Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party has also rested on strong support from the urban middle classes (Hansen 1999).

A key concern that such processes raise for political scientists and analysts of contemporary Asia is one that addresses the politicization of cultural identities such as religion and ethnicity. One approach to the study of political culture has argued that Asian middle-class culture must be understood as antithetical to liberal democratic values. David Martin Jones for instance has argued that Pacific Asia has been characterized by an 'illiberal political culture' which has not been providing a suitable context for the emergence of autonomous civil society (1998). His argument points to important analyses of the role of the state in producing a political culture that limits democratic political participation. Moreover, such an approach interrogates new versions of modernization theory which seek to argue that economic development necessarily produces democratic values and progressive political change (Flanagan

and Lee 2000). However, arguments that base explanations of political processes on notions of a homogeneous Asian political culture are characterized by a number of problems. Such arguments often rest on overly generalized conceptions of Asian culture, whether such conceptions are viewed as 'positive' or 'negative'. Thus for instance whether explanations or predictions of political transitions are based on notions that Asian political culture is 'illiberal' or an embodiment of democratic values both approaches assume that culture can be understood as a unitary, static concept. Recent research and theory has pointed to the ways in which culture is always a multilayered and contested space (Dirks, Eley and Ortner 1994). Cultural meanings within specific countries in Asia are negotiated and challenged by different social groups. While the state and more dominant groups such as the middle classes may adhere to hegemonic cultural meanings such meanings may be contested and reinterpreted by other social groups. For instance while on the one hand, the state and political parties in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and India have deployed politicized understandings of religion and ethnicity to promote nationalism, on the other hand, social groups such as workers and peasants have often used cultural meanings and traditions to resist and subvert social hierarchies and relationships of power (Ong 1988).

One example of the contested nature of culture can be seen in the role of politicized Hinduism in post-colonial India. The 1990s has witnessed the rise to power of the Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP with its allied cultural organizations have sought to replace secular nationalism of earlier leaders such as Nehru with visions of India as a Hindu nation. In this vision, religious minority groups such as Muslims which constitute 12% of the population and Christians which represent 2% of the population are constructed as outsiders that must assimilate into a Hindu-Indian culture. A central strategy which the BJP and other Hindu nationalist organizations used to gain political support rested on the use of particular forms of religious rituals and symbols that would appeal to popular cultural sentiment. For instance, one central campaign that began in the 1980s was a mobilization to build a temple at Ayodhya, the site where a mosque, the Babri Masjid was located. The mobilization was based on the religious claim that Ayodhya was the birthplace of the Hindu god, Ram. Hindu nationalist organizations deployed a number of culturally oriented strategies to gain mass popular support for this campaign. One strategy was the use of 'yatras' or pilgrimages throughout the country in support of building a Ram temple at Ayodhya. In September 1990 for example, L. K Advani, one of the central leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party, launched a 'Rath yatra', a religious procession in a chariot (rath) that began at a temple located in the western state of Gujarat through western and northern India and was to end at Ayodhya. Local Hindu nationalist groups organized rallies to welcome the procession along the way and local villagers were encouraged to perform religious rituals. The procession sparked serious Hindu-Muslim religious violence and organized pogroms against Muslims (Hansen 1999: 165). The campaign culminated with the forcible destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindu activists in 1992 and the outbreak of religious violence in various parts of India. This example demonstrates the ways in which the politicization of cultural traditions can serve as an important factor in shaping wider national political processes.

Culture is not a static entity. Some understandings of ethnic and religious violence mistakenly assume that such conflicts are ancient phenomena that stem from timeless

conflicts between ethnic and religious groups. Popular media reports of Hindu-Muslim violence for instance often project the view that such conflict stems from a primordial or natural enmity between Muslims and Hindus in India, between Tamils and Sinhalese ethnic groups in Sri Lanka or in relation to anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia. The politicization of Hindu cultural traditions in the form of a nationalist project is a modern phenomenon with historical roots in resistance against British colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The local politicization of such religious traditions does not necessarily lead to religious violence or the anti-Muslim rhetoric associated with current modern Hindu nationalist organizations. Consider one example of the use of the politics of religious rituals of Hindu workers at the local level in factories in Calcutta. Hindu workers celebrate a religious festival called the Vishwakarma Puja. The religious ceremony involves the worship of the god Vishwakarma. In Hindu mythology, Vishwakarma is the architect of the universe and the producer of weapons of the gods. The festival is oriented towards workers, specifically those who work with metal tools. During the festival workers and their unions construct shrines in portions of the factory which become sacred spaces which management cannot enter and workers are able to leave the machines during the day to worship at the shrines without the permission of their supervisors (Fernandes 1997). The religious ritual enables workers to subvert management authority in the factory. The politicization of the ritual in effect enables workers to engage in a form of class resistance that does not lead to conflicts between Muslim and Hindu workers. Such local religious politics thus do not necessarily conform to exclusionary forms of religious nationalism. However, in the 1990s such local cultural practices have increasingly become incorporated within larger processes of Hindu nationalism as the Bharatiya Janata Party's trade union wing has mobilized amongst workers and made one of its demands that the celebration of the Vishwakarma Puja replace May Day as the national labor day. Such examples demonstrate the ways in which cultural identities such as religion become politicized. However, they also caution against assuming that religion or ethnicity are always politicized in the same way.

A central research agenda such examples in contemporary Asia point to is one that addresses when and under what conditions cultural identities become politicized. For instance, a critical area of current research in political science examines the conditions that lead to ethnic conflict and ethnic cooperation in comparative contexts (Fearon and Laitin 1996; Varshney 2001). This represents an important agenda given the continuing forms of local ethnic violence in various parts of Asia such as anti-Chinese ethnic violence in Indonesia and Hindu-Muslim violence in India. A second research agenda which the politicization of such local practices points to is one that addresses the central role of informal politics in shaping broader political and economic outcomes in Asia (Dittmer, Fukui and Lee 2000). A dominant trend within political science is represented by a focus on the formal realm of politics, for instance in terms of formal governmental institutions of the state or of civil society (such as political parties and trade unions). Research studies have however demonstrated that an understanding of politics in Asia also requires the study of the informal realm of politics. This informal realm has been addressed in a number of ways. James Scott (1985), in his classic study of political resistance in Malaysia, for instance, argued that understandings of political and social transformations only in terms of large scale revolutions or protests usually organized by political parties or

other formal organizations provided a limited understanding of rural societies. Such activities have usually been the preserve of the middle classes and intelligentsia. The absence of such activity has then often led to assumptions of political quiescence amongst the peasantry. Challenging this assumption, Scott argued instead for an understanding of the 'everyday acts of resistance' that peasants in Malaysia engaged in. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic research in rural Malaysia he demonstrated the usually hidden small scale acts of political subversion such as 'foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so on' (1958: xvi) which peasants used to resist representatives of the state (for instance tax collectors) and landlords. An analysis of such normally hidden everyday behaviors substantially transforms assumptions that are sometimes made about the political passivity of peasants in Asia and points to the importance of broadening the field of activity which constitutes our definitions of 'politics'. Haruhiro Fukui for instance has argued that state-centric approaches may miss a wide range of informal political practices that are vital for an understanding of contemporary politics of East Asia. For instance, the Chinese state's repressive one-child family planning policy has often been subverted by local practices and resistances as he notes 'not only by many villagers but also by local cadres of the Chinese Communist Party itself' (Fukui 2000: 9; White 1990). Such analyses point to the importance of local, everyday social, political and cultural practices in our understanding of broader phenomena such as state policy and political change.

The significance of local informal and cultural politics has not lessened in the context of current processes of globalization. Contrary to assumptions that globalization would lead to a form of cultural homogenization and to the declining political significance of the nation-state, nationalism continues to represent an important political force in contemporary Asia. Islamic and Hindu nationalism have emerged as strong forces in South Asia in countries like Pakistan and India. Such movements have often been strengthened by globalization as they have mobilized popular sentiment against the threat of westernization often embodied in the cultural symbols of multinational corporations such as MacDonaldis. Local and national responses to such perceived threats of westernization are often cast as attempts at preserving national cultural traditions or indigenous values. However, such responses to globalization cannot be understood in terms of clear-cut conflicts between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. A long tradition of research on Asia has argued against such an opposition and has pointed instead to the ways in which modernity has varying meanings which may draw on internal cultural and social traditions within Asia. For instance in their classic study of Indian politics, *The Modernity of Tradition* (1967) Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph demonstrated the ways in which Gandhi drew on Indian cultural traditions to develop a modern mass-based nationalist movement that led to the formation of an independent modern nation-state in India. Such an approach leads to two important implications for understanding contemporary Asia. First, it demonstrates the ways in which modernity takes different cultural forms in different national contexts. Second, it demonstrates that 'tradition' is not a fixed entity. Rather, it is invented in particular historical and political contexts (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and has often been redefined in the context of modern movements such as nationalism. This approach significantly challenged assumptions of modernization theory, a dominant paradigm used to study

non-Western societies which assumed that there was one path of modernization based on Western models of industrialization. In this paradigm, cultural traditions were either viewed as an obstacle to modernization that needed to be overcome or as a realm that would naturally dissolve in the context of modernization.

The insights of such approaches become important in the context of understanding contemporary politics in Asia. At one level, the prevalence of politicized cultural identities in the form of religious nationalist movements or ethnic conflict has clearly demonstrated that modernization has not led to the dissolution of 'traditional' cultural identities. On the contrary religious nationalist movements often use very modern means of mobilization including for instance new technologies of media and mass communication, organizational structures and modern discourses of nationalism. However, at another level, an understanding of tradition as an invented realm cautions against viewing such movements as a struggle for the preservation of ancient or existing cultural forms. In many instances such movements are engaged in the normative production of cultural standards of behavior which often reproduce internal relationships of power and local social hierarchies such as gender, caste, and ethnicity. This is particularly important when understanding political resistance to contemporary globalization. Such resistances have taken a number of forms. Some forms of resistance have taken a more traditional form in the formal arena of political activity. For instance workers and labor unions have often resisted globalization when it has taken the form of policies of economic restructuring which has led to the retrenchment of workers from their jobs, attempts to change labor laws or cutbacks in state social security and welfare provisions. In contexts such as India, Malaysia or Indonesia, some critics of globalization including politicians and policymakers have focused on the ways in which international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have encroached on national sovereignty and have often tied loans to conditions of economic restructuring. Such criticisms of the IMF were particularly extensive in the period following the Asian Economic Crisis (Cumings 1999: 18).

Beyond the formal realm of politics, another important set of resistances to globalization has focused on the cultural implications of globalization and the notion that globalization in effect will lead to a form of Americanization that will erode indigenous cultural traditions and values in Asia. Such resistances are a response to real cultural changes particularly in relationship to new class-based consumption practices and lifestyles of the new rich and segments of the new urban middle classes in Asia. However, such forms of cultural resistance to globalization often reproduce internal relationships of power. A form of gendered politics often constitutes the heart of this kind of cultural defense against globalization. The reinforcement of conservative social codes regarding women is designated as the foundation of such cultural values. This has been seen most visibly for instance in the discourses of Islamic movements in countries such as Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia and of Hindu nationalist discourses in India. For instance, in the context of globalization in contemporary India, Hindu nationalist groups have organized protests against a wide range of cultural forms that they view as transgressing Indian cultural norms, including beauty contests such as the Miss World beauty pageant held in India and certain kinds of sexually explicit advertisements.

Such forms of resistance do not however represent a general cultural consensus in these contexts. Gender roles vary widely and are shaped by distinctions of caste,

class, religion and region. For instance, while politicized cultural responses to globalization have sought to police the boundaries of middle-class women's social roles, working-class women have formed the primary workforces of multinational corporations that have located their enterprises in various parts of Asia (Ong 1988; Sen and Stevens 1998). The various forms of cultural resistance to globalization represent political processes in which cultural traditions are invented and reproduced by governments, political parties, organizations and social movements. Gender, in this context, serves as a social and symbolic site in which nation-states attempt to preserve social order and manage the social and economic changes that stem from globalization. In contrast to media images which often portray women in Asia as victims of unchanging repressive cultures it is more accurate to understand such cultural practices and their hierarchical gendered codes as the products of a dynamic set of political processes which are often contested by women's organizations within these countries.

An analysis of such local cultural and everyday politics becomes an important part of understanding broader processes such as globalization. Political processes in contemporary Asia reveal that despite the significance of both cultural and economic globalization embodied in the increasing integration of national economies into the global economy, nationalist movements and sentiments have remained an important political force in Asia. This has been in contrast to some approaches which assumed that globalization would lead to the decline of the nation-state and the emergence of a new post-national phase of politics (Appadurai 1996). In most instances, globalization has reinforced rather than weakened nationalism as nation-states attempt to preserve social order in the context of the rapid flows of money, goods and cultural commodities across their borders. Despite the significance of globalization, local and regional politics remain important units of analysis. In addition, given the growing political and economic interdependence between nation-states in the context of contemporary globalization, local politics and regional conflicts in Asia often significantly shape global politics. For instance, China has emerged as a nation with significant global economic and political power. The India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir is a regional conflict with global significance given the nuclear capabilities of both countries. The war in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks on the USA remains a central area of world significance. The 'war on terrorism' has been centrally focused on this region of South Asia and has also extended to areas in Southeast Asia. An understanding of Asia is thus critical for gaining an understanding of global politics.

### Summary

Central areas of inquiry in the study of contemporary Asia have included the question of economic and political transitions and the politicization of cultural identities. Scholars have focused on factors that can explain processes of economic change and political democratization in different countries in Asia. Two important political trends which currently shape politics in Asia are the effects of globalization and the prevalence of ethnic and religious conflict. A dominant paradigm within the discipline of political science has been the rational choice approach to the study of politics. However, political events in Asia demonstrate a need to expand existing research agendas in order to

understand the links between culture and politics. Such an expanded research agenda takes seriously questions that address symbolic politics and local cultural frames of meaning in order to understand political participation and responses to wider political phenomena such as nationalism, globalization and ethnic conflict.

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