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### Democracy with Asian Characteristics

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## Democracy with Asian Characteristics

MARK R. THOMPSON

*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.<sup>1</sup> 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

Mark R. Thompson ([mark.thompson@cityu.edu.hk](mailto:mark.thompson@cityu.edu.hk)) is Acting Head of the Department of Asian and International Studies and Director of the Southeast Asia Research Centre, both at the City University of Hong Kong. <sup>1</sup>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 (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).

## 2 Mark R. Thompson

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

55 Besides meeting opposition in liberal democratic circles in the West, this discourse  
56 has also been challenged within Asia itself. Asian democrats claim that democracy is not  
57 just a “Western” concept but also finds indigenous expression. Drawing on Buddhist,  
58 Confucianist, Christian, and Muslim traditions, they argue that liberal ideas of popular  
59 participation and the justness of opposition to despotic rule are principles deeply  
60 rooted in these respective religions. Kim Dae Jung (1994) rebutted Lee Kwan Yew in  
61 *Foreign Affairs* magazine, arguing that Confucianism had strong democratic tendencies.  
62 In Southeast Asia, prominent oppositionists such as Myanmar’s Daw Aung San Suu Kyi  
63 (1995) formulated a rebuttal to an “Asian values”-style critique of democracy in Buddhist  
64 terminology. Anwar Ibrahim—still the leading opponent of one-party dominant rule in  
65 Malaysia despite his recent reimprisonment—argued in favor of democracy in Islamic  
66 terms (Anwar 1996), as did Muslim democrats in Indonesia in opposition to Suharto’s dic-  
67 tatorship (Hefner 2000; Uhlin 1997). In the Philippines, prominent opponents of the  
68 Marcos dictatorship used Catholic Christian imagery as part of their critique of authori-  
69 tarian rule.

70 Advocates of “Asian values” and proponents of “Asian democracy” stand in a dia-  
71 lectical relationship to one another. Several prominent authoritarian thinkers in the  
72 region warned of the attempt by Western countries—freed of geostrategic constraints  
73 after the collapse of European communism—to impose their values, including democ-  
74 racy, on non-Western countries despite differences in culture. Cultural particularism  
75 was used to counter supposed universal norms. But throughout East Asia during the  
76 late Cold War and early post-Cold War period, domestic oppositionists attempted to  
77 increase political space or even bring about democratic transition in a number of coun-  
78 tries in the region: the Philippines in 1986, South Korea in 1987, Taiwan in the late  
79 1980s through 1996, Mongolia in 1990, Thailand in 1992, Indonesia in 1998, Malaysia  
80 in 1998, and Singapore since the 1980s. The “Asian values” discourse was also employed  
81 in the effort to fend off these domestic pressures to introduce democracy (Connors  
82 2012; Thompson 2001). This attack put pro-democracy campaigners on the defensive,  
83 leading them to reinterpret culturalist arguments to favor their struggle for political lib-  
84 erties. While these two competing but related discourses cannot be reduced to mere  
85 instrumentalist aims, such an analysis helps illuminate why both authoritarian apologists  
86 and democracy advocates found it useful to express their arguments in culturalist terms.  
87 Although done within their respective national contexts (with varying degrees of inter-  
88 national resonance), collectively and cumulatively these discourses can be seen as part  
89 of a struggle over the normative meanings that can be derived from culture for opposed  
90 political projects. This was less a “clash of civilizations” between Asia and the West than  
91 an intraregional conflict between illiberal and democratic Asian interpretations of their  
92 own political cultures.

## 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).<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup>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.”

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., Lehmbuch 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 (Harootyan 2002; Heisig 2001; Williams 2004).<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup>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).

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

198 After the bitter attacks of the Mao years, a neo-Confucian discourse emerged in  
 199 China beginning in 1978. The same year that Deng Xiaoping launched economic  
 200 reforms, the Symposium on Confucianism was held at Shandong University (Berger  
 201 2004). The influence of Lee Kuan Yew on this "Confucian turn" in China was evident  
 202 with Lee's appointment as honorary chairman of the China-sponsored International Con-  
 203 fucius Association in 1994. In the meantime, Lee had befriended Deng when he visited  
 204 China in 1979, offering advice on China's authoritarian development, which helped ignite  
 205 "Singapore fever" in China (Peh 2009).

206 The effort to revive Confucianism with the decline of communism as a guiding ide-  
 207 ology in China has been enthusiastically supported by several leading intellectuals (Bell  
 208 2010; Fan 2012). One influential variant of this has been the "political Confucianism" ad-  
 209 vocated by Jiang Qing (2013). His alternative to political equality is a trilateral parliament  
 210 that confines popular representation to only one house, which is flanked by the *Tongru*  
 211 *Yuan* (House of Exemplary Persons), which represents the Confucian legacy, and the  
 212 *Guoti Yuan* (House of the Nation), made up of ethnic and cultural representatives.  
 213 The hope of these conservative Confucianists is that the return of this traditional  
 214 thought, with its emphasis on hierarchy, will enhance the obedience of the people to  
 215 the government and avert the desire for more individualist values such as those found  
 216 in liberal democracy. While the political Confucianist vision is viewed critically in ortho-  
 217 dox party circles because of its critique of communism and advocacy of (limited) parlia-  
 218 mentarianism, these views put forward by thinkers such as Jiang suggest a growing  
 219 intellectual interest in conservative Confucianist "solutions" to China's problems of mod-  
 220 ernization (Bell 2010).

221  
 222  
 223 <sup>4</sup>Ironically, many of the lessons these Chinese observers believe they have learned from Singapore  
 224 can be traced back to Lee Kuan Yew's interest in the "Meiji model" of authoritarian developmen-  
 225 talism. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Lee exhorted his country's citizens to "learn from Japan." In  
 226 particular, he drew culturalist lessons from the Japanese experience, helping to inspire the "Asian  
 227 Values" discussion in Singapore as "appropriate for economic growth and societal cohesion" but also  
 228 inspiring the implementation of a "Japanese style system for internal security, surveillance and  
 229 control" (Ramcharan 2002, 12). Chalmers Johnson (1995, 47) has suggested that authoritarian  
 230 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.



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

#### 244 245 246 "THAI-STYLE DEMOCRACY"

247  
248 One of the most surprising manifestations of the critique of "Western" civilization in  
 249 the name of local culture occurred over the last decade in Thailand. Thailand has one of  
 250 the longest democratic traditions in the region, with both the monarchists and military  
 251 leaders claiming that they intended to introduce democracy at the time of the 1932  
 252 coup that ended the country's absolute monarchy.<sup>5</sup> While democratically elected govern-  
 253 ments alternated with military rule throughout much of post-World War II Thailand, by  
 254 the late 1990s there was a growing sense among Thai intellectuals—culminating in the  
 255 1997 constitution, widely considered the most liberal in the country's history—that  
 256 democracy was gradually becoming the only game in town (Kuhonta 2008). But a civili-  
 257 zational critique of democracy, originally made in the late 1950s, was revived by groups  
 258 opposed to Thaksin Shinawatra in the name of protecting the monarchy, suggesting that  
 259 the rules of the game in Thai politics had rapidly changed. With the most recent military  
 260 coup of May 2014 seen as the most repressive since the mid-1970s, Prajak Kongkirati  
 261 (2015) has spoken of the end of the democratic "transition paradigm" in Thailand.

262 The military regime of Sarit Thanarat (1957–63) propagated "Thai-style democracy"  
 263 to justify its pro-monarchy, paternalist rule (Thak 2007). This discourse was revived  
 264 during "yellow shirt" (pro-monarchy) circles after protests against Thaksin Shinawatra  
 265 began in 2005 (Ferrara 2015; Hewison and Kengkij 2010). This variant of a civilizational  
 266 critique of Western democracy was linked to what Somchai Phatharathananunth (2006)  
 267 has termed "elitist civil society" to characterize ideas that emerged from an elite reformist  
 268 movement in Thailand in the 1990s. Prawase Wasi and other prominent public  
 269

270  
271 <sup>5</sup>An interesting exercise in this regard is to visit the Prajadhipok Museum in Bangkok, with its  
 272 exhibit about the Bangkok Kingdom's seventh king, Prajadhipok, or Rama VII, and its narrative  
 273 that the king, who was displaced by (and later abdicated because of) the 1932 coup, had begun in-  
 274 troducing democracy into the kingdom. However inaccurate most historians consider this claim to  
 275 be, it is also striking that the "Democracy Monument" in the middle of Bangkok, erected by the  
 276 military rulers in the 1930s, was a rallying point in 1973 of student protesters who called on the  
 king to restore democracy (Prajak 2012).

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

291 Revelations by close friends turned enemies and major financial scandals were trig-  
 292 gers that led to civil society mobilization against the government of Thaksin Shinawatra in  
 293 2005. In Thailand, the military overthrow of Thaksin in 2006, backed by “tank” (i.e.,  
 294 pro-military) intellectual supporters, was criticized as being a “coup for the rich”  
 295 against Thaksin’s pro-poor policies (Ungpakorn 2007). But military rule was weak and in-  
 296 competent, leaving new elections as the only way out. After a pro-Thaksin successor party  
 297 won at the polls (after his earlier populist party had been banned), “civil society” protests  
 298 against Thaksin and his supporters were revived, culminating in the occupation of Bang-  
 299 kok’s international airport until the pro-Thaksin government was removed from power in  
 300 an indirect coup in December 2008. But it was not only civil society’s tactics that had rad-  
 301 icalized: it abandoned any pretense of defending liberal democracy, calling for a sweeping  
 302 “new politics” that would involve an undemocratic restructuring of the political order,  
 303 with 70 percent of the seats in parliament to be appointed.

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

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

## 332 DEMOCRATS AND CULTURE IN ASIA

333  
 334 Many democrats in Asia began articulating a cultural defense of democracy as a re-  
 335 action to the authoritarian critique of "Western civilization." Drawing on the precedents  
 336 and justifications found in the region's major religious traditions, they argued that democ-  
 337 racy and human rights are not exclusively "Western" but have deep roots in local cultures.  
 338 In contrast to Asian authoritarians who denounce "Western democracy" in the name of  
 339 cultural particularism, democracy advocates in Asia find universal democratic values em-  
 340 bedded in religious culture. The most high-profile example of this phenomenon was Kim  
 341 Dae Jung's answer to Lee Kwan Yew entitled "Is Culture Destiny? The Myth of Asia's  
 342 Anti-Democratic Values," published in the prestigious academic journal *Foreign*  
 343 *Affairs*, widely read in policy circles (Kim 1994). In this essay, he offered a culturalist  
 344 defense of democracy based on participatory elements in Confucianism and  
 345 Confucian-influenced Korean history.<sup>6</sup> In Southeast Asia, Indonesian President Abdur-  
 346 rahman Wahid denounced the attempt to use cultural relativism to undermine democ-  
 347 racy in the region while invoking the democratic lessons that can be learned from  
 348 Islam, as did Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia (Hoon 2004). Aung San Suu Kyi (1995) formu-  
 349 lated a rebuttal to the "Asian values"-style critique of democracy in Buddhist culturalist  
 350 terms, a strategy adopted by oppositionists elsewhere in the region as well.

351 These advocates of democracy in Asia claim that democratic rule cannot be dis-  
 352 missed as a Western cultural phenomenon because it finds indigenous expression in re-  
 353 ligious values. Drawing on Buddhist, Muslim, or Christian arguments, it is claimed that  
 354 popular participation and the justness of opposition to despotic rule are principles deeply  
 355 rooted in the region's many religious cultures. Anwar Ibrahim, now the leading opponent  
 356 of one-party rule in Malaysia, made a pro-democratic argument in Islamic terms in Ma-  
 357 laysia (Anwar 1996), as did Muslim democrats in Indonesia in opposition to Suharto's dic-  
 358 tatorship (Hefner 2000; Uhlin 1997). In the Philippines, the assassination of oppositionist  
 359 Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. was quickly put in the folk cultural context of Christ's passion  
 360 (*pasyon*) (Ileto 1985). Aquino—like the country's national hero Jose Rizal, who was  
 361

362 <sup>6</sup>A very old question beyond the scope of this paper is whether Confucianism should be understood  
 363 as a "religion" or an ethical, cultural tradition in East Asia. Interestingly, conservative advocates of  
 364 Confucian-style "democracy," such as the "political Confucianists" discussed above, stress the par-  
 365 ticularistic cultural character of Confucianism that distinguishes it from Western traditions.  
 366 Democracy advocates such as Kim Dae Jung, by contrast, point to the universal nature of Confu-  
 367 cian teachings that parallel those of the West: "There are no ideas more fundamental to democracy  
 368 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).

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 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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