Understanding East Asian Political Systems:
Origins, Characteristics, and Changes

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Abstract: East Asian politics has mostly been approached from the perspective of either political economy or political culture, which leaves the study of East Asian political systems highly underdeveloped. This paper seeks a political explanation of the emergence, characteristics, changes and future prospects of East Asian political regimes. They reveal the common nature of unipolar power in each of three forms—the one-party regime, one-man rule, and the oligarchical unipolar system. The unipolar nature of the regime’s originated in the political elites’ sense of crisis about the survival of the nation in foreign-penetrated and bifurcated East Asian societies. East Asian political regimes gradually change into looser forms of authoritarianism or into plural democracy, due to the evaporation of revolutionary zeal and/or the growth of civil

I. Introduction

Existing Approaches to East Asian Politics:
Political Economy and Political Culture

Recent studies on East Asia tend to concentrate on the success and failure of the “East Asian model of development.” Economic success stories attracted enormous attention from both Western and Eastern scholars, while patterns of East Asian culture, supposedly having an important role in the process, derived as much concern. More recently, after the economic crisis of Japan and other East Asian countries, the defects of the politico-economic model drew much attention among analysts of the region. By contrast, the politics of East Asia have attracted far less concern among scholars and laymen alike. When politics is treated as a subject of analysis, it is usually treated as background or political infrastructure which enabled the particular pattern of economic development in the region. Thus, while we are inundated with the discussions of the East Asian political economy, these are basically concerned with economy and culture, leaving politics as only a secondary concern. In other words, studies of East Asian politics as a region are approached mostly from either a “political economy” or “political culture” standpoint. What this means is that there is a striking lack of political concern about East Asian politics which, we believe, often

determines the directions and contents of economic development and cultural changes in the region.

The main current of the political economy approach treats politics as an institutional infrastructure which enabled economic development in East Asia. This is shown in the rich tradition of the study of government-business relations, or, more generally, state-society relations in Japan, while similar studies on South Korea and Taiwan also abound. The second trend of the political economy approach considers politics a virtual reflection of capitalist economic mechanisms and the state’s management of it, and this trend is seen in more or less neo-Marxist analyses of East Asian political economy. The first tradition lacks clear vision of political structures and processes as a subject of analysis, while the second trend treats politics as largely shaped by market mechanisms. Overall, they lack a systematic concern for politics, with all the fine and rich studies of the East Asian political economy.


The political culture approach has rather a long and rich tradition in East Asian studies. We need not go back to the classics of Max Weber and Karl A. Wittfogel, who were brilliant but generally wrong about Asia. Among contemporary scholars, Lucian Pye stands out as the leading theorist of Asian political culture. Following his great predecessors, he emphasized the continuity of Asia’s political tradition, revealed in the paternalistic domination of the rulers and the dependency of their subordinates. He also emphasized the Asian tradition of a strong state and weak society, which still marks East Asian politics. In addition, he regarded patriotism, political intolerance, and personalism as major characteristics of East Asian politics. Based on these observations, he offered a dim prospect for democracy in Asia.5

Pye’s argument was less than popular when his book on Asian political culture first appeared in the mid-1980s because at the time political economy approaches saw a heyday in the field of comparative politics. But recently, political culture revived as an important element in understanding not only East Asian politics but the nature and prospects of democracy across the world.6 In this context, Daniel Bell and other scholars based in Australia and Singapore presented quite similar arguments to Pye’s concerning the nature and prospects for East Asian democracy. The arguments go on virtually the same track as Pye’s: East Asian states are not neutral but interventionist; the state manages public space, while the civil society is dependent on the state. For them, recent democratization in some East Asian countries is a mere reflection of the state’s need for more efficient management of the society and economy. Thus, they argue that East Asian democracy, if possible at all, will be non-liberal

as much as East Asian politics has been so.7

While we do not have major objections to their descriptions of traditional East Asian politics, we refuse to accept their predictions for the future of East Asian politics. This is no a place to delve into this issue extensively. Instead we present a summary critique on how Western political culture approaches oversimplify “Eastern” culture and underestimate the rapid changes both Eastern society and Eastern culture are undergoing.8

More fundamentally, culture and tradition constitute what may be called the “software” of a political system, while its “hardware” is composed of political institutions and their complex relationships. The main weakness of the cultural approaches to East Asian politics lies in that they treat East Asian politics only as a way in which power is exercised, generally neglecting where ultimate power is located and how different political institutions emerge and change, which, we believe, is more important in understanding the nature and changes of a political system.


8. Similar cultural arguments, those of “Asian-style democracy,” have been made by Southeast Asian leaders, represented by Lee Kuan-yew of Singapore, but in this case all of these Asian traits are praised as necessary for economic development and social stability. For the arguments of Asian-style democracy, see Fareed Zakaria, “Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan yew,” Foreign Affairs, 73 (March / April 1994); Goh Chok tong, “Social Values, Singapore Style,” Current History, 93 (December 1994); Denny Roy, “Singapore, China, and the ‘Soft Authoritarian Challenge,’” Asian Survey, 34 (March 1994). For their critique, see Kim Yung-myung, “Asian-style Democracy: A Critique from East Asian,” Asian Survey, 37 (December 1997).
Need for a Political Approach to East Asian Politics

Although the approaches of political economy and political culture have made certain contributions to our understanding of East Asian politics, they are inherently limited in both scope and depth because they treat East Asian politics not as an independent sphere of human relations but as dependent upon something else. What is wanting here is a political approach treating politics as an independent variable which interacts with other variables, such as economics and culture. To be sure, more narrowly-focused analyses of political processes abound, concentrating on party politics and voting behavior in each East Asian country (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan) and power relations within the circle of ruling elites (China). These studies regard politics as an independent area of study but lack a comprehensive vision that connects political forces with other, interacting forces. Also, this kind of political approach is confined to one-country studies; comparative studies and studies of “East Asian” politics as a regional phenomenon are disappointingly lacking in this tradition of political science.

This is partly understandable considering the diversity of political systems in the region, ranging from Stalinist North Korea to liberal democratic Japan. However, considering the similarities of political economy between Japan and the “Four Little Dragons” in East Asia, we can legitimately claim that comparative political analyses are wanting. Furthermore, structures of political economy are getting closer between the two divergent systems, i.e., between capitalist Japan, Korea, Taiwan on the one hand and communist China on the other. Although the natures of the two political systems are still very different, they have come close enough to demand comparative studies of their essential characteristics, e.g., the characteristics of “soft authoritarianism” or “new authoritarianism.”

9. See (fn. 7) and Meredith Woo-Cumings, “The ‘New Authoritarianism’ in East Asia,” Current History, 93 (December 1994).
to this point.

This is one reason why the study of politics of East Asia as a region becomes more important. However, systematic studies of East Asian political systems are still to come. What exists is not systematic but fragmented or mere summary applications of Western models. Representative examples are found in the work by prominent figures in comparative politics. For example, Huntington merely describes East Asian political systems as “dominant party systems” without further elaboration.\textsuperscript{10} His characterization of East Asian political systems is based on the nature of the party system, but East Asian political systems cannot be fully understood by focusing upon party system alone because other institutions, such as the military and the bureaucracy, often play more important political roles. A more systematic treatment was made by the Japanese political scientist Inoguchi, who classifies East Asian political systems as Leninist, one-party dominant pluralist, and Confucian authoritarian systems.\textsuperscript{11} Together with the nature of the party system, Inoguchi used the bureaucratic structure of developmental authoritarianism and the location of power as criteria for his typology of East Asian political systems. Although Inoguchi’s typology is more comprehensive than Huntington’s, it is less than consistent because he mixes institutional and cultural variables for differentiating each East Asian political system.

In this sense, Scalapino’s classification of East Asian political systems seems more appropriate in terms of the consistency of the criteria used; he divides them into Leninist, authoritarian-pluralist, and liberal democratic states. The problem, however, is that his typology is clearly less than elaborate and his empirical study of East Asian countries based upon this typology is less than theoretical or systematic.\textsuperscript{12}

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11. Inoguchi (fn. 1).
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What is to Be Studied?

Then, what do we mean by “political approach”? It means the approach that understands that politics has its own sphere and its own logic of operation, independent of other spheres of human action or structure. More concretely, we focus on the nature of political institutions and rules which constitute the edifice of a political system. This is what we consider the hardware side of a political system.

We do not believe that the workings and changes of a political system are determined by its hardware alone; rather, they are determined by the combination of software and hardware, that is, of political culture and political structure. But again, each has its own functioning logic, which is not to be reduced to the other. We believe that the factors for the emergence and changes of political institutions and political structures are principally found in their own nature, not in other aspects of politics, e.g., political culture, or in non-political areas, e.g., socio-economic development. Culture and socio-economic development set the broader conditions for the changes of political structure.

With these methodological considerations in mind, this paper will identify the major characteristics and different patterns of East Asian political systems. We shall also seek the origins of these characteristics and diversities, and at the same time examine the changes and future prospects for East Asian political systems.

In order to do this, it is necessary to clarify first what we mean by political system. Rather than drawing upon any conceptual or theoretical issues of the systems analysis created by David Easton, we concentrate on the nature of political *regime*, using the two terms interchangeably. Political regime is generally understood in political

science as formal and informal rules and institutions in which political rulers relate themselves to other sectors of society and which regulate the relations and interactions of different political actors within a political system. It is also “the formal and informal structure of government roles and processes, which includes such things as the method of selection of government (election, coup, selection process within the military etc), formal and informal mechanisms of representation, and patterns of repression.” Political regime is usually considered a more permanent form of political organization than the specific government, but typically less permanent than the state.

More specifically, major ingredients of political regime relevant to our study include the ultimate location of political power, the nature of ruling group and the opposition as well as the relationship between the two, the means of political control employed by the state, the means of political recruitment, and the way in which political interests are represented. However, in order to simplify our work, we will not dwell on all of them. Instead, we will focus upon the location of ultimate power and the means of control the incumbents employ, in differentiating basic nature and changes of each East Asian political system.

17. Here “East Asia” includes the three nations/five states in Northeast Asia (China, Taiwan, both South and North Korea, and Japan) plus Singapore and Vietnam. They are all under Confucian and Sinic influence, and one may assume that this category is essentially cultural. What we intend to do is to show that we may still adopt this apparently cultural category without resorting to a sort of culturalism in explaining political dimensions, thus reinforcing our argument for a political approach to East Asian political systems.
II. Characteristics of East Asian Political Systems

One scholar aptly summarized the characteristics of “Asian-style democracy”: patron-client communitarianism; personalism; respect for authority; dominant political party; and strong state.\textsuperscript{18} This characterization may be more broadly applied to East Asian political systems in general, although we do not by its cultural orientation.

Common Characteristics of East Asian Political Systems

For the sake of parsimony, we identify here two major characteristics of East Asian political regimes, that is, the unipolar nature of political power and the paternalistic power relations. The former constitutes the “hardware,” the institutional side of the East Asian political system, while the latter is to be regarded as its “software,” culture side. The two aspects of East Asian politics affect each other, making the whole system work in “Asian ways.” In this paper, we mostly deal with the former, the hardware side of the story, for the reasons discussed above.

Political power in East Asian countries has been more or less concentrated in unitary power centers. Thus, borrowing from the field of international relations, we may call East Asian political systems unipolar systems. This relates to the way in which political power and political institutions are structured and, thus, constitutes the edifice of the East Asian political system.

Political power in East Asia is unitary in the sense that it is concentrated in one center, be it a personal ruler, a monolithic party, or some coalition of political, bureaucratic, and economic elites. The unitary power center may be challenged from within the power center or without, but the power center in East Asia has been relatively

\textsuperscript{18} Clark D. Nehr, “Asian Style Democracy,” \textit{Asian Survey}, 34 (November 1994).
strong enough to maintain its basic resources and means for control despite significant changes in several cases.

The unipolar nature of East Asian power is maintained not only within the ruling bloc, but also between the state and society. With the power concentration within their modern apparatus, East Asian states have been successful in controlling and managing an underdeveloped and fragmented civil society. This contrasts to East Asia’s traditional state-society relations where both state and society were relatively static and the state’s control over the society was much less comprehensive. The all-out control of East Asian states over the society is rather a modern phenomenon, a result of the development of modern nation-states after World War II, either through revolution or other means, including the foreign imposition of a particular regime, as in Japan.

In the Communist systems of China, Vietnam, and North Korea, power is concentrated in a monolithic party which is closely interwoven with the state, jointly dominating and controlling the still dormant civil society. In capitalist Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, the state took a leading role in carrying out economic development programs, rendering the concept of “developmental state” a powerful analytical tool for explaining the political economy of these countries. In this way, despite differing natures of political and economic systems, East Asian political systems show common characteristics of power concentration within a small group of power-holders.

**Origins of the Unipolar System**

What then are the origins of the unipolar nature of the political systems in East Asia? They are primarily found in geopolitics and ideology; national survival and national development, most urgent

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tasks for the East Asian states in the course of colonialism and the Cold War, necessitated the concentration of power within one center, be it monolithic party, personal ruler, or some oligarchical power center.

An important source of power concentration in this context was revolution, either Communist or nationalist, initiated by a monolithic party, as was found in Vietnam, Taiwan, and China. Another source was the military-ideological confrontation brought about by the Cold War. Japan and South Korea did not experience revolution but shared the urgent need for survival in the wake of the Cold War, which increased the opportunity for the ruler’s or ruling group’s concentration of power. Singapore’s People’s Action Party (PAP) experienced a similar challenge from Communist forces before that country’s separation from the Malaysia Federation (1965) and, after independence, the Chinese-dominated new city-state faced national security problems in the midst of the Malay-speaking people, and these situations contributed to the PAP’s exclusive power consolidation.20

In all the cases mentioned above, East Asian states after World War II shared a common threat perception and pursued single-minded strategies for survival and development, manifested in the competition between Communist and neo-mercantilist pursuits for national power.

In the process of building unipolar regimes in East Asia, foreign forces played a great part, especially due to the Cold War. The role of the Soviet Union and the United States was particularly decisive for the divided nations of East Asia, the two Koreas and the two Chinas. We also find that the smaller the country was, the stronger foreign influence was, and vice versa. China, one of the largest countries in the world, maintained greater or lesser degrees of political and ideological independence from the Soviet Union, but the small North Korean regime was virtually imposed upon by the Soviets who

occupied the territory after World War II. Taiwan was smaller than China and was under greater influence of its patron power, the United States, to the degree that the regime’s legitimacy has depended, at least in part, upon the latter’s moral and political support.\(^{21}\)

### III. Types of East Asian Political Regimes

We classify East Asian unipolar regimes according to the nature of the ruling group, or the location of ultimate power. Some of this characterization parallels with the well-known typologies of party system,\(^{22}\) but we do not base our typology on party system, because, in many cases, especially those of the one-man rule discussed below, political parties have only auxiliary roles in the political process. We identify three types of unipolar political systems in East Asia - the one-party system, one-man system, and the oligarchical unipolar system.

**Types of Unipolar Systems in East Asia**

**One-Party Regime**

This is a political system in which one political party, usually characterized as Leninist or quasi-Leninist, dominate the state and society. There are two groups - one Communist, the other Nationalist.

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China, North Korea, and Vietnam belong to the first category, and Singapore and Taiwan to the second.

China and Taiwan represented two contrasting models of economic development, communist and capitalist, but shared similar characteristics of one-party rule. The major political components of the Chinese one party system are usually identified as a monolithic and all pervasive party and an enforced official Communist ideology. North Korea and Vietnam show similar patterns of monopoly of power by a monolithic Communist party. Taiwan before democratization had a similar regime structure with the Leninist monopoly of power by the Kuomintang (KMT), with the state no less pervasive and penetrating than the Communist counterpart. Singapore has a nominally democratic regime in which the people directly participate in the parliamentary elections, but, through various measures, the ruling PAP maintains a comfortable majority in the Parliament, while the citizens’ rights are heavily circumscribed.

One-man Rule or Personal Regime

In one-man rule, political parties and other institutions notwithstanding, power is concentrated in the hands of one strong man. Personal rule abounds in developing societies, especially in the least developed areas, such as Africa. A clear East Asian example of personal regime is South Korea. In South Korea there has until recently been a dominant party since the establishment of the Liberal Party by Syngman Rhee in 1951, but those parties alternated depending upon the will and necessity of the individual rulers. In other words, in South Korea political parties were mere devices of maintaining the personal rule of successive individual rulers, which did not change much under democratized Kim Dae-Jung government (1998-2003).

Personal rule is also observed in one-party regimes. In early

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stages, one-party regime is almost always dominated by one strong man, which we witnessed in China under Mao Zedong and Deng Xiao ping, Singapore under Lee Kuan yew, and Taiwan under Chiang Kai shek. The most salient example is North Korea under Kim Il sung; in fact, North Korean politics’ personalization is much more salient than South Korea’s in both depth and longevity, so much so that we recently witnessed a dynastic power succession in this country. Dynastic politics was also seen in Taiwan in the power succession from the elder Chiang to his son Chiang Chung kuo.

In this sense, one-man rule is more universal than one-party rule in East Asia, but we still regard the latter as a separate category because of the basic difference found between the two; one party rule is more institutionalized than one-man rule lacking an enduring party, which means much in practices and changes in each type of rule. To put it succinctly, individual governments as well as the regime itself are more stabilized and thus more enduring in more institutionalized one-party regimes than in more unstable one-man regimes. For the same reason, regime change in one-party system is usually slower, more piecemeal, and more controlled than in a more turbulent and volatile one-man regime. We clearly saw this different in the cases of Taiwan and South Korea, otherwise similar in both political and economic development patterns.

**Oligarchical Unipolar System**

One may wonder why the Japanese political system is characterized here as unipolar, because it has well-established liberal democratic institutions. Although pluralism exists and her political regime may be defined as liberal democratic, power in Japan is concentrated and distributed among a small circle of conservative politicians, big businessmen and bureaucrats of higher posts. This is why we call the Japanese regime unipolar, or, more specifically, oligarchically unipolar. The Japanese system is less than pluralistic in the sense that meaningful alternatives for national development do not exist within the system while power is not distributed extensively
throughout a wide spectrum of social sectors.24

Although oligarchical in its basic nature, pluralistic elements certainly exist among the three actors within the Japanese oligarchy and between the oligarchy and forces at large. Japan is certainly more pluralistic both socially and politically than other unipolar systems in East Asia, which probably reflects the fact that Japan had earlier and longer experience with modernization and liberalization than other Asian countries. Japanese politics also appears to be more institutionalized and less personalized than in other East Asian countries. Party politics, although dominated by one party, has survived without unconstitutional interruption. However, compared with Western democracies, Japanese politics is still highly personalized, depending upon factional and network politics in which patron-client relationships dominate.

**Hard Versus Soft Authoritarian Regimes**

In order to better understand the nature and especially the changes of East Asian political regimes, it is useful to examine the authoritarian nature of East Asian regimes. The unipolar political system is by definition authoritarian. Authoritarianism, as distinguished from democracy and totalitarianism, is usually understood as a system with a low level of both the citizens’ political participation and state penetration into the society.25 There are two types of authoritarianism, soft and hard, according to the means of political control the authoritarians employ. Soft authoritarians employ persuasion, propaganda, and material incentives as prime methods for social and political control, whereas hard authoritarians employ more explicit and extensive physical repression for the same purpose.

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All Communist regimes of East Asia and some capitalist systems (South Korea under military rule and Taiwan before political liberalization) are hard authoritarian, while South Korea under Rhee and in the first years of the Park regime were soft authoritarian. Singapore is liberal democratic in form and soft authoritarian in substance, whereas Japan after World War II as well as South Korea and Taiwan since the late 1980s are democracies, containing at the same time the elements of soft authoritarianism.

According to the categories we have offered so far, we can divide East Asian political regimes as follows.

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<th>one-party regime</th>
<th>one-man regime</th>
<th>oligarchical regime</th>
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<tr>
<td>hard authoritarianism</td>
<td>China, North Korea, Taiwan before 1987</td>
<td>South Korea (1972-1987)</td>
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<tr>
<td>soft authoritarianism</td>
<td>Singapore, Taiwan (1987-)</td>
<td>South Korea (1948-60, 1987-)</td>
<td>Japan</td>
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<tr>
<td>democracy*</td>
<td>Taiwan (present)</td>
<td>South Korea (1992-)</td>
<td>Japan</td>
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* Contains elements of soft authoritarianism.

**Origins of Each Type of Unipolar Regimes**

We have already discussed the origins of East Asian political regimes. Now let us add some more points according to each type of regime.

**One-Party Regime**

Huntington sought the origin of the one-party system in a modernizing society in its socio-political bifurcation. In a bifurcated society, according to him, political leaders are pressed to integrate polarized political interests, and they put great efforts to organize and legitimize rule by one social force over the other. They seek to secure political control and legitimacy through creating a dominant
party. This happens mostly in early to middle stages of modernization, frequently through revolution.\textsuperscript{26} Huntington’s thesis applies to the East Asian cases. The emergence of China’s one-party system was primarily a product of the national, “total crisis” that China has encountered since the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{27} China was torn between antagonistic forces in the midst of the imperialist intrusion and, as is well documented, the Communist Party (CCP) emerged as the eventual victor with highly monopolized and concentrated power. The Taiwan regime had the same origin except that it was imposed by the nationalist KMT. The internal structure of the CCP and the KMT was basically the same as the Leninist doctrine of democratic centralism, which reflected the same need for the centralization of power in the wake of military and ideological struggles with both foreign and domestic forces. In addition, the Taiwanese regime experienced its own version of socio-political bifurcation between the defeated immigrants from the mainland and native Taiwanese, which necessitated the party’s domination of the Taiwanese people.

The Vietnamese one-party regime has a similar origin in the political bifurcation between the Communist and capitalist forces struggling for national independence. The Singaporean experience was also similar in its first years of independence - the need for controlling antagonistic forces, the Communists and unfriendly neighbours, through the PAP’s concentration of power.

\textbf{One-Man Rule and Oligarchical Rule}

In countries where no revolutionary party existed, politics was characterized by continuing struggles among diverse forces, and this


made the political scene highly unstable. South Korea was typical of this case. Korea was colonized by the Japanese, who allowed no native political forces to grow. Accordingly, after the Japanese retreated, the Peninsula was divided and occupied fairly evenly by the United States and the Soviet Union. While North Korea established a Communist one-party system under the supervision of the Soviets, South Korea, under the guidance of the United States, installed a democratic regime which was under constant challenge from the opposition. The nascent civilian democracy, and the subsequent military rule which replaced it through the coup of 1961, decayed into one-man rule in South Korea, having lacked the experience of either democratic institutions or the revolutionary conditions for a one-party system. Revolutionary conditions and national crisis - socio-political “bifurcation” - certainly existed in Korea, but it was “resolved” through the division of the country into Communist and capitalist states. Lacking the conditions for the development of either democratic or monolithic political institutions, central power in South Korea has been highly personalized.

Comparing the origins of one-party and one-man rule in East Asia, we find that the former emerged in a more bifurcated society where the domination by the victorious force over the defeated was more absolute. By contrast, one-man rule emerged in a less bifurcated society or where bifurcation was actualized in the division of nation as was the case of the two Koreas. As far as the domination of one political force over the others was less absolute and political opposition stronger, South Korea’s one-man rule was less stable than one-party rule. This was revealed in relatively frequent turn-overs of power between authoritarian and democratic regimes.

In Japan, the United States-imposed democratic system found its own oligarchical form as a result of the complex interplay of various factors—paternalistic tradition, the historical legacy of strong state and weak society, the ruling party’ successful economic performance, and the Cold War. There is a dearth of studies which clarify the question why Japanese democracy took its present form. General
opinion seems to attribute the reason either to Japan’s cultural and historical traditions—groupism and authoritarianism, or to the state need for power concentration for the recovery from the defeat in World War II. These two approaches represent, respectively, those of political culture and political economy we have discussed at the outset of this article. The answer may lie in a combination of the two approaches, but a systematic study is still to come.

IV. Changes in East Asian Political Systems

An important aspect of East Asian politics is that it is changing, as all other political systems are; all the “East Asian” traits discussed above are weakening, while the elements of pluralism and liberalism are increasingly gaining weight, and this is what the commentators of East Asian politics as an “Asian phenomenon” are most ready to ignore.28

From Personal to Institutional One-Party Rule

One-party regimes are, especially at their earlier stages, controlled by one powerful individual. In the struggle with political enemies both within and outside the party, the political leaders in the one-party regime find an urgent need for integrated power for the party’s survival and the hegemonic control over society, and this is why one-party systems are dominated by a personal ruler at earlier stages. Here power becomes personalized, not institutionalized.29

However, after the initial consolidation of party power, the rela-

29. Huntington (fn.25), pp. 27-29.
tionship between the party and its leaders changes. At the first stage of seizing power, the leader and the party are virtually identical, but when both are secure in power, their interests begin to diverge. As time passes, the zeal for revolution which brought one-party and one-man rule in existence subsides and politics becomes increasingly routinized. There is less and less need for one-man control of the party, and the gap widens between the party’s needs and the logic of self-perpetuation of personal power. But usually the individual rulers’ power and legitimacy is strong enough to overcome political challenges within the party until his death. Power struggle in this context is limited to the second and lower positions as well as the future power succession from the personal ruler.

One man rule usually ends with the death or incapacitation of the personal ruler. Political succession is not smooth because succession rules are not established but rather as politics is personalized. We witness this in many struggles within the Communist parties between hardliners and softliners, and between ideologues and pragmatists. This produces political tension but the personalization of power usually goes well into the second to third generations of revolutionary leaders. At this point, however, personal power gradually weakens. Usually by the third or fourth generation of leadership, it changes into a more collective one, because the need for power concentration within the party diminishes, as the original setting for the revolutionary politics evaporates. At this point, the party leadership becomes more diversified and collectivist. Thus, the second stage of the one-party regime is marked by more institutionalization and pragmatization of the system.

In China, personal power concentration marked its zenith during the period of the Cultural Revolution. After Mao’s death, the party leadership was handed down to Deng Xiao Ping, but with clear weakening of personal authority. After Deng’s virtual retirement from the political scene during the 1980s, a kind of collectivization of power began within the CCP. An increasing degree of pluralism was found within the Party, which went along with the liberaliza-
tion of the economy initiated by Deng. Since Deng’s death in 1997, China is ruled by third generation party leaders whose individual power bases are more limited than Deng’s, not to mention those of Mao. China now is under more or less collectivistic leadership by the CCP.

Taiwan’s experience of depersonalization and democratization offers another example. Taiwan’s political regime started with Chiang’s personal rule, later to be succeeded by his son Chiang Chung Kuo, but with clearly less personal power. As a matter of fact, Taiwan’s political liberalization began with the younger Chiang’s initiative after his death. A native Taiwanese, Lee Deng Hui, succeeded as the president, but his personal power is more restricted than the latter. Singapore shows a similar pattern after Lee Kuan Yew’s official resignation from power; succeeding Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s personal authority is no match for that of his predecessor, although this country still lags in terms of the genuine pluralization and democratization of power.

North Korea and Vietnam have yet to show visible signs of political change. However, the personal charisma of Kim Jong Il, who succeeded his father, Kim Il Sung, after his death in 1994, is no match for his father’s, a virtual demi-god in North Korea, although no sign is shown that power is being pluralized even within the ruling Worker’s Party.

From Hard to Soft Authoritarianism and Democratization

In East Asia, hard authoritarianism has a tendency to become softer, which in turn shows increasing propensity toward democratization. The most obvious examples are South Korea and Taiwan. Other hard authoritarian regimes, i.e., Communist one-party regimes are more intractable despite increasing necessity for political opening.

What democratized the regimes of Taiwan and South Korea? A whole host of explanations can be cited, from structural to rational
choice ones. We can cite socio-economic developments, changes in political culture, foreign influence, and political actors’ strategies which are all relevant for the conditions, causes, or processes of democratization. But the basic reasons for the long-term change of East Asian regimes are found in the change of structural conditions in these societies. More specifically, the changing balance of power between the state and society, or more concretely between authoritarian rulers and democratic forces, made authoritarian rule increasingly untenable in rapidly changing East Asian societies. The changing power balance was in turn a result of socio-economic growth and diversification which the very authoritarian rulers provided for their own survival and legitimation. Of course socio-economic growth and diversification do not directly bring about political pluralization and democratization. Actual transition processes are determined by the games political actors play, which are bound with a full array of uncertainties, making democratic transition never predetermined by any level of economic or social developments. In many instances, these developments indeed decrease the chances for democracy due to the increasing socio-political tensions they produce. But one clear thing is this: in the long run, socio-economic development inevitably increases the demands and chances for political democracy.31


This was clearly shown in the evolutionary processes from hard authoritarianism via soft authoritarianism toward liberal democracy in South Korea and Taiwan. In South Korea, socio-economic development strengthened the middle and working classes. At certain points, these forces supported authoritarian governments for the political stability deemed necessary for continued economic growth, but they eventually turned their backs on them and sought political democracy. The middle-class uprising against South Korea’s Chun government in June 1987 evidenced most vividly the changing power balance between democratic and authoritarian forces and also between civilian and military forces. In Taiwan, civil society was less strong and more subservient but several decades’ of economic growth strengthened civil society and the opposition party, which provided the background for the leaders’ decision for political openness. Taiwanese leaders met specific legitimacy problems unique to Taiwan, stemming from ethnic tensions between mainlanders and Taiwanese as well as Taiwan’s relations with mainland China, which forced them to choose democratization as a way out of the dilemma.32

Why Do Some Regimes Change and Others Not?

As we have seen, some East Asian political regimes have undergone significant changes but others remain basically the same. Roughly speaking, South Korea and Taiwan comes first in the order of change, while China, Japan, Vietnam and Singapore show only

marginal changes. The North Korean regime has not changed in the least, despite the death of Kim Il Sung. Why then do some systems change significantly while others only marginally or not at all? Will systems demonstrating only marginal change follow the pattern of those with significant changes? To answer these questions, it is necessary first to consider the basic reasons for the difference. In general observation, the degrees of change in East Asian political regimes were determined by three factors - the power gap between state/party and society/opposition, foreign influence, and the degree of the institutionalization of the existing regime.

**Power Gap Between State/Party and Society/Opposition**

The Communist one-party regimes in North Korea, China, and Vietnam experienced the least change in East Asia despite the considerable economic opening of the latter two. The political change that has occurred in these countries is only marginal, that is, within the party. This was because the monolithic party had destroyed the alternative power bases almost completely, allowing no chance of reappearing - thus, the term “totalitarianism.” The civil society with any political significance, although emerging little by little, is still much too weak politically. In other words, the power gap between the party and the opposition as well as between the state and the society has not narrowed enough to bring about any meaningful regime change for these countries.

Change has also been slow in capitalist one-party regimes in Taiwan and Singapore. However, compared with Communist regimes, and despite the party’s initial control over others was as strong, civil societies had many more opportunities to grow because the economy was not as firmly centralized and the market was more vibrant. The Singaporean regime’s political control was certainly less tight than the Communist ones and its capitalist economic development may well have provided civil society with a chance for political challenge, but there has still been no basic political change so far, because civil society is still under the control of a paternalistic state.
Singapore’s small population and territory makes national integration and state control relatively easy, and it was also strengthened by the political elites’ effective utilization of the Confucian political ideology. To this has to be added the Singaporean state’s socio-economic achievements which reduced the possibilities of people’s political discontent.

**Foreign Influence**

Taiwan and South Korea were under great influence from the United States. The United States government often supported authoritarian regimes in this region for security reasons. At the same time, however, the U.S. government never gave up the objective of spreading American-style democracy to these countries, often helping democratic movements at critical transition periods. More fundamentally, the democratic influence of the United States on South Korea and Taiwan had deeper reouting in the political ideas which was spread by the occupation authority (in the case of South Korea), general and higher education, mass media, and extensive cultural exchange. More recently, the two countries were exposed to the “third wave” of world-wide democratization which strengthened their citizens’ democratic zeal.

Taiwan was much more exposed to democratic ideas than China, whose people were only recently exposed to them. This explains partly why the two countries, with similar one-party rule, showed markedly different paths of political change. The American influence for democratization was even stronger in South Korea,

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34. Huntington (fn. 28); and idem, “After Twenty Years: The Future of the Third Wave,” *Journal of Democracy* 8 (October, 1997).
where in the latter days of the Park regime, the opposition leaders went so far as openly asking for American pressure for democratic reform. The United States government certainly played its part in South Korea’s recent democratization, pressing the Chun government for a more flexible stance. In contrast, the regimes of Vietnam and North Korea have taken relatively autonomous paths (after the Soviet-dominated early days of revolution in the case of North Korea) and this was one reason why, unlike Eastern Europe, they have succeeded in escaping collapse.

**Institutionalization of the Existing Regime**

Why, then, is there so little political change in Japan? The Japanese political regime, with all its problems, is more or less complete in terms of liberal-democratic laws and institutions. Political change in Japan, and demands for it, is rather narrowly focused on such specific areas as revising electoral laws, and not directed toward more structural changes. In other words, political change in Japan, whether in practice or in ideas, is directed to changes within the regime rather than systemic changes of the regime itself. Likewise, the leaders of Singapore boast their own version of Asian-style democracy, which is largely accepted by the majority of its people. Like Japan’s oligarchical democracy, Singapore’s one-party regime has so far shown a high level of institutionalization that has not easily allowed room for change.

The same is true with the Communist one-party systems of China and Vietnam, where systemic political change is not yet on the horizon. The level of institutionalization of these regimes is probably even higher than those of Japan and Singapore, which renders prospects for change remote. North Korean leaders are showing, at least publicly, strong faith in their system, which is more or less complete by their own logic, although it is arguably on the brink of collapse. Generally, the Communist political systems in East Asia are so highly institutionalized that large-scale changes are imminent, except for the possible collapse of North Korean regime, due mainly
to its economic problems, in the fashion of Eastern European socialist regimes.

V. Future of the East Asian Political Systems

What will be the future of East Asian political systems? Will they maintain the essential characteristics we have identified, or will they change into some different type of political regime? Will they continue the process of change they are undergoing now, or will the changing process be overturned by some unexpected or countervailing forces? More specifically, the questions are: Will the East Asian political power still be unipolar and will East Asian state continue to dominate the society?

There is no doubt that, gradually, the basic characteristics of East Asian political systems weaken as they have so far. The question, however, is how much weakening and what speed, and ultimately toward what end? Is there an end-point at all? Here we must take into account the vast differences among East Asian countries in their size, internal diversity, current stages of socio-political development, international political environments and, of course, current nature of political regimes.

There are roughly three alternative prospects for East Asian regimes: 1) the continuation of a unipolar system, 2) the loosened unipolar system, and 3) pluralist democracy.

Continuation of Unipolar System

The Communist one-party system will be maintained for a considerable period of time in China and Vietnam, but possibilities exist for the internal pluralization of the Communist party and a loosening of party domination over the society. When that happens the system may be transformed into a loosened one-party system, but its unipolar nature will be maintained because the loosening will
occur only within the party which will still maintain a firm grip over society.

This being the case, there are chances for the Chinese and Vietnamese regimes to change into capitalist authoritarian ones like South Korea and Taiwan in their earlier days. Although China’s political regime remains basically the same, with the CCP’s control over the polity intact, increasing pluralism is found within the party. There were recently arguments for “new authoritarianism,” within Chinese as well as Western intellectual circles, which combined capitalist economy and looser political control without, however, losing the CCP’s control. Although economic opening brought about a rapid economic betterment of the Chinese people, they are showing growing discontent toward increasing socioeconomic inequality, widening corruption of party elites and deepening disparities between coastal areas and the hinterlands. Thus, the party is under greater pressure for socio-economic reforms and political opening. However, party leadership is still firm, while autonomous civil society is emerging but politically still very weak. These situations render the possibilities of political opening still remote, but “new authoritarianism” is still a possible alternative for a China.

The Vietnamese regime shows similar patterns of economic opening and the possibilities of political opening. The party is trying to widen the scope of liberalization without losing its control over society. North Korea may follow the Chinese and Vietnamese road of economic opening and intra-party diversification, but the greater probability is that it will remain a tightly controlled one-party garri-

36. See (fn. 7) and (fn. 8). For discussions of the constitutionalist option among the Chinese authorities and in academia, see Andrew J. Nathan, “China’s Constitutionalist Option,” Journal of Democracy 7 (October 1996).
son state until it collapses, which may or may not happen in the near future.

**Loosened Unipolar System**

Capitalist authoritarian regimes in South Korea and Taiwan are now considerably democratized but are still dominated by conservative political forces. The two countries offered an East Asian model of democratization marked by a gradual, and relatively peaceful, evolution from hard authoritarianism through soft authoritarianism to democracy. Of the two, the evolutionary model of democratization was more evident in Taiwan, where democratization was initiated by the party leadership and took step-by-step processes without significant conflicts or interruptions. Relatively silent democratic transition was possible in Taiwan because there one-party rule was long institutionalized so that the dominant party could take the initiative in political transition.

South Korean politics have been more turbulent, with a stronger civil society and a democratic struggle more resilient and violent. But, still, the Korean state was strong enough to take hold of the democratization process, rendering democratic reform a mixture of top-down and bottom-up patterns, a pattern which Huntington termed as “transplacement.”

Military rule ended with no chance of returning in South Korea, where the democratic process is well consolidated. However, even with the consolidation of democratic processes, just as the KMT still dominates Taiwanese politics today, South Korean politics has still been dominated by paternalistic leaders. South Korea and Taiwan appear now to be under the process of transition from a loosened unipolar regime to a pluralist democracy. They will certainly move toward a more pluralist democracy, but the question is, how much pluralism and toward what end?

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39. Huntington (fn. 28).
Pluralist Democracy

More generally, this poses a serious question for East Asian democracies, including Japan: are these regimes genuinely democratic? Japan, closest to pluralist democracy in East Asia, is often criticized as oligarchical and soft authoritarian. The Japanese constitution contains next to perfect democratic procedures but they are practiced in a less than fully democratic manner. This question involves a degree of democracy which concerns above all the degree of power distribution within a society: a genuine democracy is the one in which power is widely distributed along a wide spectrum of political and social sectors, with some degree of socio-economic equality among different sectors of society. Of course no existing democracy will pass this test, but Japanese democracy still appears less democratic than its Western counterparts in the sense that power is more concentrated within a narrow coalition of political, bureaucratic and economic elites, while civil society, including big businesses, is largely dependent upon the state in the areas of national political decisions.

Prospects for Democracy

Will East Asian countries ever be full democracies? Major hindrances to full democracy are usually identified as authoritarian legacies (norms, institutions, practices), economic difficulties, undemocratic leadership, and authoritarian culture. Recently democratized East Asian countries more or less resolved the first three problems in the sense that these are not strong enough to turn the tide of democratization. Those which are not democratized still possess all of those problems, although conditions are gradually improving.

As we mentioned at the outset of this paper, the last problem,
the authoritarian cultural tradition, is often cited as the major hindrance to the democratization of East Asian politics. The most fundamental problem with this sort of argument lies in that it overestimates the power of culture in determining politics. It is an exaggeration to argue that East Asia’s paternalistic tradition renders the political system unable to escape from the unipolar concentration of power. This depends upon the wrong supposition that the software of politics determines the hardware. The two affect each other, but each has its own logic of operation. Often, just as political culture affects political structure, the nature of political institutions and structures cause the changes in political culture. Culture and tradition are to be considered structural constraints or intervening variables which promote or hinder the development of political institutions, and not to be considered independent variables.42

Seen in this respect, it is simply wrong to assume that genuine democracy in East Asia is impossible to accomplish. For all their undemocratic past, East Asian countries are able to establish political democracy, just as Western countries could overcome their authoritarian past to develop political democracy in the last one or two hundred years.43

What kind of democracy will East Asian countries have in the future? It would be virtually impossible to draw a precise picture in this regard. Moreover, there are unending debates as to what is meant by democracy.44 However, we do have some basic ideas. The future of

44. We regard the minimum requirements of democracy as fair and free elections for higher political posts, sufficient political participation by the adult population, and the observation of the citizen’s political and civil rights. This is basically the same definition of Dahl’s polyarchy. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971.

The extent to which these requirements are met determines the degree of
East Asian political systems will not be the same as the Western ones, which are themselves diverse. However, one can be sure that the unipolar nature of power will be loosened, with power more widely distributed. State power will be more limited, while civil society will be strengthened.

East Asian democracy will not be liberal in the Western sense. Cultural tradition certainly plays a part here, but culture itself is changing in East Asia toward more liberalism and individualism. It will certainly be more paternalistic and communitarian than Western liberalism of the present day, but at the same time it will never be as paternalistic and as communitarian as East Asian politics has revealed so far. It may be illiberal as Bell and others imagine but their imaginations are certainly hampered by an unjustifiable, age-long dichotomy between the East and West. It will be more liberal than their illiberalism. Some middle way between communitarianism and liberalism should be found.45 Weakened state authority and democracy in a society. We can also pose the question of the quality of democracy which does not necessarily constitute the defining elements of democracy but is still very important for the working and development of democracy. These are such things as the efficiency of the system and its responsiveness to the demands of the society but, with relation to the present East Asian democracies, political corruption combined with money politics appears as the most urgent problem to be solved, a problem which is practical as well as ethical. See Lucian Pye, “Money Politics in East Asia,” Asian Survey 37 (March 1997).

communitarian ideals will be combined with strengthened individual rights.

Democratic political institutions which guarantee the basic requirements of fair and free elections, sufficient political participation, and political and civil liberties have already been installed in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan to greater or lesser degrees. Democracy in these countries, and probably in Singapore as well, will develop into fuller forms, although it will still operate through some combination of “Eastern” values of paternalism and network politics and the Western values of individualism and liberalism. The Communist regimes have a long way to go to transform themselves into democracies, or they may not become democratic at all for decades to come. However, again, we should not look for the reason in cultural traditions but in the more structural and political reasons of power politics.

History tells us that the road to democracy is not predetermined, nor is it determined by the level of socio-economic development. For a foreseeable period of time, today’s diversity of political systems will continue in East Asia, with the whole range of regime types, from liberal democracy to Communist one-party systems. We may, however, optimistic that, even if they encounter many difficulties in developing into basic or fuller democracies, East Asian political systems will not deteriorate into more authoritarian ones than we see now, except perhaps in the not-very-likely case of insurmountable economic difficulties.