Triumph of the West? : The Politics of Legitimacy in Asia

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The rise of China has led some commentators to claim that Asia will dominate the 21st century. In this paper I argue that, to the extent that countries in the region define and understand their politics in western terms, the rise of Asia will simply continue the influence of modernity that had its origins in the West. To demonstrate this case I examine the character of political legitimacy in the region, which is founded on the concept of the state, an idea derived from the west. The modern state form has provided considerable advantages to countries in the region, bestowing international legitimacy on those that claim sovereignty, endowing smaller nations with increased political power in international negotiations, and allowing states to use the idea of non-intervention to shield themselves from international scrutiny. But the concept of the state has also defined new territorial boundaries superimposed on pre-existing political, ethnic and traditional sources of power, thereby creating new problems of legitimacy. In confronting and negotiating these challenges Asian states have resorted to western concepts of legitimacy, including democracy, nationalism and performance. Thus an examination of the politics of legitimacy in Asia reveals the extent to which countries in the region are fundamentally shaped in their architecture of governance and their conception of legitimacy by western ideas. The success of Asia in the 21st Century will therefore not introduce a new type of ‘Asian’ global politics, nor restore a more ancient kind, but simply confirm the dominance of modernity in shaping thought and practice.
China’s increasing economic prosperity has raised questions regarding its regional and global political ambitions. Some argue that due to economic limitations, environmental degradation and domestic political instability, China will be unable to sustain its current prosperity.\(^1\) Others assume the continuing economic rise of China, and diagnose a ‘China Threat’, arguing that China’s continuing deployment of economic, military and ‘soft’ power will inevitably challenge American hegemony.\(^2\) Still others dissent, claiming that China’s rise will pose no threat because it has been sustained by an international economic and political architecture that will also constrain its imperial reach.\(^3\) Though these views implicitly accept the increasing international importance of China and the region, some go further, arguing that the recent dominance of the west has been an historical aberration, and that the rise of China will return us to the historical balance of the Central Kingdom.\(^4\) Relying on the notion of contending ‘civilisations’, they claim we are at the end of the western era and at the threshold of an Asian 21st century.\(^5\)

In this paper I question whether the increasing economic, political and cultural importance of China, and Asia more generally, will in fact lead to an Asian 21st century. Though ‘East’ and ‘West’, ‘Oriental’ and ‘Occidental’, ‘Europe’ and ‘Asia’, can sometimes be useful as short-hand descriptions, their specific technical use by civilisation and world historians tends to obscure the complex intellectual and political interrelationships that inform these terms. My reference to the west will be much more specific – it is to those ideas that have their origins or were developed historically in the west but claimed to have universal validity; a rejection of classical

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\(^1\) On the sustainability of China’s economic development see Beeson (2009): ‘China’s embrace of rapid capitalist development – a development which might have been seen as an unambiguous long-term manifestation of American hegemony and structurally embedded influence – may prove highly destabilising and unsustainable; but not necessarily for traditional reasons of great power politics’. Bijian (2005) argues China faces three problems: a) shortage of resources; b) the environment: pollution, waste, and a low rate of recycling together present a major obstacle to sustainable development; c) lack of coordination between economic and social development. See also Yue (2008) regarding the limitations of ‘technologyless industrialization’.


\(^3\) See, for example, Ikenberry (2004; 2008); Shambaugh (2005); Christensen (2006);

\(^4\) Zhang (2004) argues that the Chinese have a ‘Central Kingdom Complex’, ‘generated by the ancient history when China was the center of East Asian civilization, implying that the Chinese elites see the country’s rise now as recovering something lost in the past and not grabbing anything new.’ Compare this assessment with Spakowski (2009), who notes the importance of nationalism in Chinese accounts of world history.

\(^5\) See, for example, Jacques (2009); Huntington (1996); Desnoyers (1997). (This claim should be distinguished from the ‘Asian values’ debate’: see Moody (1996); Thompson (2004)).
and pious approaches to political thought and practice, in favour of human independence, self-sufficiency and enlightenment that came to be comprehended under the general formulation of ‘modernity’. My argument is that the continuing dominance of modernity in the region, specifically of those ideas that can trace their origins to the west, means that the rise of Asia will be articulated in ‘western’ terms, thereby reinforcing the importance of modern ideas and the practices shaped by them. The rise of China and the increasing influence of Asia in international politics will not therefore inaugurate an Asian century, but will rather confirm modernity’s political conceptions and practices.

To examine the nature of the rise of Asia I first explore the larger or overarching theoretical and methodological contest raised by the practical question of what does China’s rise portend for the future of the region and for world politics more generally. This contest concerns the question of whether politics or ‘civilisation’ is the best means for understanding the changing nature of political ideas and practices. These approaches can only engage each other, I suggest, only when we recognise the civilisation approach as a fundamental critique of modernity, and especially of the dominance of the idea of the modern state. Having thus developed the common ground of the ‘state’ as the common basis for examining the contending views on the rise of China and Asia, I proceed to examine the salience of the concept in the region, especially how both the large and powerful, and smaller nations have been willing to embrace it for its political expediency. The adoption of the concept of the ‘state’, I argue, confirms the resilience and dominance of western conceptions of political legitimacy in the region. I therefore explore the character of the domestic political legitimacy debates in the region, drawing on recent research that shows the dynamic debates in these countries incorporate and in some cases emphasise western conceptions of legitimacy, such as performance, nationalism and democracy, at the expense of indigenous ethnic, cultural and historical sources. Thus both internationally and domestically, the concept of political legitimacy reveals the continuing influence of western ideas in Asia. I conclude by observing that the success of China and Asia will not introduce a new type of ‘Asian’ politics, or restore a more ancient kind, but simply confirm the dominance of modernity in shaping contemporary thought and practice.

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

There is something compelling about comparative civilisational history. Its insightful recognition of cultural, societal and mythic aspects of life, and its comprehensive claims that provide a coherent account of the world and its changing orders are only some of the strengths of such an approach. But the very grandeur of civilisation seems oblivious to the detailed, specific and contingent that do not accord with its grand narratives. Its epochal focus seems to puts its claims beyond immediate or quotidian contestation or refutation. Importantly, it seems curiously deaf to those claims based on might and right, of power and virtue, of force and justice. It seems, in short, indifferent to politics. Accordingly it would appear that in adopting a political approach, where we examine Asian politics in terms of the state and political legitimacy, we will be unable to confront or even repudiate civilisational claims of an Asian 21st century. Our political approach does not so much refute the civilisation claim as to provide a different account in terms that civilisation scholars reject. The two approaches, it seems, do not meet or engage each other; they talk past each other. This fundamental difference in approach cannot be resolved by undertaking a politics-based critique of the civilization perspective that challenges the accuracy of its definitions and its methodological rigour. We are therefore confronted with a formidable intellectual impasse.

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

7 For an early account of the ‘historiologoists’ who have pursued the theme of civilisation as well as an enumeration of their different forms of civilisation see Wescott (1970).

8 For an example of such critiques see Yamazaki (1996) on the importance of ‘modernity’ for both East and West, and his rejection of the concept of ‘Asian’ civilisation. On the limitations of macro-paradigms see Spohn (2003). For an indicative critique of Huntington’s approach see O’Hagan (1995).
One way of overcoming such an obstacle, I suggest, lies in a deeper understanding of the nature of the world history approach. In their view of the primacy of history, of ‘culture’ and civilisations, of the potential conflict between these civilisations, all civilisation or world history scholars are indebted to Hegel’s historicism. Though these scholars may disagree as to the characterisation of civilisations, whether they clash or build on each other, whether they suggest a ‘decline’ or ‘ascent’, all nevertheless concur on one point – they reject Hegel’s view that the modern state is the perfected culmination and terminus of world historical progress.\(^9\) Even if this anti-state or anti-modernity bias, which is in effect a moral repudiation of modernity, has disparate sources, it provides a via negativa that directs world historians to all those powerful and appealing aspects of the civilisation approach – its openness to comprehensive notions of ‘culture’; its grand narratives of historical change; and the serious possibility of telos or eschatology and theodicy.\(^{10}\) Thus ‘civilisation’ is fundamentally a modern critique of modernity, especially regarding the status of the modern state. It is on this basis, therefore, that politics and world history can critically engage each other.

Accordingly in the discussion that follows I draw upon the political concept of the modern state, and related ideas such as legitimacy, performance, nationalism, democracy, to provide a more complex account of the implications of the rise of China. Of course how modernity, with intellectual and historical origins in the ‘West’, shaped the ‘East’ and was in turn influenced by it is a long and complex story.\(^{11}\) For this reason we will limit our discussion to a specific, contemporary account, to the reception of the political concept of the ‘state’ by Asian nations after the founding of the United Nations following the end of the Second World War.

\(^9\) Even Fukuyama’s (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*, a Hegelian and Kojèvian account of history, succumbs to Nietzschean reservations (‘Last Man’).

\(^{10}\) Contrast, for example, Spengler’s (1932) rejection of modernity, derived from his Nietzschean rejection of modern nihilism, with Toynbee’s religious telos of history as ‘Man’s Fellowship with the One True God’ (Hall 2003, 396), and the neo-gramscian foundations of Cox and Schechter’s (2002) reinterpretation of ‘civilisation’.

\(^{11}\) For a general overview of the relationship between ‘East’ and ‘West’ that seeks to repudiate ‘Eurocentrism’ without succumbing to ‘Occidentalism’ see Hobson (2004).
State Legitimacy

How has modernity influenced Asian politics? An examination of the concept of the state, and its influence in Asia reveals the extent to which Asian political thought is articulated within a modern western framework. The origin of the modern state is usually traced to the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which ended the Thirty Years War by instituting a new European political order founded on sovereign states. The Peace of Westphalia recognized the principles first laid down at the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, that the prince had the right to determine a state’s religion, and that subjects practising non-established religions had the right to worship freely. It also settled boundaries between principalities and recognised *de jure* the sovereign independence of each. As is evident from the theoretical architects of the modern state, such as Bodin, Hobbes and Grotius, the state was a radical innovation. For example, in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651), one of the most influential accounts of the state, we find a radical transformation in the concept of sovereignty. Based on his concept of power, Hobbes argues that rights-bearing individuals mutually covenant and thereby authorise the ‘sovereign’, a new entity, to enforce laws and pursue the *salus populi* or the people’s safety and welfare. Thus political legitimacy is no longer based on the divine, in wisdom, or even in tradition; it is now authorised by individuals who found the artificial state. This new conception of the state became the basis for subsequent political philosophers, who sought to mitigate the absolutist aspects of Hobbes’ teaching while retaining its core elements of power, rights, and the contractual foundations of all political associations.\(^\text{12}\)

The ‘state’ can only be understood within the larger context of the evolution in modern international law.\(^\text{13}\) This evolution is usually presented in terms of theoretical changes made possible by influential thinkers such as Vitoria, Suárez, Grotius, Pufendorf, and Vattel, and major political milestones, such as the Peace of Westphalia, as well as the First and Second World Wars and the end of the Cold War.\(^\text{14}\) The modern conception of the state has been significantly influenced by

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\(^\text{12}\) For example, Locke in the *Two Treatises on Government* introduced the notion of ‘consent’ to transform Hobbes’ state into a liberal constitutionalism; Rousseau in his *Social Contract* retained Hobbes’ concept of right and contract but argued for the people as the sovereign.

\(^\text{13}\) For general discussions of the concept of the state and state sovereignty see Vincent (1987); Hashmi (1997). On the importance of ‘norms’ in the evolution of the state see Spruyt (2000).

\(^\text{14}\) For example, Cassese (2001) proposes four major stages in the historical evolution of the international community: from the Peace of Westphalia to the end of the first world war; the period between the world wars; from the UN charter to the end of the cold war; from the cold war to the present.
international law. According to international law, the fundamental or primary legal subject of the international community is the state. The criteria for statehood in international law are: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) government; (d) capacity to enter into relations with other states (Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States, 1933, Art 1). States have fundamental rights, as defined by international law. Sovereignty or independence is one of the most important features of a state, which has the right to exercise jurisdiction over its territory and permanent population, and therefore the right to engage in self-defence. A corollary of such a right is the duty not to intervene in the internal affairs of other sovereign states. Legal equality of states – that is, equality of legal rights and duties – is the other fundamental international law principle. For example, irrespective of size or power, states have the same legal capacities and functions and are entitled to one seat and vote in the UN General Assembly. Thus the concept of ‘sovereign equality’ captures an important aspect of the legal character of the modern state. According to the 1970 Declaration on Principles of International Law, sovereign equality includes the following elements:

(a) States are juridically equal;
(b) Each state enjoys the rights inherent in full sovereignty;
(c) Each state has the duty to respect the personality of other states;
(d) The territorial integrity and political independence of the state are inviolable;
(e) Each state has the right freely to choose and develop its political, social, economic and cultural systems;
(f) Each state has the duty to comply fully and in good faith with its international obligations and to live in peace with other states.

This understanding of the state is increasingly being challenged by changes in the international community. One of the most important challenges has been to the concept of non-intervention by those who favour the ‘right to protect’ and humanitarian intervention. Undoubtedly the concept of the state will continue to change and evolve to meet the changing demands of international politics, and certainly the growing international power of Asian nations will mean they will have

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15 See generally the works on international law by Shaw (2003); Cassese (2001).
16 See, for example, recent challenges to state sovereignty by international financial institutions (Williams 2000);
greater influence in determining the new formulations in statehood. But such new formulations will unavoidably build on a concept that traces its origins to the West.

**Legitimacy of the State in Asia**

Asian nations readily adopted the concept of the modern state. We can see this most clearly in their support for the newly instituted United Nations, which established an international system founded upon the concept of state sovereignty and therefore legitimacy.¹⁸ UN membership represented international recognition and therefore prestige and authority. Becoming a UN member was an important milestone in national independence and state sovereignty.¹⁹ The importance of UN membership can be seen in the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) attempts since 1949 to represent China at the UN by displacing Taiwan. It achieved success in 1971, effectively expelling Taiwan from the UN, and thereby depriving it of international status.²⁰ Asian states’ support of the international system could also be seen in their participation in major international conventions and treaties, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), as well as their contribution to regional organisations, such as ASEAN, APEC, ARF, and the Asian Development Bank.

Asian nations understood that state status conferred significant legal and political advantages. As we have seen in international law statehood conferred territorial sovereignty, equality and rights of non-intervention. Each of these legal dimensions proved to have far-reaching political consequences which were welcomed by Asian nations. For countries in the region that had been subjected to colonialism, or had uncertain or contested borders, state sovereignty as territorial control, backed up by the new international principles outlawing aggressive wars, provided a new basis for international legitimacy. Indonesia, the Philippines and the other archipelago states were special beneficiaries of such a concept of statehood.

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¹⁸ Founding members included China (1945), Philippines (1945), Thailand (1946), Myanmar (1948). China became a permanent member of the Security Council on admission. See Bedeski (1975) on the evolution of the modern state in China.

¹⁹ Japan’s membership in 1956 marked an important point in its political rehabilitation. Similar accounts, in terms of political legitimacy, can be given for: Malaysia (1957); Singapore (1965); Vietnam (1977).

²⁰ In October 1971 the General Assembly, by a tally of 59 to 55 with 15 abstentions, voted against the US sponsored procedural motion that would have allowed Taiwan to keep its UN seat. By a formal vote the PRC was granted that seat, effectively expelling Taiwan from the UN (Spence 1999, 598). See, however, Zhang (2004) regarding the limitations of the ‘nation-state’ as a ‘process of peripheralization and semi-colonization’ for China.
The principle of non-intervention proved to be particularly valuable, precisely because it effectively removed from international scrutiny contentious domestic issues of human rights and democratic governance. Though the principle of non-intervention especially favours highly authoritarian states, such as Myanmar and North Korea, it is equally useful to other nations in the region. In his 1995 speech to the UN China’s state chairman Jiang Zemin declared ‘the sacred nature of state sovereignty is inviolable’. According to Zemin, ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ were often used as a pretext to encroach on the sovereignty of other states (cited in Moody 1996, 1). China continues to insist on the inviolability of sovereignty, though its practical application of the principle is more complex.21

In addition to sovereignty and non-intervention, the legal equality of states has proven to have significant political consequences in the region. Though a type of political hypocrisy that has proven costly to the more powerful nations because it denies the reality of their comparative power, ‘sovereign equality’ has given unprecedented influence to smaller and less powerful nations that otherwise would have very little diplomatic power in international relations. One consequence has been the possibility of middle-power states inaugurating their own regional fora such as ASEAN.22 For the smallest states in the region, especially those in the Pacific with very small populations, limited natural resources, and relative isolation, sovereign equality has been an important means for the pursuing the national interest.23 UN membership (except for Niue and Cook Islands), as well as membership of other international bodies such as the International Whaling Commission (IWC), has allowed these micro states to exercise their voting rights in ways that advance their political and economic interests. Of course the legitimacy of such vote-buying has

22 But see Martin Jones and Smith (2007, 184): ‘Whatever strategic mutation ASEAN assumes in terms of its wider community building, it can only mask the reality that weaker states cannot shape the fates of stronger ones.’ In the same vein Narine (2005) argues that weakness of domestic legitimacy places limits on such regional institutions.
23 Stringer (2006, 549) recognizes eight independent states: Fiji; Kiribati; Nauru; Samoa; Solomon Islands; Tonga; Tuvalu; Vanuatu; and five self governing states: The Cook Islands (freely associated with New Zealand); Niue (freely associated with New Zealand); Federated States of Micronesia (freely associated with the United States (US)); Marshall Islands (freely associated with the US); Palau (freely associated with the US). Consider the populations of some of these states (as at 2009): Tuvalu: 12,373; Nauru: 14,019; Palau: 20,796; Marshall Islands: 64,522; Micronesia: 107,434; Kiribati: 112,850; Tonga: 120,898; Vanuatu: 218,519; Samoa: 219,998; Solomon Islands: 595,613; Fiji: 944,720.
been questioned. But the larger question concerns the benefits of such diplomacy – whether it exposes these states to greater control and exploitation by powerful nations. Miller and Dolšak (2007), for example, have noted that Japanese bilateral aid to countries like Palau was directly linked to whether members voted with Japan in the IWC. Benefits of such diplomacy have also been challenged by Petersen (2002, 227), who concludes that the ‘Pacific island countries are heavily dependent on foreign aid, essentially exchanging aid for cheap access to their fisheries and poorly directed foreign direct investment. Much of this aid has been invested in the domestic fishing industry. All of these investments have been financial failures, some repeatedly’. But as Stringer (2006) demonstrates, the situation may be more complex, and these Pacific island microstates are not simply pawns in Pacific rim diplomacy. For example, they have benefited from the PRC-Taiwan rivalry in the region, which has as its source Taiwan’s attempt to reasserting its legitimacy in the international community through trade and economic assistance. The case of Nauru is instructive. It had since 1985 supported Taiwan but in 2002, with the promise of substantial economic assistance, it signed a joint communiqué establishing ties with China, only to reverse its policy again in 2005 (Stringer 2006, 562-564).

**Contesting Asian Political Legitimacy**

This brief overview of the nature of international relations in Asia shows the dominance of the modern concept of state, and its associated principles, in the region. But perhaps the Asian nations adopted these concepts because they had no choice: the powerful make the rules and consequently western military, political and economic dominance inevitably shapes the nature – and terms – of international politics. The corollary to this argument is that once this power balance shifts, for example with the rise of China, the victors will make new rules. Perhaps the best way to examine this

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24 See Gillespie’s (2001) critique of international vote-buying, especially in the IWC. On the political aspects of whaling generally see Heazle (2006).
25 Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu are all members of the IWC. See the detailed discussion in Stringer (2005).
26 For an examination of PRC-Taiwan rivalry in the Pacific see, for example, Biddick (1989) who argues that over the long term China’s concerns transcend the Taiwan question, and Zhang (2007) who argues that China’s regional contribution may be in terms of development, rather than strategic rivalry. For a general overview of China’s regional influence see Breslin (2009); for specific regional focus see Zhang (2007) regarding South Pacific; Cheng and Shi (2009) on Africa. For regional attitudes to China see Chung (2009).
27 The microstate dealings with Japan reveal a similarly complex picture, according to Stringer (2006, 565-572).
argument, which is in effect a prediction about the state of international relations in
the future, is to see how seriously states in the region have adopted western ideas. To
what extent was statehood a necessary façade and to what extent did its influence
reach deeper into the domestic politics of each country? An examination of the
political legitimacy of countries in the region provides a useful means for answering
this question.

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

Performance – in its simplest formulation the security, stability and prosperity
of a nation – is of fundamental importance for the political legitimacy of all countries.
But the increasing prosperity of nations that adopted western technological,

28 Challenges to the usefulness of the concept, include the charge that it is tautological for analytical
purposes; that it is difficult to distinguish between the source and the object of legitimation and that
there are insurmountable problems in measuring legitimacy. For a discussion of the theoretical
limitations to the concept see generally Alagappa (1995), Schaar (1989), Barker (1990), Beetham
29 On Confucianism see de Bary (1996); Moody (1996) and Bell (2008).
30 See the recent edited collection ‘In Search of Legitimacy’ (Kane et al 2010). For earlier research
consistent with these findings see Alagappa (1995).
commercial and institutional initiatives has made performance a major challenge to
traditional forms of legitimacy in Asia. The story of Asian economic success is well
known. The extraordinary prosperity of Japan set the standard for the ‘Asian Tigers’,
Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and also for China’s modernisation
initiatives. Other countries in the region, notably Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and
Indonesia, are now pursuing the same path of development and modernisation that has
transformed their Asian neighbours. But the more these changes are adopted, the more
performance legitimacy ultimately directs countries in the region to the west, which is
widely regarded as the original model for such performance.\textsuperscript{31} The increasing stability
and economic prosperity of Asia is therefore a testament to Asia’s willing embrace of
high standards of living, made possible by the adoption of western ideas and
institutions. Though some decry the debilitating aspects of this form of globalisation,
its continuing and extensive influence in these countries testifies to the foundational
role of modernity in Asia.\textsuperscript{32}

A similar case can be made regarding nationalism. All Asian nations,
confronted with challenges to their legitimacy, have turned to some form of
nationalism to counter such claims. Nationalist claims can be founded upon ethnicity,
language, history or tradition and are employed to create a sense of solidarity among
often quite disparate populations. For example, references to the Han in China, the
Malays in Malaysia, the Burmese in Burma, the Thai in Thailand and the Kinh in
Vietnam are intended to found legitimacy on ethnic national grounds. But such ethnic
nationalism tends to be divisive, with separatist tendencies. It is for this reason that
countries such as Indonesia and Singapore stress the multi-ethnic makeup of their
state, appealing to the concept of a ‘neutral state’. Nationalism can also be employed
effectively against other nations, in situations of tension or conflict, with the intention
of promoting internal unity or pursuing certain domestic or foreign policy objectives.

What is important for our purposes regarding the resort to nationalism by nations in
the region, whether domestically or for international purposes, is the fact that
nationalism can trace its theoretical origins to the western idea of the ‘nation-state’.
Though nation may be understood as an ‘imagined community’, in the well-know

\textsuperscript{31} Compare this with Breslin (2009), who notes that Ramo’s \textit{Beijing Consensus} did much to promote
the idea of ’the uniqueness of the Chinese development model’.

\textsuperscript{32} The Cold War, as a struggle between Communism and Capitalism, was in effect a contest over
contending forms of performance. Yet to the extent that both ‘isms’ could trace their origins to western
political thought, the struggle simply confirmed the continuing dominance of western modernity in the
region (even if modified or adapted for domestic application eg Maoism).
formulation of anthropologist Benedict Anderson (1991), its modern expression is based on the political idea of a sovereign people, and is therefore linked to the modern concept of the state. Accordingly, the temptation of nations in the region to secure the political legitimacy of their state by resorting to nationalism confirms, once more, the dominance of western political conceptions in Asian politics.  

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

33See, for example, Spakowski (2009, 494) who notes that Chinese concepts of world or global history reveal ‘the persistence of a deeply embedded Eurocentrism, albeit one that is self-imposed and manipulated for national purposes’.
Politics of Modernity

What conclusion can we reach from our discussion above regarding political legitimacy in Asia? Though political legitimacy is contested, though it confronts traditional and modern conceptions, what is evident is that western ideas, such as technological and material progress, nationalism, and democracy are now an unavoidable and ineradicable part of Asian political debates. The dominance of international media, especially with developments in modern information and communication technologies, means that Asian nations see and hear themselves internationally in terms that are not simply ‘Asian’. It is now very difficult, if not impossible, to remove these modern concepts and ideas from the intellectual landscape in Asia. They will surely be contested and may evolve as a consequence of debates.34 Nevertheless, looking at Asian politics from the perspective of political legitimacy suggests that in important ways that matter – in the formulation of political ideas and frames of thought – western modernity will continue to influence and shape China and Asia.

The discussion above suggests that in adopting the concepts of the state, legitimacy, performance, nationalism, democracy, that is, political ideas, we see a much more complicated picture of what may develop with the rise of China. If China can sustain its economic growth, it will undoubtedly gain greater international influence and thereby inevitably restructure the international political landscape. But there is no reason to think that such a transformation will abandon those modern ideas, or their variants, that had their origins in the west and have to date been so influential in the region, such as the international law principles of state sovereignty, and political concepts of legitimacy.

Our examination of the long-term implications of the rise of China has also revealed an important theoretical aspect of this debate. China’s increasing economic prosperity poses significant questions for its domestic politics, and has major implications for international politics. But for some the rise of China represents much more. It portends a fundamental challenge to ‘modernity’, an enterprise initiated in Europe more than five hundred years ago. Fearing the triumph of western modernity, and united only in their opposition to modernity’s reshaping of humanity, civilization

34 See, for example, Petras (1998, 158) who wants to return to class politics to avoid the ‘cultural collapse implicit in the Americanization process’. 
scholars look to the ‘East’ in hopeful anticipation of an Asian civilisation that will repudiate the ‘West’ with the promise of a new politics and history. As we have seen, however, this very hope has its source in modernity, thereby confirming modernity’s dominance. Yet in a certain respect this hope reveals and confirms an important aspect of modernity – its contradictions and contestations. It is in this sense that the ‘Triumph of the West’ ironically uncovers the limitations and incompleteness of modernity.

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