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**A “Mediterranean” Model for Asian
Regionalism: Cosmopolitan Cities
and Nation-States in Asia**

by

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About the Author

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The Initial Question

What can be said about the social and cultural characteristics of the Asian region as a whole? Are there, for example, traditional similarities that unify the region—something one might label “Asian culture”? Various scholars have seen an Asian-ness in such things as the way authority has been understood in the region¹ or, even more typically, they point to the Confucian heritage common to China and the nations on its periphery as a unifying characteristic.² At least one contemporary Asian leader, Mahathir Mohamad, prime minister of Malaysia, has argued for the legitimacy of a distinctly Asian approach to politics and society, one that is at odds with what he infers is a Western cultural hegemony in such matters.³ Others, certainly the majority of scholars, have expressed skepticism with any interpretive framework that has attempted to embrace the entire region in cultural terms. Are there other ways to think of cultural connections that are not based in traditions or in religious, linguistic, historical, or other origins? Or is the initial question itself misplaced?

The approach taken here in response to such a broad and ultimately elusive question is to develop a small set of typological contrasts that represent the way economic, social, cultural, and political forces appear to be patterned across the region. Up front, let us acknowledge the usual problems with such typologizing, namely that the typologies tend to exaggeration and the contrasts tend to be overdrawn. Second, this approach leads to the usual problems with generalizing across an entire region, namely: 1) that exceptions abound, 2) that local specifics are ignored, and 3) that cultural distinctiveness gets lost. These problems should not be forgotten as the reader joins this author in attempting to tackle the question, or questions, of culture, society, and regionalism in contemporary Asia.

Introduction

Asia is comprised of nation-states. We know this from maps, from statistical compilations, from representation at international meetings, from the way news is packaged and, as a rule, from how academic research is structured. To argue that this fundamental categorization of the Asian world is wrong would be to deny most political and legal realities. Yet missing from or missed entirely by the state-based system of categorization are other realities that cannot be ignored, especially as Asian economic growth proceeds. Missing, for example, are the rising centrality and quasi-autonomous development of a system of urban capitalism that is regionwide. No one can deny that externally oriented trade growth has so far centered very largely on a relatively small set of commercial cities around the coastal rim of maritime Asia. Cities such as Tokyo, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Seoul, Singapore, Osaka, and Taipei are the hubs for most of Asia's air and sea transportation, its international entrepreneurship, its information flows, its lines of cultural influence, its industrial development, its pattern of direct overseas investment, and so forth.⁴ Simply put, most of the regional interactions occur within and between these urban areas. The same is true of emergent China, where coastal cities are developing far more rapidly than the nation as a whole.⁵

We could say that these cities act as gateways between their separate domestic economies and the expanding international system of trade, both regional and global. This certainly was the role of port cities in the past when agricultural products and natural resources were at the heart of international commerce. But today the gateway metaphor is inappropriate. It fails to focus on the cities themselves as the creators of the most dynamic kinds of economic activity. It ignores the network of international ties that link them to one another and the multidimensionality of these ties. It misses the intense competition among them for capital and technology. The metaphor also cannot convey the growing similarities among them arising from so much interaction, so much commonality of interest and activity. The image of a gateway, furthermore, implies that what lies behind the gate is what is important, but today the cities themselves are central to the dynamics of the region. As a rough approximation, we can say that fewer than a dozen urban centers in Asia (representing perhaps 4 percent of the total population—see Figure 1) are the locus of 90 percent of international finance, of international transportation, of trade-oriented manufacturing, and of international information networks.⁶ To underscore the fact that capitalistic growth centers in a small selection of Asia's cities is to highlight their contrast with the national societies that make up the bulk of Asia's

geography and population. Certainly the intensity of international activities is hundreds of times higher per capita in these cities than in the nation-states that we typically focus on.

One way to present this contrast would be to mentally construct a kind of topographical map of Asia centering on international activities and transactions. The map would represent such things as the movement of sea and air cargo (Table 1), the level of telephone and fax activity (Tables 4 and 5), the number of business and other international visits (Table 2), the quantity of technologies transferred, and the amount of other kinds of information exchanged. Relevant business activities would include the electronic transfers of funds, and the production of contracts, patent filings, and litigation. They would also include the movement of personnel belonging to multinational companies. An analysis of equity holdings, loans, acquisitions, and joint ventures would also be useful to the task of constructing such a map. Foreign students studying at universities and foreign trainees at factories and training institutes would be another helpful input (Chart 1). The convening of such things as international conferences and trade shows would also be relevant. We would want to include transactions related to joint research activities (academic, industrial, medical, and so forth). The distribution of foreign television programs, newspapers, books (including translations), trade journals, business brochures, public policy studies, and other sources of international information would be germane. Rarely are such data available using an accounting system that focuses on cities. If more such information were available, we would find that most of Asia, topographically speaking, is a great level plain (signifying little such activity), whereas the sets of aforementioned cities tower over the landscape, interconnected around the region's coastal periphery—the near perfect inverse of the actual physical landscape.

We would also find that the more mature the national economy, the more the level of such activity has spread geographically inland. This process is most evident in the case of Japan where one could argue that almost the entire coastal area from Tokyo to Hiroshima and the hinterlands beyond has become one enormous metropolitan area. In such cases as Thailand or China, on the other hand, the pattern would be much more uneven, with the spread inland of international activities only in its earliest stages. The point is that such a map would tell a very different story from the conventional one of borders and national populations. We would find, for example, that Singapore and Hong Kong, with combined populations amounting to less than one percent of China's, have more international activity of the kind we are considering than their giant cousin.

To help us better grasp the pattern we are discussing, let us consider what data is available on telecommunications in the region. First, as Table 3 illustrates, the density of phone lines is very much greater in urban areas. Bangkok, for example, possesses 68 percent of the total phone lines available in Thailand, and Seoul and Pusan together have 40 percent of those in Korea. The figures for China are not available, but it is widely known that demand there greatly outstrips supply in the country's leading cities and that obtaining an access line is not only a major investment, it also often involves graft and political favoritism. The number of pagers in China is expanding at an amazing rate today, primarily as a means of better coping with the phone system's limits.⁷ Second, comparing the region's richest and poorest nations illustrates the commonsense fact that as a country industrializes, the pattern of phone distribution gradually evens out geographically. If China is at one extreme, Japan, with its nearly complete phone coverage of the entire population, is at the other. Third, rates of international phone/fax traffic have been expanding at rates much greater than most other kinds of business activities (Tables 4 and 5). Fourth, as we would expect, regional developments in Asia are intriguingly illustrated in some of the recent changes. By far the greatest rate of phone activity increase for Japan of late, for example, has been with Vietnam (Chart 2), and even more notable has been the extraordinary rise in phone traffic between Taiwan and China (Chart 3), which in a matter of four years (1989-1993) grew at such a pace as to rise from representing in 1989 less than a fourth of the level of calls to Hong Kong and Japan, to surpassing both in 1993. Finally, the extension of fiber-optic cables in the region (Figure 2) further underscores the geographic pattern we are describing. In sum, telecommunications activity, a particularly sensitive indicator of regional relationships, describes a rapidly developing system of internationally linked coastal cities and the gradual extension of these cities' influence inland.

This paper aims to overlay our state-based approach with this other template, a city-based one, that is both supranational and subnational in its dynamics and implications—supranational because it highlights the regional and global system and subnational because it highlights the unevenness, the disparities, and the tensions within national societies. Specifically, this paper will underscore the growing similarities among cities regionwide and it will discuss the tensions between these cities and the larger national systems to which they belong. Coastal, market-driven, and cosmopolitan in nature, these cities diverge significantly from their own interior regions, which are politically and culturally more conservative. Desirable in economic terms, they present political problems for national leaders. Asia's exuberant capitalist cities are sources of new and disturbing

identities and loyalties. Such contrasts are not unique to Asia or to this century, to be sure, but because of the region's very rapid economic growth and the many factors that make global forces more powerful than ever, the tensions between urban and rural and between city and state appear particularly acute in Asia today.

I use the term "culture" advisedly here. It is not used as synonymous or congruous solely with "the traditional." Rather, it is used as an approximation of differences of "worldview" arising out of a particular set of circumstances, in this case those concerning economics technology, and information. Urban culture is, therefore, that which distinguishes the world of meaning for city dwellers from other perspectives salient to a single society. In the contemporary world, furthermore, public culture is best understood as constructed by contemporary forces rather than being simply the product of historical continuities. Those forces certainly include political influences, but are hardly limited to the power of government. Mass media, commercial activities, international movements, information availability, nativistic nostalgia, and much more combine, especially in cities, to continually shape and reshape public culture. My argument is that the nation and the cosmopolitan city are points of origination for very different public cultures, and distinct worldviews. Furthermore, quite different processes of cultural construction are found in cities, in rural areas, and in governments.

Capitalist urban culture is shifting and diverse, a product of many intersecting currents, some of which are global and regional in nature. It is open to the outside and sophisticated in character. Fashions animate its surface. It is eclectic, varied, and variable. Its dynamic comes from markets and its solution to many social issues tends toward a tolerance for greater degrees of pluralism. It values economic freedom.

These cosmopolitan cities are like border areas in a more conventional sense, not because they are marginal, but because they are transnational places where a sort of cultural blender is allowed, even encouraged, to run.⁸ State-sponsored culture, by contrast, centers on a nationalistic inclination, one that typically includes the "reinvention" of tradition,⁹ and a conservative need to counter the perceived moral degeneration that comes with prosperity and foreign influence. The goal is to define a national essence and a moral agenda that combines "national tradition" with the needs of a contemporary ideal vision of the state. This worldview is inherently antithetical to cosmopolitanism and pluralism. Rural-based conservatism (often strongly represented in the military and in the first generation of nationalist leaders) is a major element in the nationalist cultural formula. To the nation-state worldview, cosmopolitan cities, despite their economic

importance, appear culturally marginal at best, and at worst they are subversive of the fragile nationalist vision.

The realm of practical politics in today's Asia is thus largely defined by the problems of adapting urban and rural interests and the very separate moral perspectives each fosters during a time of very rapid social change. This makes for a complex and potent set of issues faced regionwide. While we typically discuss these issues as belonging to the realm of political economy, the fact is that underlying their salience is a powerful set of cultural contradictions that arise from the pattern of growth we have been considering.

Much of this story is not new. The general social and economic trends in Asia have been evident for more than a decade, but we tend to see them as current maps would have us see them, as occurring in nation-states—when, in fact, the preponderance of change has occurred in a select set of cities and continues to center in them. Export-led growth means that rates of change, both economic and social, are much greater for those urban areas actively participating in international trade. Many kinds of social and cultural consequences flow from this fact. Consumerism, foreign popular entertainment, unconventional fashions, freedom of information, and international contacts mushroom and in turn these changes lead to critical cultural disjunctures with interior regions. The value-added contribution of cities remains much higher even as low-skilled, low-wage work filters out to rural areas. The political process of resolving such disjunctures is at different stages across the region to be sure, but the process itself is regionwide. The spectrum is very great when we compare Myanmar and North Korea at one end, with Hong Kong and Tokyo at the other.

Historical Considerations

A construct of European thought as much as anything else, “Asia” has no single geographical, cultural, or historical focal point. Nor is there common agreement on where Asia physically begins and ends. It makes no more sense to argue that Asian regionalism finds a basis in a common cultural tradition than to say that there is a geographical coherence to the region. To be sure, subgeographies have common historical experiences sufficient to encourage a sense of affinity, such as the sphere of Chinese influence, but it would be a distortion to overemphasize these ties, especially when we are contrasting the region to Europe or the Americas.

Asian regionalism today is still very much evolving—the product of rather arbitrary perceptions and very recent economic dynamics, not one of continents, or a single history or cultural heritage foundational to the entire area. Granting that, one can still perceive historical patterns lying below the surface of the urban topography just introduced.

Until very recently Asia was largely a heterogeneous collection of essentially agricultural societies separated in space primarily by water. Land and its productivity were of paramount importance. Territorial configurations and constituent ethnic groups shifted greatly in time as more powerful systems expanded. Although one can speak of Chinese and Indian spheres of influence, and also of Buddhist, Hindu, Confucian, Islamic, and even Christian spheres, a more accurate cultural portrait would have to dwell on the historically eclectic and shifting nature of boundaries, groups, administrative regimes, and symbolic systems. What was most common was the profound centrality of agriculture to patterns of social life and to systems of governance. This meant that protecting borders, controlling farming populations, building tax systems, enhancing agricultural productivity, and managing markets were paramount concerns. The great centers were characterized by religio-administrative complexes from which sprung the great civilizations of Asia's past. Largely inward-looking, conservative, and oriented to bureaucratic control, this largely continental world attempted, as a rule, to try to protect itself from foreign influences, from the disruptions of commerce, and from populations living on the geographical margins.

There was another historical Asia to be sure, one of trading ports, commercial entrepôt, maritime linkages, and colonial cities.¹⁰ Located on the coastal periphery of continental/agricultural Asia, this world was cosmopolitan and its cities ethnically heterogeneous by comparison with the agricultural core. Connected with one another primarily by trade, such port cities (and kingdoms) developed civic cultures that facilitated the conduct of intersocietal commerce. They shared, for example, the need for a minimal set of “international” rules that guaranteed markets, standards and measures, and safety for travelers. Out of necessity, they encouraged tolerance of religious and ethnic differences. Even just considering the matter of language, these cities tended to be polyglot with a mix of local languages, pidgins, and lingua francas. They housed distinct trading communities that were allowed considerable autonomy. They were alike, too, in the way consumer products, fashions, foods, and ideas from many sources commingled.

In other words, thanks to trade, to the common civic culture it required, and to the fact that with trade comes a commerce in ideas, tastes, fashions, and knowledge, these trade-based cities shared a cultural sphere, one that

grew and evolved for three centuries from about 1500 onwards. Japan withdrew in 1635.¹¹ The Portuguese, Arabs, Persians and many others were forced out. Chinese participation ebbed and flowed. The fortunes of individual cities shifted, but the basic system and its dynamic remained. As a kind of shorthand I will refer to this system of linked trading ports in its overall regional pattern as “Mediterranean,” using the term in a generic sense.¹² While the present system of interconnected coastal cities is quite different in some respects from the actual, geographical/historical Mediterranean, the critical point is that the character of the present system is also “Mediterranean.”

In the nineteenth century European colonialism came to dominate this world built on maritime commerce. The prosperity and intensified cosmopolitanism that colonialism brought to many of the coastal ports further contributed to their similarity with one another. Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore became more and more alike, for example, and other cities like Kobe, Batavia, Yokohama, or Saigon, that were part of the same trade network (colonial or not), became increasingly alike by virtue of such things as overlapping enclaves of foreign traders (British, Chinese, Indian, French, Dutch, Jewish and so forth), shared international markets, international or extraterritorial legal protections, similar infrastructures (including many European institutions like clubs, hospitals, and schools), and systems of rapid intercity communication. It is this colonial and quasi-colonial base upon which much of the contemporary system arose. And it is older colonial cities like Saigon (Ho Chi Minh) and Shanghai that are struggling to return to membership in the network.

Nineteenth-century colonialism also largely confirmed the vulnerability of preexisting administrative regimes. The rise of European power in Asia brought with it a growing set of basic contradictions between new and older forms of government, technology, social organization, thought, and value. The story of this relatively short and highly traumatic time is well known, and space does not allow a recapitulation here. What is important to our analysis is 1) that a system of trade-linked cities had existed for centuries and that colonialism only reshaped, extended, and deepened its nature; 2) that this cosmopolitan maritime world was essentially peripheral to the ongoing administrative and culturally conservative spheres of Asia centering on agricultural populations. Rhoads Murphey, for example, has argued that colonialism’s impact on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “continental” China was much less than our Western histories have estimated. And 3) whether tolerated, encouraged, or opposed, this peripheral trading world was chronically problematic for traditional regimes.

Whatever country of the region we examine, both of the modes I am describing have played important roles in economic history. Equally true

is the fact that a cultural and political tension has existed between them. China, for example, tried to isolate its continental nature from the incursions and “corruption” of coastal pirates, commercial and foreign influences, and ultimately Western colonialism, and its present ambivalence about coastal development is testimony to the continuing salience of the issue. Japan, following a long period of very active maritime exploration and trade, closed all but one of its ports to foreign commerce for two and a half centuries, and is still viewed as relatively closed by the standards of other advanced nations.¹³ Korean history also shared in this “hermit”-like inclination of an essentially agricultural regime to quarantine itself from foreign disruption. Today, Myanmar and North Korea are the extremes of this pattern. Exacerbating matters in Southeast Asia between coastal cities and interior agricultural areas have been ethnic and religious differences epitomized (but by no means limited to) the place of the overseas Chinese.

In sum, this very generalized historical overview contrasts two distinct patterns of social existence. Typically symbiotic in economic terms, they were, and remain, different in cultural terms, and the differences all along have been mediated by politics.

Turning to this century, anti-colonialist revolutions and the formation of new nation-states in the region have generally been followed by initial tendencies toward isolation and consolidation. One wonders whether these inward-looking tendencies echoed earlier periods in history when dominance by the continental mode was ascendant. Nationalist revolutions brought the military to the forefront of state building, for example, and they gave rise to political preoccupations with ideology and with physical borders. Second, efforts to make “modern” nations meant forcefully transforming traditional social structures, and this focused on largely agricultural populations. Third, an ideology that was anti-commercial and anti-foreign was notable in the emergent nationalism of Asia. Former colonial cities were not in favor, for example, in post-1949 China. Nationalism, in sum, stood in opposition to the cosmopolitanism of commercial cities oriented toward the outside world.

Whether belatedly (China, North Korea, Myanmar) or with surprising alacrity (Meiji Japan, Vietnam), this initial postrevolutionary posture has given way to a recognition that only through international ties can crucial industrial development efforts succeed in the present world. It has not required a great mental leap to extend this logic to the point where export-oriented growth and the critical role of such things as trade zones, port infrastructure, airports, English-language skills, advanced communications technology, protection for commercial rights, the liberalization of labor and financial markets, and all the many fundamental necessities of

participation in the larger trading world have come to constitute the development agenda. This is the new pragmatic, capitalist-in-orientation Asia that this volume is focusing upon. In geographic terms, it is the Asia of old coastal trading cities turning dynamic once more.

Finally, because power was European, what was modern and what was Western proved very difficult to separate, balance, and reintegrate with existing norms for post-World War II nationalist regimes.¹⁴ Capitalism, technology, consumerism, and democracy—nearly all that was to be central to what has become the late-twentieth-century international order—appeared at the time to be culturally opposed to whatever ideology and/or Asian tradition was espoused by the nationalist postwar regimes. Only in Japan was this issue being worked out free of a history of colonialism, and this largely before World War II.

Thus, confusion and tensions between new and old, East and West continued through the period of postcolonial nation-state building. Revolutions, popular uprisings, authoritarian regimes, democratic reforms, and other manifestations of the tribulations of this period certainly occurred in distinct patterns within each society, but for our purposes it is important to note that 1) the time for building nation-states was very short by European standards and punctuated by many setbacks and false starts; 2) nationalism has inherently been a cultural effort to balance and select from aspects that are “modern,” “Western,” and “traditional”; and 3) whether a capitalistic or socialistic track was chosen, the process of institution building did not allow for a *laissez-faire* approach to government. In essence, the inclination to administrative controls, to the use of “reinvented traditionalism,” and to discomfort with Western-style liberalism accelerated in the era of nation-state building, the partial exceptions being Hong Kong and occupied Japan. In Communist China after 1949, both anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism made commercial cities like Shanghai appear decadent, and the city’s legacies threatening to the new moral order.¹⁵ In conservative, pro-Western Taiwan, Singapore, and Korea, on the other hand, anti-communist ideology legitimated official hostility to popular democracy. Even as Japan began to grow rich, there was consistent head wagging about the deleterious moral effects of prosperity and Western liberalism. In other words, regardless of ideological orientation, the long-standing tension between the commercial city and the administrative state continued across Asia.

But here the similarities end. The postwar history of Asia’s commercial cities is one of dynamic revitalization for some and isolation and stagnation for others. Beginning with Tokyo, Osaka, Hong Kong, Kobe, Yokohama, Singapore, Nagoya, and Taipei and extending subsequently to Seoul, Bangkok, Pusan, and Kuala Lumpur, export-oriented activities centering

especially on the North American market led to consistently high growth. Japan and Hong Kong developed and perfected the game and others followed. The fact that industrial policy interventions were critical in the early stages did not imply that the commercial dynamic was lacking. Nor should it imply that the governments were hoping to see many of the social and cultural changes that came with export-based growth. In the socialist states, no such encouragement of externally oriented activities occurred and the port cities of these nations languished.

The Logic of International Markets and Commercial Cultures

Let us remind ourselves that Asia is a region of enormous physical and cultural scale. Distances are very great. The total population is of a different magnitude than in either Europe or North America. Considering religion, culture, or language (or any combination of them), diversity is also much greater. And in terms of levels of economic development, the area contains the full spectrum from very poor to abundantly wealthy subregions. Natural resources, wage rates, human capital, technology, financial assets, and other factor endowments also vary enormously. Until recently, such scale and diversity have prevented much thinking about Asia as a single region.

On the other hand, the region's geographical distances are now significantly reduced by advancing technology and the fact that distances across water are much less formidable than those over land. The only landlocked countries, Laos and Mongolia, are notably isolated from participation in the dynamics of regionalism by this fact. New communications technologies (satellites, fiber optics, etc.) put Tokyo and Jakarta next door. Air travel also has changed the perceptions of distance. Measured in the more contemporary standard of time zones, Asia is no larger than Europe. As Peter Rimmer so aptly puts it, "the friction of distance" is rapidly decreasing.¹⁶ This global phenomenon is particularly relevant to the Pacific region in the next few decades.

Container cargo data, air passenger traffic, and the rapidly rising statistics on air cargo movement all show great intraregional increases. These are activities that rest on very expensive infrastructural developments. International traffic of these kinds is inherently dependent on infrastructural concentrations, most of which have long histories dating back to the fourteenth century and beyond and periodically require major

new investments to remain competitive. Distances in Asia shrink with advances in shipping and air transport, but the geographical pattern of trade changes slowly due to the embedded character of infrastructural concentrations.

Although the data are incomplete, recent changes in telecommunications are the most indicative of larger trends. If, to begin with, we consider the numbers and distribution of phone lines, we find that in countries like Thailand or China there is an enormous demand for new lines. Most of the phones and most of the new demand center in the key cities. Not surprisingly, in China, use of the more flexible pagers that allow people to "patch in" to the system is growing at rates that surpass increases in phone lines. Traffic loads per line are heavy as a result. Cellular phone growth is great throughout urban Asia as well. This too is a reflection of the fact that demand is far outdistancing the growth capacities of the conventional phone systems. If we turn to intraregional phone traffic we encounter a similar explosion of activity (Table 4).

The development of fiber-optic cable networks in the region is telling. We have made a map of the present and planned system of lines and it rather closely replicates the patterns of coastal city development and interaction being discussed in this paper (Figure 2). The projected advance inland from Shanghai and Hong Kong of fiber-optic cables is a notable barometer of future Chinese developments centering on these hub metropolises.

Linguistic and cultural barriers are also coming down. There are a number of lingua francas in Asia with English and Chinese dominant and Japanese a distant, but advancing, third. Foreign study, furthermore, has grown to a point where most nations possess a pool of foreign-trained specialists and elites capable of effective international dealings. The extensive networks of overseas Chinese are notable, too, but even they are but a part of a larger and continually expanding world of cosmopolitan players. The pool of Asian "regionalist experts" competent to facilitate intra-Asian transactions is also growing rapidly.

These developments are part of an increasingly well-understood game. The entrepreneurs organizing international business are people capable of exploiting differing factor endowments within and between Asian nations. They move money, skills, and technology in profitable ways, intermediating between local production and distant consumer markets. These are city people, of course, and they depend on the infrastructure of cities to be effective. Similarly, most of the investment in factories and trade they sponsor takes place in or near the same cities.

The crucial communications pathways connect these localities to other cities throughout the Pacific Rim.¹⁷ Only between the key cities of the system does the amount of traffic justify the very high costs of the most

advanced technologies. By virtually any measure, the key cities of Asia succeed because they have the infrastructure, the human capital, and the historical experience to effectively play the game.

While their long histories as trade centers and their relatively advanced facilities help explain this concentration, human and cultural factors are probably the most critical. Only urban environments are capable of attracting and supporting such scarce assets as investors, traders, and skilled citizens. A depth of technical and other skills is essential for cities to succeed and this means that educational attainment levels must be relatively high. Here again cities are different from agricultural areas. Virtually no regionwide data exists, but it would be fair to estimate that employed city populations on average have at least four more years of schooling than their rural counterparts. Attracting capable foreign participation (multinational corporations and international traders) has also generally required an environment acceptable to expatriates' families. Former colonial cities have an obvious advantage in this sense.

Networks and organizations offering the multitude of links business intermediation requires are important additional urban assets. By definition, this population of people and organizations must be cosmopolitan and entrepreneurial. Without extensive knowledge of and connections to the outside, the risks are simply too high. The degree to which both the state and the immediate urban environment help to reduce the risks is a further key factor in explaining the concentration of Asian growth in older coastal cities, whether autonomous cities or those belonging to states that acknowledge the primacy of an international capitalist regime.

All players have accepted certain necessities such as legal guarantees of an essentially liberal business context, freedom of financial and commercial information, and protection for foreign businessmen. City-states like Hong Kong and Singapore have had perhaps the easiest time arriving at this stage, but we should not underestimate the difficulties involved for nations like Korea or Vietnam. Japan, by some measures, is still problematic. In all of the above considerations, and for very clear practical and historical reasons, a small set of cities has come to dominate the development game.

Considering these factors as a set of necessary preconditions even just to play, we can infer the need for a critical mass that is hardly within the reach of interior regions. Breaking into or participating in the game appeals nearly everywhere in Asia today. Yet, it is not hard to see why interior regions face very high barriers to entry, and why most newly designed, "greenfield" coastal developments also have great difficulty taking part successfully despite their very low labor costs. Cheap labor exists throughout the region, including in the favored backyards of many existing urban centers. Overcoming the lack of a cosmopolitan culture and the absence of

technical and other human resources is probably the most salient challenge. Newly created economic zones that have succeeded, furthermore, are typically suburban appendages of established coastal cities granted special tax and other incentives. The undeniable historical fact is that older commercial cities (and their industrial suburbs) have had most of the advantages.

As is patently clear today, Asia's leading cities are reaching the saturation point in terms of expanding manufacturing activity (resulting in excess demands on services and physical systems, rapidly rising wages, and rising land costs, etc.).¹⁸ They must now extend their system geographically. Some moves are inland to adjacent agricultural areas, others are abroad to known locations. Both processes are readily discernible in all parts of Asia. Hong Kong money moving to the Pearl River delta, Singapore's attention turning to nearby islands belonging to Indonesia, Japanese money flowing to Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, and Taiwanese manufacturing companies going across the straits to Fujien are all examples.

Governments seeking rapid growth must encourage these processes. Indeed the last several decades have seen nearly every government in the region attempting to guide such movement. In many cases this ultimately means overcoming sovereignty barriers to transborder development. As formerly socialist regimes join, the process begins to have some of the qualities of a gold rush. And the competition between cities intensifies with each new entrant. This is not the place to go into the details of the many experiments, failures, and reversals in the region viewed as a whole, but let us simply note that the emerging formula (a combination of infrastructural investments, legal protection for investors, liberalization of key markets and information, tax advantages, and building of credibility overseas) possesses a logic that accommodates few exceptions and which governments ignore at great risk.

The Cultural Contradictions of Asian Capitalism

The notion that as urban capitalism advances the foundations of a future bourgeois democracy are laid is an old one in European history. It is also common to assume, as in the case of the Shah's Iran, that rapid capitalist development and its accompanying liberalism and secularization so threaten the traditional social order and its cultural framework that violent backlash is predictable. In each example, a critical element of the story is the

primacy of economic change and the tension between economic dynamics and the inherently more conservative political order. The gap between these two forces is reflected most forcefully in the difference between urban and rural perspectives. The fragility of the political order is certainly another key element of the equation. The integration of new forms of economic activity into existing social frameworks is largely a matter of time and space. That is, the more time and the more limited the affected social space, the easier the adjustment. Change in cities moves forward with greater ease than it does in whole national societies. Secondly, if state governments must mediate the overall national process of adjustment, it is not surprising that their basic viability—dependent on many things, of course, but certainly affected by their historical depth and by the degree of integration of the national society—is a critical factor defining the likelihood of tension and the process by which economic change and social order are balanced. The very fact that these considerations have been pertinent to virtually the entire sweep of modern capitalist history indicates their robustness as analytic tools.

To recapitulate, the outward-looking coastal cities and all that they embody are on the ascendancy. A revolution as great as those recently conducted under the banners of national independence or socialism is occurring as part and parcel of this regionwide growth phenomenon. The once marginal cities of the coastal areas are becoming increasingly central. The continental, traditionalist, isolationist mode and style of administrative centralism are in undeclared retreat. Because cosmopolitan coastal cities are booming, money, people, ideas, and technologies are shifting in their direction. Their problems—overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, pollution, cultural confusion, and rapid social change—are rapidly becoming the defining social problems of the region.

The political balancing act is looking more and more the same everywhere as governments cope with the cultural contradictions between city and countryside, between conservative forces emphasizing traditional values and those pushing for cosmopolitan capitalism and its associated institutions. Unlike other political revolutions, economics rather than ideology is the moving force and this fact redefines the nature of social control.

Liberal changes, favoring cosmopolitan players, run contrary to long-standing patterns of governance and ideology.¹⁹ This is most true in the socialist states, but it is also significantly true throughout Asia. Even in Japan, to take a case of mature capitalism, the arrival of more and more foreigner workers, the extremes of consumerism, the saturation of popular media with Western images, the international challenges to domestic regulatory arrangements, and much else pose notably difficult political

problems having to do with the openness and internationalization of the country. Japan's adjustment problems, including those reflected in the recent party realignment, are characteristic of such challenges throughout developing Asia. Japan's liberalization has had a much longer time to evolve, whereas far more wrenching adjustments have been forced by domestic political pressures or by the global system (or some combination of the two) on nations that succeed economically. Patently, such changes are most extreme where economic change is moving at the highest rates and where the system of governance is most at odds with the fundamental logic of the international market system.

Many governments would like to separate export-oriented development from its social and cultural effects. In China, for example, special development zones have been created as buffering mechanisms.²⁰ These exceptional locations illustrate most sharply the problems of adapting existing systems of governance to the rules of international trade and development. While the political leadership of Asia has very largely wanted this form of economic development, it has wanted it without the social and cultural changes endemic to it. Just as the rules of this particular economic game are now rather clear throughout the region, so too is it becoming clear that the social and cultural changes that follow pose serious political challenges to the existing order.

Economic development requires that governments find ways to "break in" to this transactional world and attract resources (regional and/or global) within it. Governments of the region are naturally unable to control the flow of resources per se and they find trying to help their designated candidates (coastal development zones largely, but also cities like Shanghai) break in quite challenging.²¹ Success will show up, naturally, as a new pathway of transactions within the overall regional pattern. Such would be the case, for example, if the development zone on Hainan Island were to succeed in the next ten years.²²

Perhaps the most striking example is the case of the Hong Kong/Shenzhen area, made particularly poignant because of the looming 1997 date for Hong Kong's reversion and the fact that China, anxious for economic growth, is also undeniably worried about rapid social change.²³ The population of Hong Kong thrives in an environment of laissez-faire, intense international business activity, entrepreneurial risk taking, rampant materialism, international culture mix, and considerable political freedom—all very much in contrast to the political order prevailing throughout most of China. Shenzhen, the special economic development area across the border from Hong Kong, has been allowed by the Chinese government to relax many of the normal regulations governing economic activities, and as a result Hong Kong entrepreneurs have flooded in and the

region has prospered greatly. The special region is thus a mix of Hong Kong's and Beijing's influences. A new kind of hybrid society has arisen, one that in lifestyle (and by Chinese standards, in income disparities) is moving in a startling manner toward the Hong Kong model. No wonder that this giant industrial suburb has had to be partially screened off from the rest of China by the authorities, for fear that its greater materialism and more liberal social climate will upset the existing norms elsewhere in the country. The barrier between Shenzhen and the rest of China is also needed to prevent too many Chinese from migrating in and overwhelming the already crowded situation.

Perhaps this kind of formula—one of cultural and political prophylaxis—will prove to be a successful means for easing the transition of Chinese society from socialism to quasi-capitalism. But the solution must be regarded as short term, temporary, and partial. Given the cultural implications of capitalism, especially capitalism with an international orientation, China's problems are likely to continue, to spread, and to deepen with time. How Hong Kong and China ultimately resolve their much more fundamental differences will certainly be watched closely from this perspective.

Let us next review briefly some of the major characteristics that set virtually all of Asia's international trade cities off from their larger "host" societies. For economic purposes communication is advanced and relatively free. Information from around the world is readily available and the systems for receiving it are numerous. An articulate middle class of businesspeople, professionals, skilled workers, and intellectuals plays an increasingly assertive role in public life. International travel is common and foreign residents also bring new perspectives. Secular education is highly valued and status based on educational achievement challenges the traditional status system. Consumerism flourishes. Exotic and imported fashions appear increasingly. Popular culture is more and more influenced by global industries shaping entertainment, taste, and domestic consumption. The visibility of large disparities in wealth symbolizes and highlights urban problems like overcrowding, inadequate social services, and poverty. The nuclear family and declining fertility become the urban norm. Iconoclasm is the measure of sophistication. Intellectual fashions among urban elites are often heavily dependent on foreign ideas. Neighborhood and community organizations tend to decline, except among the diaspora trading groups and other ethnic minorities, while interest group organizations increase. The place of women begins to change.

Contrast this with the characteristic conservatism of the countryside where merchants and foreigners are regarded with suspicion, where local community ties are strong, where attitudes and mores are anchored in some

system of sacred value, where information from the outside trickles in, where social welfare is generally nongovernmental, where income disparities are somewhat suppressed, where cultural change is rarely welcomed, and where political authority is stable and legitimated by tradition.

Contrast also the Asian coastal city's culture with the various kinds of authoritarian (typically military) rule common since independence in most Asian countries. However benign they may seem at times, these regimes have been unquestionably inclined to the extensive regulation of social life, to the use of violence as a means of social control, to the management and censoring of public information, to suspicion of outside influences, to active opposition to the values of youth-oriented, largely imported consumerism, and to a desire to manage the business sector through informal and often corrupt dealings of a personalized nature. Nativism and reactionary movements tend to target foreigners and ethnic minorities. They also typically see the city as a place of evil influence and the defilement of "pure" traditional values. The fact that Asian cities fit such stereotypes rather well—witness the foreign influence, the corruption, the illegal and legal vice, the unemployment, the slums, and the potential for failure and for loss of all social anchoring—only underscores the depth of the two cultures' problems when viewed from the countryside.

The economic success of cities is hardly the whole story. It has brought with it extensive poverty arising from in-migration far exceeding the capacity of the system to absorb the numbers.²⁴ Slums and squatter towns abound in many cities, and social services, schooling, public infrastructure and housing constitute enormous and deepening problems in places like Bangkok, Jakarta, and Manila. In other places like Tokyo or Hong Kong, the in-migration peak was experienced some decades ago and relative stability has allowed the cities to catch up in terms of services and facilities.

We must remind ourselves that the nation-state is legitimated by some system of meaning constructed of an unwieldy mix of traditionalism and modern values. It is necessarily a wobbly and ungainly structure in most of Asia due to its parentage and its generally shallow historical roots. By the very fact of its weakness, it is taken very seriously by the governments aware that legitimacy and the very unity of society require symbolic mechanisms that bridge past and present. National unity is not nearly as secure as maps would imply. Exaggerated appeals to nationalism and heightened focus on external threats are normal in such circumstances. To a degree, so are efforts to convert national ideals into prescriptions for daily conduct. The problem is that such efforts do not sit particularly well with the city's outward-looking inhabitants or with the evolving realities of international capitalism.

Of course, in starkly drawing such contradictions I am simplifying much that in actual practice is very complex and multifaceted. To begin with, national politics and urban economics are rarely separated in space to the degree implied by the cultural contrasts involved. Many leading commercial cities are also the national capitals of important Asian states. Tokyo, Seoul, Bangkok, and Taipei are examples. Nor is it correct to assume that all segments of national bureaucracies are inherently united in antagonism to urban influences. To the contrary, some elements are expressly assigned the job of encouraging economic growth and this puts them in natural alignment with international economic realities. Other segments with other preoccupations will naturally focus on matters that align them with non-urban perspectives. Alliances between urban business and certain elements of the bureaucracy are predictable. Furthermore, under-the-table business dealings with military leaders and nationalist political authorities are commonplace due to the logic of practical power. Business seeks protection and special privileges. Governments need increasing prosperity to retain popular support. Politicians need money. Power and wealth thus intermingle. It is the balancing act or acts that we are interested in.

We can safely assume that the nature and public culture of trading cities (but not necessarily their wealthy elites) tend over time toward greater autonomy from political control and, thus, from the constraints of sovereignty. International competition forces this tendency. Responsiveness to the cold calculus of international investment flows and to the mobility of multinational corporate commitments is a fundamental necessity of continuing success for all of Asia's cities. Maintaining or erecting barriers to the global economy becomes too costly once a city has embarked on this road. In the context of Asia's commercial cities, the mutual adjustment of politics and economics is not static, or even balanced in time. It moves dynamically to greater and greater accommodation of external forces. This, however, is not necessarily the direction of whole societies in Asia. Reactions to external influences can be powerful. Even when pragmatic considerations predispose governments to accommodate the economic realities of cities, counterforces hostile to foreign and commercial values quickly respond in the political arena.

In a purely economic respect, the city-state appears to be the ideal entity for this era in Asia. Certainly Hong Kong and Singapore, despite their differences, have been exemplars of success in the postwar era. Yet the city-state also has needs only governments can fulfill, needs for social order, for educated workers, for international security and diplomatic representation, for cross-border sites for the extension of manufacturing, and for the regulation of migration and control over its labor supply. Nor do city-states escape the politics of culture entirely. Rather, city-states are simply much

less burdened by the weight of large peasant populations, the legacies of traditional administrative and military regimes, and the costs of extended geography. Nor is nationalism a powerful force.

The meaning of security itself is taking on a new dimension with the rise of dynamic, prosperous cities. National borders take their meaning from their significance to land and people. In an agricultural age, borders represent the dimensions of land-based power. To advocates of a national culture, borders involve the extension of dominion over ethnic groups. They also delineate the arena in which public education is to consolidate a state's language, loyalty, and worldview. Nationalism thus focuses intensely on borders. Defending or extending such borders gives the military great importance. In exercising its role the military typically develops a particular preoccupation with border areas and with the process of development and welfare of rural populations. In Asia military people are characteristically uncomfortable with city-dwelling merchants, traders, intelligentsia, and cultural cosmopolitans. This discomfort is reciprocal. What order is to the military mind, freedom is to the commercial mind. What moral certainty and uniformity are to the soldier, materialism and heterogeneity are to the city-dweller. In other words, the very character of trading cities stands in dramatic contrast to the world of the military.

In an era of rapid economic development and transoceanic trade centering on cities, borders take on a different complexion. With the most dynamic aspects of commerce being transacted over water and with freedom of movement an important ingredient of business, the importance of borders to national wealth and power changes. They remain critical for defensive reasons, but simply acquiring territory is of less strategic value in an era of maritime trade and global systems of production. This does not mean borders are of little significance. Indeed, successful cities need borders (both international and national) to protect themselves from excessive labor in-migration. This situation is likely to grow more acute throughout the region, but particularly in and around China and Indonesia where water barriers to such movement are not great and the relationship of labor supply to employment is seriously out of balance. Singapore's position as a city-state which can regulate its labor supply on a daily basis using its closely supervised border with Malaysia is particularly interesting in this regard. A comprehensive solution to a problem of this magnitude will require attention to many other factors such as rural development, birthrates, and income redistribution; in other words, more political balancing, yet the initial steps on a regional basis will almost certainly be increased restriction of migratory movement within and between nations with significant income and employment gaps.

New information technologies are also obviously having a major impact, particularly in urban areas and most particularly in those places most developed economically.²⁵ Faxes are replacing mail, and mobile phones are bringing business dealings into every realm of urban life. This revolution, based in the value of rapid information to the transactional life of international business and made possible by the prosperity that the world has brought to urban users of the new technologies, is also affecting the conduct of political control as well. The spring 1989 student-led uprising in Beijing illustrated the power of the fax machine as a vehicle of international communication capable of circumventing the official control over information. A subservient or censored media is no longer sufficient to limit information. The subsequent use of mobile phones to relay information about conditions in the city by the leaders of Bangkok's recent popular demonstrations against the military-led government was a further demonstration of how international links can play a significant role in circumventing local information monopolies. Communications technology is replacing arms as the great equalizer in the realm of democratic movements. These technologies bring local events before world opinion and thereby create enormous pressure on governments exercising "excessive" control. As a result, the world now sits in judgment of Asian governments. Examined more closely, however, what we discover is that this is actually the case only in cities where such communications technology is advanced and diffused enough to play a "subversive" role. City and countryside are increasingly different as far as political control is concerned.

As Asian prosperity has grown so has the presence of multinational firms: European, Japanese, and North American. They are actors oriented to the global nature of economic change, and they bring with them a capacity to magnify this reality in any particular location. Cities need these actors and would like to spawn multinationals themselves since corporate headquarter locations bring premium benefits. But MNCs are less susceptible to state control. They can pack up and leave if conditions are not favorable or if more attractive locations appear. This gives them considerable leverage over local authorities, a leverage cities are much more comfortable with than states due to the pattern by which benefits from MNCs are distributed. Cities reap most of these benefits, whereas states have more difficulty accepting the challenges MNCs bring to aspects of sovereignty, given their limited benefits to whole nations.

Another facet of the broad dimensions of sovereignty questions between cities and the state in Asia is the growing power of regional business networks, notably those among the Chinese.²⁶ These networks certainly have their own distinct character and the variety among them is consider-

able, but as a set they are quite similar to the MNCs in their borderless nature. They too have a notable capacity to move money, ideas, technology, and people in, out, and among national confines. The fact that the networks of most significance rest on an ethnic base is hardly unique to Asia. But when we see the issue as, again, one that centers essentially in the region's leading commercial cities, the implications for governance appear much greater.

The business activities of Asia's leading commercial cities, excepting those in Japan and Korea, are largely dominated by ethnic Chinese. While it is true that many Asian societies (again Japan and Korea are the exceptions) have long been multiethnic, they have generally kept or relegated ethnic minorities (other than Chinese) to the geographical peripheries. It is also important to note that the overseas Chinese populations of Southeast Asia contain many, perhaps most, of the most competent entrepreneurs in the area as far as international business is concerned. The overseas Chinese, despite considerable prejudice against them, provide advantages today that cannot be denied, advantages that increase as the region grows economically and becomes more international. This is greatly complicated, of course, by the minority status of overseas Chinese, by their vulnerability to sudden or systematic discrimination, and by the looming power of China. As in the case of the MNCs, powerful external forces stand behind them and their unacknowledged challenges to state sovereignty.

Commercial cities everywhere attract ethnic diversity; the more successful, as a rule, the more diverse. They must find ways of accommodating such diversity, and this becomes problematic if the state finds its power eroding, and/or if the preservation of the cultural homogeneity and orthodoxy is politically very sensitive. Pluralism is one thing when it is a matter of the weak, but quite another when it must focus on powerful and internationally well-connected minorities. The civil rights of such minorities are likely to be made the object of concern on the part of their mother countries. China, Japan, North America, and Europe have large numbers of their own residing in urban Asia. All of these considerations, longstanding and not unique, are compounded in a regional context where trading cities are growing rapidly and the power of Chinese business networks is rapidly increasing. How this factor complicates and how it cuts across the grain of state authority and the national politics of cultural conservatism is further evidence of the breadth of the state's problems with cosmopolitan cities.

Sovereignty can also be challenged by global voluntary movements based on universalistic ideals. In earlier centuries such movements were largely religious, but in this century international communism was undoubtedly the most dynamic challenge to the claims of local authority.

Today, with the exception of Islamic revivalism, the prime examples are organizations advocating environmentalism, humanitarian causes, and animal, human, and women's rights, although this hardly exhausts the wealth of universalistic causes made local. It is notable that none of these are "native" to Asia, but are seen generally as "Western" in philosophical and organizational origin. This does not mean, however, that these movements find no followers in Asia. Rather, those that are drawn to them are likely to come from the urban, middle, and especially intellectual classes, the very ones strengthened by cosmopolitan capitalism. Almost invariably, then, such movements arise and thrive in cities. The loyalty of members of these movements is often to a higher ideal than those represented by their own nation. Members monitor the activities of their own government and are not hesitant to publicize transgressions to a global audience. The use of international media by groups such as Amnesty International or Greenpeace is illustrative of how vexing such groups can be to local authorities. Many groups are willing to openly oppose the state in the name of their cause, just as highly committed religious groups have done throughout history. Despite being somewhat alien in style and orientation to traditional Asian practices, they have an appeal that is regionwide among a segment of the population and their international links with other branch groups follow the pattern we have been discussing for business activities. They create another dimension of urban pluralism, and they add to the list of ways Asia's coastal cities are like one another.

The presence of universities, natural seedbeds of protest and criticism, is an additional element making the political context of cities particularly intense. Students, for example, are often in the vanguard of Asian movements for greater democracy. Among students of the region, this has been the riveting issue in the last decade, but as with all universalistic forms of idealism, the university is a predictable source of challenge to authority. As with the advocates of a particular universalistic ideal, faculty and students are cosmopolitan in orientation and linked with like-minded groups internationally. More willing than working members of the middle class to take to the streets for their causes, it is the students who generally prove to be the most spontaneous challenge to state authority. The presence of universities, in other words, greatly intensifies the urban context as different from the rest of the nation and as a locale for "disruptive" tendencies as defined by the state.

Putting entrepreneurs, ethnic minorities, students, and the professional middle class in the same category will strike many as rather counterintuitive, since they are not natural allies in political, social, or cultural terms. Businessmen often abhor the disruptive tactics of students, while students typically view business as part of the establishment. For urban pluralism to

solidify into a broadly based citizens' movement is uncommon, but in both Seoul and Bangkok, recently, that is what appears to have happened. The potential for more of the same in various parts of Asia is not inconsequential, and the region's shallow history of democracy makes this mixture particularly explosive.

Commerce prefers a borderless and unpatrolled world. Some aspects of international business, such as the nature of multinational corporations, directly confront the claims of national sovereignty, but it is the practical logic of mundane business dealings operating throughout the complex system of a city, and represented in a myriad of decisions and adjustments each day, that moves things inexorably in a direction the opposite of state control. That is, unless the state itself can embrace not only the economic goals of development, but also the social and cultural changes that come with it. One might argue that such liberalism is a more deeply ingrained aspect of European cultural traditions or that such liberalism evolved in the West over the long period of urban capitalist development, making the transition a relatively long and incremental matter. The point is that neither of these conditions (attitudes or time) can be said to hold for Asia.²⁷

Would Asia's capitalist cities, if left alone, be likely to grow more and more liberal, pluralistic, and resistant to ideological authority? The need for safe and orderly conduct is a basic necessity, and certainly there are many in any city who would be quite pleased if the state succeeded in suppressing cultural and political dissent. But the fact remains that the underlying necessities of capitalism limit the means of control, and international business keeps the gates open to a flow of ideas and influences that are potentially seditious. Social control in cities is a most delicate and complicated matter and when we add the effects of new technologies to the mixture, social control becomes even more difficult.

It is the particular challenge of Asian politics to both maintain some kind of balance between the cities and the rest of the social system, and to find systems of meaning that encompass the whole, or, in other words, that bridge the cultural contradictions. Each nation has its own forms of these exercises, to be sure, but there are certain basics to be observed. First, if cities prosper, then a degree of prosperity must be created for rural areas through wealth-transfer mechanisms such as price supports for agricultural products, rural development schemes, light taxation, and public works in order that disparities do not become too great, and, also, so that migration to cities is kept manageable. Second, the military must be co-opted. Third, culturally conservative values must be publicly displayed and endorsed periodically in what may amount to an exaggerated but reassuring display. Fourth, if possible, the media must be enrolled in this bridging

effort and enjoined from dwelling on the extent of threatening trends or from overwhelming external influences.

Japan, Korea, and Taiwan all have succeeded, for example, in keeping income levels in the countryside relatively close behind those of urban areas.²⁸ Taiwan, Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand have all found ways (not always satisfactory or effective) to accommodate their military establishments to rising urban and commercial power. Malaysia manages its ethnic problem with interventionist policies that seek to maintain a balance between Malays and Chinese. The press in many countries is constrained, legally or illegally. What one can say about the Philippines is another story, obviously, but that is in fact the point—namely, that a degree of political stability is a precondition for the success of any program that is oriented to international markets. If rapid growth can exacerbate existing problems of governance, then governance problems can also create major barriers to development. Obvious examples of the latter, besides the Philippines, include North Korea, Burma, and, some might say, Indonesia.

This brings us to the much-discussed question of “Asian democracy.” The argument (some would say apology) goes something like this: Asian societies are not used to democracy, are not used to the public, rule-governed, adversarial behavior; they are young, as nations go, and are growing too rapidly to accommodate Western-style democracy. They will develop in a stable way, the argument continues, only if democratic politics is tempered by a dose of authoritarian control. The issue is not only that Asia is different, but that in Asia, liberal economics can be fostered by and then coexist with illiberal forms of governance. Typically, this argument is also accompanied by some remark to the effect that a gradual (or “natural”) transition to Western-style democracy will occur as economic maturity is reached. While it is dangerous to allow this kind of argument to stand uncritically, since it is so easily misused as an apology for excessive disregard of human rights or the “unnatural” suppression of popular government, it is also unfair to dismiss it outright. In this paper we have implicitly acknowledged much of this argument as historically correct for the state jurisdictions of the region, if not for many of its cities.

Asia’s experience with democratic thought and practice is historically shallow. It is hard to argue with this if Europe or North America is the point of comparison. Furthermore, some of the cultural underpinnings of Western democracy—such as individualism, the legitimacy of public dissent, and the elaboration of political rights—also lack deep roots in Asia. On the other hand, in the very cities we are considering, there is clearly a popular base for democratic movements, with considerable understanding of democratic thought, procedures, and institutions. Those with colonial histories have tasted aspects of the British, French, or American systems of

governance, however distorted by the fact of colonial rule. There is also the Japanese model. Asians can certainly ask, "If the Japanese can do it, why can't we?" We have also noted how the economic life of these cities is inherently tending toward a liberal society. Finally, the cosmopolitan cities of the Asian Pacific rim are participants in emerging global trends of many kinds and democratization is certainly among them.

This indicates that talk of "Asian democracy" is but symptomatic of the fact that this will be a persistent source of tension, one that each society will have to work out in its own particular circumstances. The balancing acts and cultural bridging efforts necessary to keep rapid economic development in the coastal areas from destabilizing many Asian nations seem to require more control and continuity in the public sphere than are likely to occur under Western-style "democracy." Let us keep in mind, for example, the experience of Japan in the prewar years of rising militarism (fed by the very problems we have been outlining). The failure of "Taisho democracy" may very well have set the stage for the subsequent dominance of militarism. It was an experiment in democracy that failed. The necessary leadership and popular support were lacking.

"Asian democracy" will certainly be a defining issue for years to come. There seems to be broad, although tacit and vague, agreement among the governments of the region that they will not insist on political reform on one another's part, and that they will not join Western efforts to tie trade to civil rights. Even the most mature and stable of the region's democracies, Japan, has resisted American efforts to enroll it in the campaign. "Typical Japanese economic pragmatism," say the cynics, but there is more to it. Japan senses in this argument issues that are analogous to its own historical experience. Again, the point is not right or wrong in terms of fact or righteousness. What is notable is the convergence of sentiment and sympathy with one another's "Asian-ness." There is, in fact, an "Asian predicament." As a result one can detect a kind of nascent regional perspective (at least among elites) in this implicit, mutual sympathy—convenient and self-serving as it is. Turned inside out, what seems to be happening is that Asian leaders can readily agree with one another that their societies are not Western in essential character. They may not be alike, but they are just as certainly not European in origin or heritage. It follows that they can more readily agree that the judgment of their domestic political arrangements by non-Asians is unwelcome and misguided meddling. Cosmopolitan, urban, Mediterranean Asia (or much of it) may be ready for accommodation to the cultural imperatives of capitalism and Western liberalism, but all of Asia is not. The issue of democracy reflects all that we have been discussing in this essay.

But, the fact remains, the Asian “culturalists” cannot articulate an Asian version of what is proper and good. The day has arrived when, among themselves, Asia’s political leaders and some intellectuals will try to articulate their own set of principles regarding the environment, human rights, freedom of information, dissent, and so forth. As they do, assuming there is some plausibility to the effort, the new cultural dialogue will become another ingredient linking the region’s cities together and, in all probability, causing them to seem more like one another than like their rural hinterlands. Everywhere economic success seems to lead to cultural pride and assertiveness, and, despite the dubious historical foundations, Asia is headed toward an era of self-definition that also will center in its cities.

A degree of regional hubris may be an inevitability, but the fact is that what is domestic and what is international will be increasingly indistinct in the future. The continual creation of more and more cross-border alliances, the advance of new systems of information, and the rise of new, increasingly global cultural forms around the Pacific’s Western rim tend strongly in this direction. “Asian democracy” and the sorting out of what is modern from what is Western will be but parts of a much larger story in which the nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural issues centering on nationalism are recontextualized in an ever more global world, one in which the leading cities of the region are already very much active participants. The rise of Asia signals the next step in a transformation moving from colonialism through nationalism toward the central significance in the next century of a globalized capitalist cultural mode.

Concluding Comments

This paper has focused on the changing dynamics between two modes of existence, the state and the city. The last decade of this century is witnessing a shift in the relative power between them. While city/state differences are salient virtually everywhere in the world, the rapid economic growth in the Asian region coupled with the area’s relatively shallow historical experience with nationalism and democracy, and the liberal institutions associated with both, make for contradictions and degrees of tensions that seem unusual, if not unique. The rates of change in Asia are unprecedented in history and this fact sharpens the set of issues associated with city/state differences and brings them to the political forefront.

By treating “culture” in the way I have, am I saying that “traditional” elements are not important or are fading away? Are the changes, and the notion of an urban culture I am focusing on, superficial when contrasted with the depths of linguistic, historical, and social embeddedness of “traditional” culture? Neither need be true. This is not an either/or question. The past and the present, the external and the local, the Asian, the Western, and the simply global are now influencing and will continue to influence one another, be recombined, and be generative of the new as a result. We can expect that this process will accelerate and, as one by-product, it will put a fresh premium on what is viewed as “traditional.” The salience of matters distinctly Thai or Korean or Japanese will remain at the specifically national level, without a doubt, but a Thai or a Korean or a Japanese perspective, just as certainly, will not be sufficient to understand the totality of social change.

Obviously, by many measures, Asia’s leading cities are as diverse as any set of cities could be. They belong to different traditions and have different histories. They have entered the era of intensive industrialization at different times. Their problems with overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and poverty are of differing degrees. The ethnic mix varies enormously from one to another. Each has its own vulnerabilities and strengths. Still it is equally clear that in comparison with the countryside and with the style of conventional governance, the vibrant commercial cities seem increasingly similar. We take the crucial role of cities in the rise of modern society for granted, but in Asia, where this transformation is telescoped in time, we must note the pivotal role they occupy in virtually all aspects of social change. European cities played a similar catalytic role in the rise of capitalism, in the establishment of popular government, in the secularization of society, and in the development of industrialization, but there the changes took centuries.

Viewing Asia as “Mediterranean” has helped us to rethink the structure and dynamics of the region. The analogy can also remind us of the complex possibilities of the future. The history of the actual Mediterranean is one of continual competition between different locations. The fortunes of great Mediterranean commercial centers rose and fell continually as if following some law or set of laws beyond human control. The list of once dominant cities that today are tourist backwaters covers the entire circumference of the region—Naples, Seville, Carthage, Alexandria, Athens, and Venice, to name but a few. Civil war has taken Beirut to its knees before our eyes. Nor can we ignore the historical shift of power to northern Europe, to continental centers and to trade patterns oriented to the Atlantic economy starting with the Renaissance. That Asia’s “Mediterranean” era is in its ascendancy is no guarantee that it will not be challenged in fundamental

ways by the other powerful regions of the world and by emerging continental locations (China and India in particular). Dominance will also be shaped by unforeseen new changes in technology.

Returning to the large geoeconomic pattern, we have noted already how the development of coastal Asia appears peripheral when viewed from the perspective of continental Asia as a whole and especially from the Sinocentric angle, one that long dominated the region. China's size and centrality make it "the" continental power of the region. Yet, so large is its size that it is equally a major participant in peripheral, maritime Asia. China, in fact, must be seen as the only geographically dominant nation in the region. That this has not been of particularly great note in recent decades is explained by China's economic and military weakness, the cold war counterbalancing of military power, and the relative isolation of the country in other terms. These limits seem more and more anomalous in the light of recent developments. As China once more emerges as a regional giant, a number of profound questions arise from the perspective of coastal Asia. First, will China's growth continue to be based primarily in its own coastal regions (as the present pattern would imply), or will political priorities shift the loci of development inland? We already know of plans to extend toward the interior from Shanghai and Hong Kong up the Yangtze and Pearl River basins. If development does move inland, will the center of dynamic activity ultimately shift the overall balance of China's economy in a continental direction? It is obvious that the consequences of such a shift in the long term are profound for Asia as a whole. If China gradually moves the centers of investment and growth toward the interior, it will simultaneously improve the balance of domestic politics and society, and redraw the lines of communication and commerce in the Asian region as a whole. To a degree, of course, this tendency is inevitable. Differential labor costs and political forces push in such directions. The availability and growing centrality of new telecommunications technologies make such moves easier. Ports and roads, the infrastructural foundations of classic industrialism, are expensive to construct, slow to develop and extend, and anchored typically in coastal outlets to international markets. The newer systems of economic relationship based more on information, air links, satellites, and fiber-optic cables, however, are more readily extended over a continental landscape and allow "leapfrogging" of spacial and geographical barriers to some degree. Air travel is another leapfrogging technology. Airports are expensive and slow to build to be sure, but once in place and situated strategically to encourage and benefit from growth, they can help open up interior areas to development. We might note in this regard that the present dominance of Hong Kong and Tokyo as air hubs on China's periphery is hardly secure. Congestion, the opening of more direct routes into China, and political

problems expanding them make both locations vulnerable to significant shifts by air carriers to different cities, especially if China encourages such moves.

Like continental Russia or the United States, China's future development pattern is certain to require constant attention to issues of geographical balance and these in turn will be associated with political and cultural differences of major concern to the Asian region as a whole.²⁹ What is not yet clear is whether the future balance will favor the Mediterranean pattern of regionalism or whether, coupled with sufficient time and economic success, China's emergent power will shift the structure of regionalism toward a more Sinocentric, continental arrangement, one that would indeed lead to profound changes for Asia. Given China's emergence, the future of the region is certain to be defined in part by the tensions between these two patterns of economic, political, and cultural existence.

Certainly, the relative power and prestige among the different cities of coastal Asia will shift in time. It seems quite possible that a few of them might well choke on themselves due to overcrowding and a failure to provide the necessary infrastructure. Others may fail to keep pace. They can be mismanaged in other ways too. And faced with a continual need to adapt to the rising competition, some will certainly fall into relative decline. The operative words in Asia's "Mediterranean" are competition and change.

Obviously, some possess more resources and power than others. Just as obviously, cities of roughly equal status are struggling to attract some of those resources and simultaneously to improve their status in the overall system. Climbing the value-added ladder through such things as improved institutions, better transportation, more advanced telecommunications, upgraded education, new airports, more research and development, and organizational learning all serve to define the common competitive agenda. Answers to the question of which urban populations will prove most adept at "stealing" the production know-how of the Japanese, or developing the product and marketing knowledge of the Americans, or learning the entrepreneurial skills of the overseas Chinese will help to define the future shape of the region. Turning the question inside out, we must ask which cities will prove to be the most popular hosts to these activities.

What happens when more and more new cities (or development zones) are created? Will this keep the region continually supplied with new low-cost production sites and therefore sufficiently varied so as not to need to shift investments and know-how to geographical areas outside the region? Will China, with its vast population, be Asia's eternal sweatshop, so to speak? Will Vietnam or North Korea step on to the lowest rungs of the

ladder? If the answers appear to be “yes,” then we are also describing a future Asia in which the urban mode is geographically ascendant.

Cities are also perfecting niches of various kinds, some specializing in finance or transportation or tourism or a particular industry. Some also tend to monopolize the development of a particular “subordinate” subregion. Whatever niche strategies arise, it will be their collective outcome that is most interesting to follow, for it will define Asian regionalism as a system. The overall picture, we can be sure, will be a dynamic one that allows few if any locations to rest on their laurels for long.

Notes

¹ Lucian W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: the Cultural Dimension* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

² Gilbert Rozman, ed., *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and its Modern Adaptation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

³ The topic is one that seems to be drawing considerable interest within governments throughout the region. While public remarks tend to be tentative and cautious, there is no doubt that certain elements of the pan-Asian cultural position can be discerned, including 1) that Western experience and Western social science are not of universal relevance, 2) that Asian economic success reflects Asian values and approaches to political economy, 3) that there is an Asian model of development, 4) that Asian intellectuals have a responsibility to give definition to Asian experience, and 5) that the diverse traditions of the region have much in common, especially when contrasted with Western culture. See, for example, Kazuo Ogura, "A Call for a New Concept of Asia" in *Japan Echo*, Vol. XX, No. 3 (1993), pp. 37-44.

⁴ Daniel I. Okimoto, "The Asian Perimeter, Moving Front and Center." Unpublished paper for the Aspen Strategy Group Conference, Aspen, CO (August 1990).

⁵ Shang-Jin Wei, "Open Door Policy and China's Rapid Growth: Evidence from City-level Data," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 4602 (December 1993).

⁶ Rough estimates of this sort are all that is possible for the region as a whole given the state-based format for statistical compilations. While Singapore and Hong Kong can be isolated as urban hubs for such transactions, the other leading cities of the region cannot be separated out for purposes such as this.

⁷ *The Wall Street Journal*, February 11, 1994, reports that China now has 3 million pagers. This compares with 17 million in the United States.

⁸ James Clifford has written of such zones of cultural confluence in "Sites of Crossing: Borders and Diasporas in Late 20th Century Expressive Culture," The EastWest Center, *Cultural Currents* No. 1 (January 1993).

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹⁰ K. N. Chandhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Mark Elvin and G. William Skinner, *The Chinese City Between Two Worlds* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974); John K. Fairbank, "Maritime and Continent in China's History," in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 12 (Cam-

bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 1-27; Anthony Reid, ed., *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power and Belief* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹¹ But not as completely as the Tokugawa policy of isolation would imply. Much commerce, legal and illegal, continued through the two and a half centuries of “isolation” and commercial information on the rest of Asia was actively collected.

¹² One could also find an analogy in the Baltic region at the time of the Hanseatic League.

¹³ A recent study by Ronald Toby has illustrated how Tokugawa Japan remained diplomatically active in Asia despite its policies of cultural isolation and official restrictions on trade. Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

¹⁴ Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958).

¹⁵ Rhoads Murphey, “The Treaty Ports and China’s Modernization,” in Mark Elvin and G. William Skinner, eds., *The Chinese City Between Two Worlds* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

¹⁶ Peter J. Rimmer, *International Transport and Communications Interactions Between Pacific Asia’s Emerging World Cities*. Unpublished manuscript.

¹⁷ See, for example, Hafiz Mirza, “Peripheral Intermediation: Singapore and the Emerging International Economic Order,” in John G. Taylor and Andrew Turton, eds., *Southeast Asia* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988).

¹⁸ See, for example, John Bauer, “Industrial Restructuring in the NIEs: Prospects and Challenges,” in *Asian Survey*. XXXII, No. 2 (November 1992): 1012-1025.

¹⁹ For an insightful discussion of the problems with liberalism in Asia, see Masahide Shibusawa, “Pacific Asia in the Post-Cold-War World,” in The International House of Japan *IHJ Bulletin*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Spring 1992).

²⁰ See Ezra Vogel, *One Step Ahead in China: Guangdong Under Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

²¹ “Economic Focus in Shanghai: Catching Up,” *New York Times* (December 22, 1993).

²² See Sheryl Wu Dunn, “A Mini-Hong Kong From Scratch,” *New York Times* (March 23, 1993), pp. C1-2.

²³ See Ezra Vogel, *One Step Ahead in China: Guangdong Under Reform*; and Ezra Vogel, *The Four Little Dragons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

²⁴ Mike Douglass, "The Future of Cities on the Pacific Rim." In Michael Peter Smith, ed., *Pacific Rim Cities in the World Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1988).

²⁵ Two recent articles in *Foreign Affairs* discuss such changes on a global scale as they impact sovereignty. They are Michael W. Blummenthal, "The World Economy and Technological Change," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 3, 1988, pp. 529-550, and Walter B. Wriston, "Technology and Sovereignty," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 2, 1989, pp. 63-75.

²⁶ In addition to papers in this volume, see, for example, Linda Y. C. Lim and L. A. Peter Gosling, "Economic Growth and Ethnic Relations: The Chinese in Southeast Asia," Paper for 1993 Conference on Conflict and Conflict Resolution in East and Southeast Asia.

²⁷ For a somewhat different discussion of this issue see Leslie Sklair, *Sociology of the Global System* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991).

²⁸ See, for example, Lawrence J. Lau, "Poverty Alleviation in Taiwan," Stanford University: Asia/Pacific Research Center Working Paper Series No. 102 (1993).

²⁹ In this regard, see especially Gerald Segal, "China's Changing Shape: The Middle Kingdom," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (May/June 1994): 43-58.

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