Japan’s ‘German Path’ and Pacific Asia’s ‘Flying Geese’

Mark R. Thompson
University of Erlangen-Nuremberg

Abstract
Barrington Moore has argued that Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan both followed a capitalist, authoritarian ‘route to the modern world.’ But these parallels were not coincidental. German developmentalism was consciously imitated by Meiji reformers and this model was later diffused throughout Pacific Asia (East and Southeast Asia). This article explores German influence on pre-World War II Japan and its later impact on post-war Pacific Asia. There were similarities among elite behaviour, developmentalist dictatorships and culturalist ideologies. ‘Progressive’ elites pushed through a program of modernisation against ‘backward’ conservatives. They demobilised the working class, made the newly-created business sector dependent on the state, and co-opted the rising middle class. The ‘flying geese formation’ in Pacific Asia has been a group of developmentalist dictatorships that did not, however, all share the same ‘developmental state’ form as Japan. But they did invoke a new version of Imperial German Zivilisationskritik — the critique of ‘Western’ democracy in the name of (in this case) ‘Asian values.’ Authoritarian rule was justified by a culturalist ideology derived from a dichotomy posited between Western civilisation and German Kultur by reactionary Prussian modernisers.

Keywords
authoritarian, development, Germany, Japan, Pacific Asia, Barrington Moore

The influence of the nineteenth-century developmental ‘model’ of Imperial Germany on Meiji Japan is an open secret. While similarities and links between the two countries have been analysed, the theoretical and practical implications of these studies have often been ignored because they contradict prevailing social science theory and offend political sensitivities. Barrington Moore, Jr. (1966) argued that Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan pursued an elite-led, authoritarian modernisation that resulted in fascism. This argument contradicted then dominant modernisation theory, which posited a positive relationship between economic development and political

1 Moore, who died in October 2005, succeeded in re-launching the neglected tradition of comparative, historical sociology which influenced a number of young scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. For an interesting obituary, see Tilly (2006).
democratisation. The frame of reference for modernisation theorists were the historical examples of Britain and the U.S., which were both industrialised and democratised. That Germany and Japan had successfully pursued an authoritarian ‘path to the modern world’ in which industrialisation did not lead to democratisation was conveniently overlooked.2

But these parallels between Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan were not coincidental. The historian Bernd Martin (1987) shows that after examining various Western models the Meiji-leadership decided to take the German ‘path to the modern world.’ The common fascist outcome was also not coincidental, being the result of this Wesensverwandtschaft (closely related character) between the two countries, as German and Japanese propagandists of the period never grew tired of underlining (ibid.:20). The next common stage in both countries’ histories was the occupation by U.S. forces (or U.S. and allied troops in the case of Germany). Strong American influence in both countries led these pre-Cold War militarist links to be forgotten. Scholarly attention has focused on the peaceful, post-war traditions of both countries.3

If Japan’s ‘German path’ remains politically (and social scientifically) incorrect, its influence on the ‘developmental states’ of Pacific Asia (East and Southeast Asia) is largely taboo. Japanese colonialism, militarism, war crimes, and the lack of systematic Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coming to terms with the past) since the late 1960s has ruled out any admission of Japanese influence on economic and political development in this region.4 South Koreans, in particular, have been loath to admit Japanese influences that are well known to experts.5

This article explores Imperial German influence on Japan and the impact of the pre-War, authoritarian Japanese model on Pacific Asia. In particular, I will argue that what is known as the ‘flying geese formation’ in this region can be understood as an extension of the Imperial German example of

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2 One of the most striking examples of this process of historical selectivity is Seymour Martin Lipset’s classic Political Man (1959). In the early part of the book, Lipset stresses that the chances of consolidating democracy improve with higher rates of economic development. Later in the book, however, he explores why the middle class that arises in the course of modernisation can come to favour fascism. He does not explore the implications of the attraction of fascism for the middle class in Germany, Italy and elsewhere though for modernisation theory.

3 For an interesting comparison of the post-Cold War period in these two countries, see Thränhardt (1996).

4 On differences in Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Japan and Germany, see Buruma (1995). In the early post-war period, Japan was not as ashamed about its militarist modernisation as might be assumed. As late as 1957, the Japanese Prime Minister Kishi recommended that Southeast Asian countries follow Japan’s (authoritarian) model of development (Martin, 1987:19).

authoritarian-led development. I explore three forms of linkage: social structural, state formational, and ideological. The social structural analysis takes Moore’s analysis of the parallels between Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan as its starting point. I argue that a ‘progressive’ section of the elite launched an authoritarian industrialisation drive in several Pacific Asian countries. Furthermore, I suggest that these systems are ‘labour repressive’ in nature and create a dependent group of industrialists.

In the next section, I consider the role of the state in Meiji Japan’s rapid industrialisation. Japan can be understood as a ‘late developer’ in the sense that Alexander Gerschenkron used the term for his European cases and which Henry Rosovsky later applied to Japan (Gerschenkron, 1962; Rosovsky, 1966). I will argue that just as there were differences among the ‘late developers’ Germany and Japan (in the former banks were more important, in the latter the state was decisive), so too are there variations between Japan’s ‘developmental state’ as originally analysed by Johnson (1982) and the (even later) industrialising states in the rest of Pacific Asia. I argue that the very idea of the region ‘Pacific Asia’ originated largely through the spread of such developmentalist regimes.

In the final section I suggest that a key similarity among developmentalist dictatorships in Pacific Asia is their culturalist-based authoritarian ideology. The ideological attack against ‘Western democracy’ echoes the Imperial German critique of Western civilisation (known as Zivilisationskritik). This culturalist strategy of immunising their societies against pro-democratic ideas and movements was widely diffused throughout Pacific Asia. This leads me to ask what the implications of this analysis are for understanding the political trajectory of China today.

The Authoritarian Path to the Modern World

Moore speaks of a ‘capitalist and reactionary’ route to the modern world shared by Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan. In both countries, elites (landed ones in particular) sought to preserve the existing social structure, while making enough changes to generate a surplus needed for successful industrialisation. He describes both systems as ‘labour repressive’ in that political not market mechanisms are used to create this surplus (Moore 1966:434). This is the key to understanding why Moore believes such a path to the modern world is necessarily authoritarian. Such systems depend on labour repression in order to generate the surplus necessary for industrialisation.
Moore argues that although labour-repressive political systems in Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan acquired some democratic features — particularly parliaments with limited powers — the aim of these reactionary capitalist regimes was to ‘preserve as much of the original social structure as they could’ (ibid.:438). Moore stresses the importance of leadership among modernising conservatives, which he sees in Bismarck in Germany and the Meiji reformers in Japan. Such leaders detached themselves from the rest of society, took over the regime, and launched a ‘conservative version of modernisation’ (ibid.:252). On the one hand, they had to fend off leftist and liberal challenges to their authoritarian rule. On the other hand, in order to ‘catch up’ with other, earlier industrialisers, modernisation had to be promoted despite the resistance of more ‘backward’ members of the elite who resented the loss of privileges and discontinuities that industrialisation brought with it (ibid.:253). Moore memorably describes the déclassé samurai who opposed the Meiji reforms as a ‘Lumpenaristocracy’ (ibid.:236). Moore also points to the anti-capitalist rhetoric that often arises in this context. In part to counter such reactionary critics, the state propagates a ‘feudal ethic’ that, despite a massive industrialisation drive, even suffuses the merchant class (ibid.:240). The Meiji reformers, like the Imperial German modernisers before them, were not ‘doctrinaire social theorists’ (ibid.:246). They were patient students of trial and error, attempting certain reforms but modifying them when experience proved them wrong.

Criticisms of Moore’s analysis of Meiji Japan, for example, the extent to which social change did in fact occur during the reform period, need not detain us here (Rosovsky, 1966:113–117). Rather, I want to examine the extent to which the parallels that he draws with Imperial Germany are relevant to understanding authoritarian modernisers in Pacific Asia today. Pacific Asian developmentalist dictatorships were launched by authoritarian elites who seized power and repressed their opponents. Among the best known examples are Park Chun-Hee of South Korea (after a military coup in 1961) and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore (after the ‘Cold Storage’ crackdown in 1963). Both began their all out push toward rapid development in the early 1960s. Other prominent examples are Suharto in Indonesia, who seized power through a military coup in 1965, and Ferdinand E. Marcos in the Philippines, who declared martial law in 1972. One of the most recent cases is Deng Xiaoping in China 1978–1979, who became preeminent leader after the purge of the ‘Gang of Four’ following Mao’s death. All of these leaders claimed to promote economic development in the face of resistance by ‘backward’ elites. Park purged members of the old Rhee regime. Lee repressed leftists who once dominated the socialist-oriented People’s Action Party (PAP).
Suharto arrested Sukarno and marginalised his followers, massacred the communists and sidelined Muslim politicians. Marcos promised to destroy the old ‘Filipino oligarchy.’ Deng pledged far reaching changes after extensive purges had taken place in the Communist Party. These ‘progressive’ leaders were very pragmatic. Deng’s saying that any development strategy is satisfactory ‘as long as it catches mice’ is axiomatic. Chinese communist leaders had no master plan for development, adopting a trial-and-error approach (Naughton, 1995). Like in Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan, modernisation was undertaken by the self-proclaimed ‘enlightened’ segment of the elite in order for the country to ‘catch up’ with the rest of the world economically and politically.

The second relevant point of Moore’s analysis for Pacific Asia is his focus on the repression of peasants in the modernisation process in Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan. If we extend his concept of ‘labour repressive’ rule to industrial workers, its relevance becomes obvious in Pacific Asia. The work of Fredric Deyo (1987) has stressed the importance of the repression of organised labour in the developmental model that has become widespread throughout Pacific Asia. This regional developmental model has emphasised exporting labour-intensive industrial manufactured goods on the world market. In order to be competitive in the earlier stages of industrial production, wages have to be strictly controlled. Authoritarian regimes throughout Pacific Asia have done this with strict regulations on organised labour. Throughout the region, organised labour was repressed, its leaders jailed, and state-corporatist unions put in their place. Labour repression was one of the keys to the economic success of this developmental model. It also provides a powerful explanation for its authoritarian character.

While workers were demobilised, capitalists were made economically dependent on the authoritarian state. The mechanisms varied from intimidation of a Chinese capitalist minority in Southeast Asia to the complicated incentives and punishments of the centralised South Korean economic planning system. The state could dominate industrialists because these lacked an independent power base. They were either dependent upon state subsidies or vulnerable to state sanctions/blackmail (and often a combination of both). This corresponds roughly to Moore’s argument about the lack of independence of the ‘merchant class’ in Meiji Japan. This helps explain why, in

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6 On South Korea, see Amsdem (1989), and on Taiwan, see Wade (1996). For the role of the ethnic Chinese in the region’s political economy see McVey (1993). On the relationship between a predominantly ethnic Chinese bourgeoisie in Southeast Asian and authoritarian states, see Sidel (2008).
Moore’s terms, the rise of a bourgeoisie did not result in democratisation. Moore’s famous phrase ‘no bourgeoisie, no democracy’ is actually based on the idea of an economically and politically independent bourgeoisie. The dependence of the ‘bourgeoisie’ in Meiji Japan on the state parallels that lack of independence of leading industrialists in much of Pacific Asia today. In studies of China, the rise of ‘red’ or ‘crony’ capitalists has received much attention (Dickson, 2003, 2008). The rise of industrialists to economic power is not matched by political power. Moore has said famously in this context that the bourgeoisie in Germany exchanged ‘the right to rule with the right to make money.’ Such a materialist, but anti-Marxist analysis provides a powerful argument against the modernisationist claim (which is, as it were, a form of ‘bourgeois Marxism’) that industrialisation inevitably results in democratisation.

Yet, that modernisation theorist might well claim that a group neglected by Moore in his analysis — the middle class — is chiefly responsible for democratisation in the course of industrialisation. Such an argument has become influential in the study of the politics of Pacific Asia, particularly with reference to the democratic transitions in South Korea and Taiwan, beginning in the second half of the 1980s (see Morley, 1993; Laothamatas, 1997). It is often asserted that the large middle class that arose in these two countries in the wake of rapid economic growth was the chief actor that led to democratisation. Putting aside the issue of whether social classes can be political actors (for a skeptical view, see Przeworski, 1986) and whether other explanations are not more plausible (such as international pressures, particularly from the U.S.), there are other cases in the region that do not ‘fit’ this explanation. Despite the rise of a proportionally large middle class in Singapore and Malaysia, both countries remain exceptions to the ‘rule’ that wealth leads to democratisation (Thompson, 1997). Some scholars have pointed to the middle class’s often illiberal attitudes toward politics in Pacific Asia (Bell et al., 1995). More generally, it has been argued that in historical perspective (Weimar, Chile under Allende, etc.) the middle class often has an ambivalent, if not downright hostile, attitude to democracy (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992). Despite the rise of the middle class in the course of economic development, authoritarianism remains a possible ‘path to the modern world.’

**State-directed Industrialisation**

In his classic study of economic ‘backwardness,’ Alexander Gerschenkron argues that the ‘development of a backward country may, by the very nature of its backwardness, tend to differ fundamentally from an advanced country’
(Gerschenkron, 1962:7). In particular, he argues that the more backward a country is before it industrialises, the more organised capitalism becomes. In the case of Imperial Germany, universal banks played a crucial role in industrialisation. By contrast, in Great Britain, the first country to industrialise, banks did not play a significant role in long-term industrial investment. The universal banks of Germany ‘accompanied an industrial enterprise from the cradle to the grave, from the establishment to liquidation throughout the vicissitudes of its existence’ (ibid.:14) Oligarchic industrial branches were established as banks limited competition among their ‘children.’ Bank-led development in Imperial Germany proceeded much faster than the earlier laissez-faire capitalism of Great Britain.

Meiji Japan clearly falls into Gerschenkron’s next phase of late industrialisation. As in Russia, the state played the dominant role in the industrialisation of Japan in the late nineteenth century. Japan, like Russia, not only industrialised later than the already ‘late’ industrialising Imperial Germany (and Austria), it was also had a more ‘backward’ economy to begin with (ibid.:16–17; Rosovsky, 1966:93–112). Meiji Japan can be seen as the classic case of state-led capitalist development (more so than Russia, whose capitalist economic system was ultimately overthrown in the October Revolution). Japanese reformers created a bureaucratically-rational state that transformed society by intervening actively in the economy to increase agricultural productivity, launch industrial activity, and train the manpower needed for these efforts.

Gerschenkron’s approach goes beyond Moore’s in two senses. On the one hand, he shifts our attention from class structure to the state. Moore’s argument about the ‘progressive’ segment of the elite pushing through reforms of course implicitly assumes that its chief instrument of change is control of the state. But by making this argument more explicit, we can better understand, for example, how an authoritarian elite used the state to create an obedient industrial elite. The zaibatsu in Japan, the chaebol in Korea, and the ‘Ersatz Capitalism’ of the ethnic Chinese minority in Southeast Asia were largely created by the state (Yoshihara, 1988). They were not only established in the course of a state-led industrial drive, they were kept dependent on the state thereafter through a series of incentives for obeying state directives and penalties for disobedience. Dependent on the good will of the state for capitalist accumulation, the industrial bourgeoisie could pose no threat to the authoritarian political system. The state also led the effort to demobilise labour, either through direct repression or indirectly through anti-labour union laws or legislation that created ‘friendly,’ corporatist-style unions. Furthermore, the state played an active role in co-opting the professionals of the new
middle class. In particular, state jobs were often seen as highly desirable to young university graduates, which put a premium on conformist political behaviour economically. But the state also had other ways to co-opt professionals, such as through the licensing of the professions, allowing them to regulate who would enter these ‘private’ occupations and keeping out potential dissidents.

Second, Gerschenkron’s approach shows that the comparative analysis of ‘late industrialisers’ does not require that the way in which rapid modernisation is achieved has to be the same in every country. This is a refinement of Moore’s less differentiated authoritarian ‘revolution from above’ approach. As discussed above, in Germany the banks led the industrialisation drive, while in Meiji Japan it was chiefly the state. Subsequent authors have tried to generalise the Japanese experience with the concept of the ‘developmental state’ (Woo-Cumings, 1999). But such a static concept misses important differences in the ‘even later’ industrialisation processes in Pacific Asia. While in East Asia the developmental state remained more bureaucratically rational in the Weberian sense, in Southeast Asia it was more ‘predatory’ (Hutchcroft, 1998). Typical of the former was South Korea, characteristic of the latter was the Marcos regime in the Philippines. But there were not only differences in the degree of rationality and efficiency between ‘developmental states’ in the region. There are also differences between the ‘top down,’ heavy industry-dominated model (Japan and South Korea) and the ‘bottom up’ models with a larger role for a family-owned Mittelstand-driven industrialisation (Taiwan and China).

What became widespread in Pacific Asia were not uniform ‘developmental states.’ Rather, there was diffusion of dictatorships justified by developmentalism. In the next section, I argue that networked economic development and the rise of developmentalist dictatorships is what has made Pacific Asia into the widely recognised ‘region’ it is today.

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7 Kang (2002) compares South Korea and the Philippines, arguing that while both states were ‘crony capitalist,’ in the Korean case the business sector was large and concentrated enough to resist state corruption sufficiently so that economic growth could continue without hindrance. The problem with this argument is that the South Korean state under Park largely created the chaebols. This raises the question of why Marcos was unwilling, or unable to do so in the Philippines. Here the argument that Park intended to create a more ‘bureaucratic-rational’ state in South Korea than Marcos did in the Philippines, who was content with ‘politics of plunder,’ seems more persuasive. On the Marcos regime as ‘sultanistic,’ see Thompson (1995).
Making ‘Pacific Asia’

Pacific Asia is neither geographically, nor culturally convincing. Covering East and Southeast Asia, it is difficult to distinguish geographically in any meaningful way from the borders of South Asia, the South Pacific, Australia, Russia or Central Asia. Culturally, all the major religions of the world are represented in the region. One common historical tradition that this region shares is the legacy of the Chinese empire, to which smaller states paid tribute. Another historical precedent — the ‘Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere’ of militarist Japan during the Second World War — is ignored because of bitterness about Japanese war crimes. Politically, ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) plus Three (China, Japan, and South Korea) has tried to provide some regional unity but has thus far has largely been limited to security issues (although there are some indications economic cooperation is deepening). However, there is nothing approaching close European Union-style political cooperation as national sovereignty remains closely guarded and tensions between many countries in the region remain high.

What is ‘Pacific Asia’ when its geographical arbitrariness, cultural diversity, limited historical precedents, and weak regional organisations make the drawing of regional borders an arbitrary undertaking? The region has been defined economically. It was the fastest growing region in the world between 1965 and 1997. Its economic growth has commonly been described in terms of a ‘flying geese formation.’ Japan, the region’s economic superpower (although this leadership was weakened by nearly two decades of stagnation), took the lead. It was followed by the ‘four dragon’ (alternatively ‘tiger’) economies (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan), then the ‘little dragons/tigers’ of Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand), and finally by the communist converts to capitalism (China and Vietnam, but not Stalinist North Korea). Through so-called production cycles, older, more labour-intensive technologies were transferred down from leader countries to follower ones (Hatch and Yamamura, 1996). Foreign capital (particularly Japanese and Western but later also Taiwanese and ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia) played a major role in this process. Networked with major corporations, developing country affiliates of more modernised states shared in a region-wide, export-orientated industrialisation strategy, which stretched from raw materials to high tech.

Region-wide boom was followed by a regional economic crisis in 1997–1998. Nothing shows the extent of capitalist networks better than their failure. A currency crisis in Bangkok had no business causing economic havoc from Jakarta to Seoul. But the ties that bind in good times can rebound
during the bad patches. Because they perceived their investments to be within a common region, foreign investors withdrew their money regionally, even if the crisis had originally been localised.

In Pacific Asia, development was used to justify authoritarian rule. Autocrats declared democracy an unaffordable luxury until sufficient economic prosperity was achieved. One after another developmental dictatorships were established in the region, replacing either weak democracies or economically-lagging authoritarian regimes (for a similar argument, see Suehiro, 2008, Ch. 5). They were sometimes military (in South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia), sometimes civilian regimes (in Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan).

This provided a snug fit into the Cold War ideological context. Protected by U.S. military power, one anti-communist, authoritarian state after another turned to mercantilist policies of export promotion integrated through production cycles. Despite the Vietnam War and its heavy dependence on U.S. foreign aid, even South Vietnam may have been on its way to developmental success before the North Vietnamese so unkindly overran it. But capital was to have its revenge. Vietnam followed China (in the mid-1980s with the doi moi economic reforms) in converting from state socialism to venture capitalism, with the growth being particularly fast in the South, which was well versed in capitalist ways. After the Cold War divide was bridged (earlier than in Europe), capitalist-style development was promoted by these still officially communist regimes. The ‘flying geese’ of Pacific Asia were developmentalist dictatorships.

Culturalist-authoritarian Ideologies of Late Developers

If Pacific Asia is best understood as being defined by networked economic development and the rise of developmentalist dictatorships — rather than as a homogenous group of ‘developmental states’ — what is it that these regimes have in common? Besides the arguments made above about a ‘progressive’ authoritarian elite, labour repression, and industrialists’ dependence upon the state, I want to suggest that another key similarity is the nature of the ideological justification for authoritarian rule. On this point both Moore and Gerschenkron seem in agreement. As we have seen, Moore speaks of the ‘feudal ethic’ that suffused modernising Meiji Japan. Gerschenkron (1962:24) suggests that ‘late developers’ require an ‘ideology’ or a ‘spirit.’ I want to suggest that the ideology adopted in Pacific Asia originally arose in Imperial Germany. Diffused to Meiji Japan along with the basis of a formal political system, it later came to influence the rest of the region, most recently China.
The ideologues of Imperial Germany were aware that by not democratising in the course of economic development they had departed significantly from the pattern of other industrial nations — above all Britain, France, and the U.S. (Faulenbach, 1980). While today this so called German ‘special path’ (Sonderweg) is seen to have led to the ‘German catastrophe’ of national socialism, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was a source of national pride. By distinguishing between Western civilisation and German Kultur, ideologists were able to claim that, for Germany, industrialisation ought not to lead to democratisation, for democracy was alien to German culture (for a longer discussion, see Thompson, 2000). This particularistic identity was at the same time nationally inclusive, strengthening integration after recent German reunification.

In the second volume of his monumental study ‘On the Process of Civilisation,’ Norbert Elias elaborates the background and main arguments of this critique of Western civilisation (Zivilisationskritik) (Elias, 1982). He warns against the assumption that the advent of modernity in different countries proceeds linearly without being influenced by national differences. In particular, he refers to the peculiar German understanding of ‘culture’ in comparison to French and English concept of ‘civilisation.’ In German, the term ‘Zivilisation’ has a certain connotation of superficiality, whereas ‘Kultur’ assumes a deeper, more spiritual meaning. Perhaps the most famous formulation of this ideology was made by the writer Thomas Mann (Mann, 1956[1918]). Germany, he said, protests against the ‘imperialism of civilisation’ and the Western claim to universalism. The spiritual and unpolitical character of the Germans distinguish them fundamentally: Individualism is sacrificed for the sake of the collective (ibid.:267). He added that the ‘mechanical-democratic state’ of the West would never be at home in Germany (ibid.:270). As this statement makes clear, the initial societal critique against Westernisation has now been expanded into a general attack on ‘Western’ democracy.

It has often been claimed that the reason for the failure of democratisation in Imperial Germany was the weakness of business and the middle class. But the middle and upper classes were not numerically small: Germany after 1870 was an increasingly urbanised country with rapidly growing ranks of civil servants, businessmen and professionals. In fact, the prevailing political views in Germany were the outcome of an ideological struggle, in which ideologues of the ‘German way’ used nationalism to sideline the local

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8 To be fair, it must be added that Mann changed his opinion after the First World War when he became a leading supporter of the Weimar republic, albeit based on rationality (Ver- nuftrepublikaner), not strong emotional attachment to democracy.
democrats. Max Weber could see this, which is why he used his famous Freiburg inaugural lecture of 1895 to berate the German middle class for its apolitical spirit and its unwillingness to take the lead in liberalising society (Weber, 1994[1895]).

Bernd Martin shows how after considering different Western models the Meiji leadership decided for the ‘German path to the modern world’ (Martin, 1987). In 1873, a high-ranking Meiji-government delegation met with German Chancellor Bismarck. A year later the Japanese finance minister was present at the opening of the Reichstag. The Japanese delegates were impressed by the strength of the monarchy at the cost of parliament, as well as by the strong position of the military, characteristics that found their way into the Japanese constitution. The draft of the 1889 constitution was written by a Prussian jurist Herman Roesler. A high-ranking German officer advised the Japanese on the reorganisation of the military.9

The Meiji slogan ‘Eastern ethics and Western science’ showed clear parallels to the Prussian-German critique of Western civilisation in the name of German *Kultur*. While some Meiji intellectuals, such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Okuma Shigenobu, favoured British liberal thought, the Meiji reformers (particularly Ito Hirobumi) preferred authoritarian notions influenced by their focus on the Germany as an appropriate ‘model’ for Japan. They preferred the ideas of Sakuma Shozan, who called for a selective process of Westernisation, asking that Japanese ‘ethics’ be preserved despite the adaptation of Western scientific techniques. Morris-Suzuki (1992:184–185) analyses the situation this way:

> In practice, of course, such a simple division between ‘ethics’ and ‘science’ could not be maintained, but Sukama’s formula did provide a basis for a selective approach to foreign borrowing — one in which the relatively authoritarian model of countries like Prussia came to be regarded as ‘more appropriate’ to Japan’s circumstances that the relatively liberal model of countries like the United States.

Bruce Cumings (1987), Jung-en Woo (1991), and Arul Kohli (1999) have shown how the example of authoritarian Japan influenced their former colonies of South Korea and Taiwan after 1945. The then Malaysia prime minister Mahathir, who propagated the slogan ‘Look East,’ said in a book written together with the Japanese nationalist Shintaro Ishihara that despite Japanese war crimes, Japan remains a ‘source of inspiration and promise’ for the region (Mahathir and Ishihara, 1995). The Singaporean government has never hidden its admiration for the ‘Japanese model.’ But it is clear that this con-

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conscious imitation has little to do with Japan’s democratic system since WWII but rather much to do with its authoritarian development during the Meiji period. Sebastian Heilmann (2006) has pointed to the (usually unacknowledged) influence of the Japanese model on the Chinese developmental state.

The ‘Asian values’ discourse — which was debated in major international journals and newspapers in the 1990s — contrasted the defects of ‘Western’ individualism and democracy with the virtues of ‘Asian’ communitarianism and good governance (see, for example, Kausikan, 1993; Kim Dae Jung, 1994; Zakaria, 1994; Mahbubani, 1995; Ng, 1997). ‘Asian values’ as a doctrine of developmentalism can be understood as the claim that, until prosperity is achieved, democracy remains an unaffordable luxury. This ‘Protestant ethic’ form of ‘Asian values’ attributes high growth rates to certain cultural traits. These characteristics include hard work, frugality, discipline and teamwork. Western democracy hinders rapid development, authoritarian rulers in Pacific Asia claim, and thus must be delayed until substantial development has been achieved. This helps explain why authoritarian advocates of ‘Asian values’ have been so intent on weakening international human rights conventions. Only a ‘disciplined’ (that is, authoritarian) regime, they hold, is likely to promote fast economic growth. This view led Singaporean senior minister Lee Kuan Yew to warn Manila business leaders that their country needed ‘discipline more than democracy.’

‘Asian values’ have also been propagated in countries with higher living standards, however. Despite prosperity, the Malaysian and Singaporean governments argued that ‘Western’ democracy remains culturally inappropriate. While developing countries, such as Suharto’s Indonesian, used ‘Asian values’ to help deflect criticism of serious human rights violations, in more economically-advanced Singapore and Malaysia ‘soft authoritarianism’ has been sufficient: Civil liberties are violated less openly, but democratisation is still resisted.

Like the rulers Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan had been before them, Singapore’s Lee and Malaysia’s Mahathir were concerned about the rise of the middle class and its potential to serve as a social base for political change. This post-developmental ‘Asian values’ discourse was thus directed primarily at that middle class, which, beginning in the 1980s, increasingly supported new pro-democracy opposition groups. Although repression was used against these groups (as it was against socialists and Catholics in Imperial Germany), significant efforts were also made in Malaysia and Singapore to co-opt their

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10 Cited in “Mr. Lee Goes to Manila,” Far Eastern Economic Review, 10 December 1992, p. 4. Lee’s plea ignored the fact that economic performance had been far worse under the Marcos dictatorship.
middle class backers. Indeed, the ‘Asian values’ discourse was part of an effort to depoliticise students, civil servants, professionals, and small-business owners.

The Imperial German critique of Western civilisation helps us better understand ‘Asian values’ by showing that the real issue involved is not ‘Asia’ versus the ‘West,’ but rather authoritarian versus democratic modernity. Imperial Germany was a European country whose ideologues denied that it belonged to Western civilisation. But this claim to cultural difference merely covered over a deeper dispute about the way in which the modern world should be constructed. Conservative thinkers in Imperial Germany, like today’s ‘Asian values’ advocates, tried to prove that authoritarianism could go hand-in-hand with an advanced form of modern living. The historian Jeffrey Herf has aptly termed this phenomenon ‘reactionary modernism’ (Herf, 1984).

The international ‘Asian values’ discourse, which blossomed during East and Southeast Asia’s economic boom, withered after the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998 (with some critics even blaming ‘Asian values’ for the cronyism that claimed lay behind the crisis). But as an internal justification of the ‘firm hand’ of electoral authoritarianism, appeals to collectivist values against Western individualism are still part of official discourse in Singapore and Malaysia, even if it has been discredited abroad. As a form of ideological self-defence, it continues to belong to the authoritarian armoury against civil societal demands for greater democratisation, that have been particularly strong in Malaysia since the advent of the opposition Reformasi movement there over the past decade.

Looming over all these considerations is the ideological struggle for China’s soul. It is the outcome of this battle that will determine the long-term significance of ‘Asian values.’ The Chinese experiment in Hong Kong of using cultural difference to justify authoritarianism has failed. Large segments of this politically sleepy society were politicised by the Tiananmen Square massacre and the democratic reforms of the late colonial era. With Hong Kong’s return to China in 1997, Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa and his pro-Beijing allies attempted to use ‘Asian values’ against democracy. They were badly defeated, however, in the 1998 legislative elections in the small percentage of seats open to electoral competition. Yet conservative Chinese ideologues continued to see Singapore as a model. In 1994, Lee Kuan Yew was elected honorary chairman of the International Confucius Association,

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11 For an excellent application of Herf’s concept to the ‘Asian values’ discourse, see Jayasuriya (1997).
established by the Chinese government. In its effort to justify authoritarian rule, China’s communist leadership (once militantly anti-Confucian) has begun experimenting with traditional culture as a possible form of ideological cover. (Because of its relative cultural homogeneity, neo-Confucianism could be invoked in China; in multi-ethnic Singapore only the more encompassing ‘Asian values’ could safely be emphasised.) While some Chinese ideologists have employed a ‘developmentalist’ argument that democracy must be delayed until substantial economic growth has been achieved, others have expounded a critique independent of China’s rising living standards. Dissident Liu Xiaobo has complained that the Chinese government rejects criticisms of human rights on the grounds of supposed differences in ‘national conditions’ and ‘traditions’ (cited in Svensson, 2000). Government ideologists also point to the moral decline of the West as manifested by drug consumption, suicide, divorce, and increasing crime. ‘Western’ democracy can thus be dismissed as both alien and decadent. Unlike straightforward appeals to Chinese nationalism, appeals to Confucian traditions can draw on the economic success of countries with a similar cultural heritage — from Meiji Japan to Singapore.

Conclusion

The capitalist, authoritarian path to the modern world, first taken in Imperial Germany, was consciously followed by the Meiji reformers and later spread throughout East and Southeast Asia. ‘Progressive’ elites pushed through a programme of modernisation against ‘backward’ conservatives. They demobilised the working class, made the newly-created business sector dependent of the state, and co-opted the rising middle class. The ‘flying geese formation’ in Pacific Asia has been a group of developmentalist dictatorships that did not all share the same ‘developmental state’ form as Japan. One important thing they did have in common was a version of Zivilisationskritik, the critique of ‘Western’ democracy in the name of (in this case) Asian ‘culture.’ Authoritarian rule was justified by a culturalist ideology derived originally from the criticism of Western civilisation in the name of German Kultur by reactionary Prussian modernisers.

Some countries in Pacific Asia have democratised, however. In South Korea and Taiwan authoritarian regimes ‘failed’ to adequately co-opt the middle class (and in the case of South Korea, some workers also became mobilised). In the case of the Philippines and Thailand, the industrial bourgeoisie remained relatively independent of the state because Chinese businessmen could not be blackmailed by the state as they were much better integrated
into society than was the case in Malaysia where they faced greater discrimination. This independent ‘bourgeoisie’ ultimately turned against developmentalist dictatorships, supporting ‘people power’ movements in 1986 in the Philippines and in 1992 in Thailand, respectively (Sidel, 2008). But where the industrial class remained under firm state control, a culturalist argument against democracy has been effectively employed to co-opt the middle class. This was the case in Singapore and Malaysia with the ‘Asian values’ discourse in the 1980s and 1990s. While this ideological discourse may not have ‘brainwashed’ the middle class population, it set the political agenda making it possible for the regime to claim that demands for more participatory democracy were ‘too radical.’

If this analysis is correct, China may be well following a ‘German path’ to the modern world. Nothing is inevitable in history, but the persistence of China’s authoritarianism is striking. Having survived the transition from totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism (from Mao to Deng), the Communist Party has now consolidated its rule after the legitimation crisis caused by the bloody repression of protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989 (Shue, 2004). A new culturalist discourse helps to justify this continued authoritarianism and to ward off ‘Western’ democracy. Official ‘neo-Confucianist’ propaganda and the semi-official ‘neo-conservative’ discourse since the 1990s (Feng, 1997) reminds one of both Imperial German ‘Zivilisationskritik’ and the slogan ‘Eastern ethics and Western science’ of the Meiji period.

The authoritarian path to the modern world followed by Germany and Japan ended in militarism and fascism. Only after defeat in World War did Germany and Japan adopt the path of peaceful democratic development. There is much hopeful discussion about China peacefully choosing to democratise (for a more realistic discussion, see Friedman and McCormick, 2000). Instead, though, the Chinese leadership is doing its best — like the leaders of Singapore have long succeeded in doing — to preserve authoritarian rule despite growing prosperity. Only if the co-optation of the middle class fails (or the dependence of the industrialists slackens while peasant and labour militancy grows), might China, like South Korea or Taiwan 20 years ago, end up inadvertently on a path toward democracy.

References


