

**From Development to Democracy: The Transformations of Modern Asia** by Dan Slater and Joseph Wong, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2022, 368 pp., \$35.00/£28.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780691167602, \$35.00/£28.00 (ebook), ISBN 9780691231075.

Why some authoritarian countries democratize while others do not is a central question of comparative politics. Through a comparative historical analysis of twelve countries of “developmental Asia”, Dan Slater and Joseph Wong offer a complement to modernization theory and an alternative to autocratic breakdown. Strong authoritarian regimes *concede* democracy when they expect to thrive under democratic conditions (“victory confidence”) – building on their track record of rapid economic development that lifted their countries out of poverty – and when they expect that the political regime remains stable (“stability confidence”).

On this view, democratization often is an elite-led process. Being imposed top-down by strong incumbents, the democratization process is “reversible experimentation” and need not preclude the return to authoritarianism (as in Thailand and Myanmar). However, to concede democracy, authoritarian regimes must receive a mix of ominous and reassuring *signals* (electoral, geopolitical, contentious, or economic) of having passed their “apex of power” while maintaining a grip tight enough to *choose* democracy with confidence; they must find themselves in a “bittersweet spot”.

In their analysis, Slater and Wong group the cases into four *developmental* clusters: a “developmental statist cluster” (Japan, Taiwan, South Korea), a “developmental militarist cluster” (Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar), “developmental Britannia” (Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong) as well as a “developmental socialist cluster” (China, Vietnam, Cambodia). The typology of cases is complex yet neat. Two of the clusters (statist and militarist) feature cases of democratization. In contrast, the remaining two clusters (Britannia and socialist) feature cases of “democracy avoidance” that either missed their chances at democracy through strength (“embittered cases”) or may not yet have reached and passed their apex of power (“candidate cases”). The book would have benefited from a more precise explanation of the criteria for belonging to the region of “developmental Asia”, which guides the scope of the argument. Nevertheless, twelve cases are plenty for a qualitative comparison, and they encompass many of the major countries of East and South-east Asia.

The structure of the book is unusual but works well. The first two chapters introduce the cases and theory. Next, three chapters discuss the developmental statist cases one by one. Chapter 6 deals with the People’s Republic of China and why it did not concede democracy in 1989 (the Chinese Communist Party’s developmental record was too feeble to concede with confidence, the authors claim). Then, the authors contend with a cluster of three cases in each of the following three chapters: the developmental militarist cluster (chapter 7), Britannia (8), and the socialist cluster (9), followed by a short conclusion.

The primary support for the theoretical argument derives from the three statist cases. Taiwan's case is "paradigmatic" and easily the most clear-cut case of democracy through strength. The KMT conceded democracy based on a strong developmental record and went from authoritarian to democratic strength, dominating the party system even under conditions of free and fair elections for years to come. Japan, at first sight, seems an odd fit. However, Slater and Wong compellingly argue that even though democracy was imposed on Japan by the United States, continued democratization can be explained by the support from strong, conservative parties within Japan, which could have reverted to authoritarianism after the end of the American occupation. That, after all, was the fate of South Korea in the 1950s and 60s. In the 1980s, the South Korean regime faced increasing pressure for democratic reforms. Nevertheless, conceding democracy was a choice made by the rulers who could have cracked down on the protests as they had in the past. By choosing democracy, the regime split the pro-democratic opposition, expanded its base, and continued to compete successfully in elections.

The three militarist cases show democratization from positions of intermediate strength of the ruling militaries. The military continued to share power with elected civilian governments in these cases. Two countries, Thailand and Myanmar, have abandoned their democratic experiment, while democracy remains stronger in Indonesia. In contrast, the three "Britannia" cases are highly developed but show no signs of democracy, defying the predictions of modernization theory. With Hong Kong and Malaysia, it includes two cases that have become "embittered", i.e. where the regimes have missed the "bittersweet spot" to democratize through strength. Singapore remains a "candidate case" that could conceivably go the route of democracy through strength if the ruling party so chooses. Among the socialist cases, the authors argue that Cambodia has become "embittered" while the PRC and Vietnam continue to be "candidates" in the sense that the regimes are not yet past their best-before date. Nevertheless, the low exposure to democratization pressure from the US, their revolutionary socialist legacy, and largely missing electoral signals make democratization through strength unlikely in the socialist cluster.

"From Development to Democracy" offers an engaging and novel theoretical argument that the authors present in a lucid and highly readable manner. They explore this argument through twelve case studies of varying detail. While the theoretical argument is the book's main contribution to the scholarly literature, some readers might also jump on the opportunity to learn about the recent political and economic history of twelve East and South-east Asian countries in a highly condensed form. While methods are not discussed in detail in the book, it is still a brilliant example of qualitative comparison through historical narratives. As it stands, the book makes an important contribution to democratization studies, but it might also interest area specialists and historians of Asia. I recommend it thoroughly.

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