Civility, Social Capital, and Civil Society: Three Powerful Concepts for Explaining Asia

Many knowledgeable people believe that developments in East and Southeast Asia will vindicate the theory that successful economic growth can set the stage for political democracy. Two decades of rapid economic growth there hold out the promise that the arrival of democracy may not be far behind. First Japan and then South Korea and Taiwan broke from their one-party, authoritarian traditions to become plausible democracies. Their achievements have given hope that China and the economically developing Southeast Asian countries will follow the same path. Such, after all, was the implicit expectation in much of modernization theory, including the assumption that foreign economic aid would, by facilitating economic development, prepare the way for transitions to democracy.

Current practices from Singapore to Beijing, however, are a cause for concern. Not only have there been no smooth transitions from economic to political change in these countries, but numerous Asian leaders are now insisting that such a sequence is neither inevitable nor desirable. In contrast to the dominant thinking in Asia during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century that these societies had to take on new values in order to make both economic and political progress, voices there now are proclaiming that “Asian values” are different from Western ones, and that economic growth can occur without the individualism associated with pluralistic democracy.

In the light of these concerns, it becomes reasonable to reconsider judgments about the character of democracy in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan since it is still seen as an exceptional event for an opposition party in even those supposedly democratic countries to come to power. Maybe Asian values are distinctive. Moreover, in the wake of the 1997/98 Asian financial crises,
which brought into question the soundness of the widely pro-
claimed economic “miracles,” the relationship between economics
and democracy in Asia has become even more murky and con-
fused. Some who are anxious to be at the forefront in announcing
new paradigms are already proclaiming that democracy in Asia
might, paradoxically, arise as the result of economic troubles rather
than successes.

Given all the uncertainties in the relationship between eco-
nomic and political development in much of East and Southeast
Asia, the time seems right to rethink the nature of social relations
in Asia: Do they provide the basic essentials for stable, pluralistic
democracy? The answer requires going beyond Putnam’s concep-
tual framework, and to employ an approach based on three related
and overlapping, but still distinct concepts: civility, social capital,
and civil society.

Every society has its rules of civility that ensure social order,
thereby forming an integrated functioning society and preventing
confusion, disorder, and anarchy. Social capital, as defined by Put-
nam, testifies to the critical level of trust among the members of
a society that makes collective action possible. Social capital builds
upon the norms of civility; it is the next step up in the develop-
ment of a democratic political culture. Finally, civil society consists
of the diverse autonomous interest groups that can exert pressure
on the state. The creation of a civil society is critical for the
effective performance of democracy.¹

These three concepts are the key building blocks for demo-
cratic theory. Civility involves the most general norms of personal
interaction; social capital determines the potential for reaching
community and national goals collectively, and civil society pro-
vides the critical basis for the articulation and aggregation of
interests essential for pluralistic democracy. The particular civility
norms of a country either facilitate or impede the accumulation
of social capital. The amount of social capital amassed by a society
sets the stage for the emergence of a healthy civil society, which
in its turn provides the dynamics for democratic politics.

The ways in which these ideas fit together helps to illuminate
such crucial developmental issues as the relationship between state
and society, the boundaries between private and public activities,

¹ Robert D. Putnam, with Roberto Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, Making Democracy
Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy (Princeton, 1993).
and the relative values of the individual and the community. These concepts serve as powerful tools for analysis, not as isolated variables but as patterns of interrelationships. We are dealing with clouds, not clocks.²

In trying to explain why Asia has developed the way it has, and in seeking to forecast likely future Asian developments, we must ask fundamental questions in terms of the three concepts: Do the standards of civility in the various countries encourage respect for differences in opinion and thereby allow constructive political competition to take place? Do they encourage withdrawal from politics and passivity toward authority? Is their brand of social capital consistent with the trust essential for a free society, or is it more in line with the culture of dependency common to stable autocracies? And what are the prospects for the growth of vibrant civil societies? Is the emergence of healthy establishments dedicated to the common good likely, or will the informal clustering of power produce corruption and rule by mafia? Will the agglutinative nature of power mean that the powerful and the rich will become as one, or will the political and the economic realms—the public and the private—diverge?

CIVILITY: THE RULES THAT FORM A SOCIETY

Shils maintained that civility is the most fundamental concept for understanding how societies are shaped and organized and, hence, the most basic concept for the discipline of sociology. Every society has distinctive rules of etiquette and standards of behavior that render the behavior of individuals more or less predictable and set the tone for public life. Civility is not to be confused with gentility or virtue; even a band of thieves and rogues has its stated and unstated rules of conduct. When civility totally breaks down, society ceases to exist. When civility is strong and widely upheld, the society will be integrated and coherent. Civility is critical not just for private, personal relationships, but also for relationships of power and authority. Since parliamentary democracy cannot operate without respect for rules of civility, civility is the measure of democratic political culture: High civility means smooth democ-

² Gabriel Almond, building on Karl Popper’s metaphor for understanding the continuum of determinacy to indeterminacy in physical systems, maintained that in spite of efforts by the more “scientifically” inclined to make the cause-effect relationship in the social sciences “clock-like,” political causality still remains “cloud-like” (“Clouds, Clocks, and the Study of Politics,” World Politics, XXIX [1977], 489–522).
racy; low civility means repressive rule to keep people in line. Pluralistic democracy, especially when it involves rival moral concepts, requires an exceptionally high level of civility.3

Three dimensions of civility are especially important for comparative political analysis. The first involves, on the one hand, differences in the standards of behavior with respect to personal, intimate relations, and, on the other, the norms for impersonal, public relationships. The second involves the standards governing status gradations—in particular, superior—inferior relationships. The third involves the norms controlling human aggression and managing conflict situations. The practices of a society in these three areas have significant consequences in facilitating or retarding democratic development.

All cultures recognize that norms of civility should differ in accordance with the relationship, establishing one set of standards for dealing with intimates—including family and personal relationships—a different set of norms for relations among acquaintances, and, finally, an outer ring of impersonal relations involving strangers. The rules in each sphere differ greatly from culture to culture; total reversals in the conventions are not without precedent. In American culture, the closer the relationship, the more informality obtains. Among family and friends, one can “relax”; among strangers, one exercises a certain propriety. In Chinese culture, however, the obligations of filial piety and the key Confucian relationships of father–son and brother–brother mean that in the heart of the family, high standards and ritual correctness are expected to be upheld. Yet, at the same time, rudeness is acceptable toward those foreigners who are thought to be mere “barbarians.” This aspect of Chinese culture creates a problem of intimacy. People crave the presumed security of intimacy even as the standards of intimate relations have a distant, formal quality, and relations with strangers tend to be loaded with distrust and suspicion. In a partial attempt to overcome this difficulty, Chinese culture allows for the idea that people can become “old friends” almost instantaneously, thus pretending to change from strangers to intimates. Yet, Confucianism’s lack of civility for all but face-

3 For a collection of some of his work on civility, see Edward Shils (ed. Steven Grosby), The Virtue of Civility: Selected Essays on Liberalism, Tradition, and Civil Society (Indianapolis, 1997). For an illuminating analysis of democracy’s best strategy to cope with fundamental moral disagreements and, in particular, the need for reciprocity among citizens, see Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, Democracy and Disagreement (Cambridge, 1996).
to-face encounters is hardly a favorable condition for participatory democracy.

For democratic development, the norms of civility must encourage positive rules for a wide range of impersonal relationships. The practices common in a traditional society, in which people are expected to be honest and helpful mainly with family and friends, and in which they can feel free to outwit and cheat outsiders, will not support a pluralistic democracy. Significantly, the five key Confucian relationships jump from father–son, brother–brother, and husband–wife to neighbor–neighbor and prince–subject, largely bypassing the huge realm of impersonal relationships. This lack of bonding at a more generalized level caused Sun Yet-sen to say that “China is a plate of sand.” As he correctly saw it, Chinese society showed little social integration beyond family, clan, and personal relationships.

The Southeast Asian cultures tend to have elaborate rules for conducting impersonal relationships, but almost always in hierarchical terms, thus exemplifying the second key dimension of civility—the rules about how superiors and subordinates should conduct their relations. Cultures differ in how people are expected to show respect and deference to authority figures, and in how those in power should treat the weak. Americans learn early that the best way to cope with father’s authority is either to play along with him or to challenge his standards of justice by accusing him of being “unfair.” Such is the training ground for the exaggerated American concern about equality. Americans strive to get on friendly terms, even on a first-name basis, with authority figures in the hope of jollying them into becoming less threatening, and to exploit any suggestion of unfairness, especially in not applying rules equally. In all of the Asian cultures, exactly the opposite norms prevail. Formality and correctness is expected and only the innocently naive expect fairness and equal treatment. Asians assume that those with power will make the most of their advantages, whether to play favorites openly or to humiliate the weak in order to keep them in their places.\footnote{In Asia, defense of the weak often amounted to little more than the hope of shaming officials who misbehaved. In traditional China, those who felt mistreated by an official would frequently make a spectacle by wailing their sorrows publicly. Extreme cases determined to get even might go so far as to commit suicide on a magistrate’s doorstep. Rather than being shamed, many Chinese officials probably felt the act to be good riddance.}
Moreover, all of the Asian cultures practice rituals of civility in superior–inferior relationships that glorify the dignity of the superior; in these cultures, dignity is the essence of power. The result is that those in authority tend to be hypersensitive to any hint of a slight or any implicit challenge to their status. The political effect is to reinforce authoritarian norms and complicate the development of the adversarial relationships essential for competitive democracy.

Superior–subordinate relations, particularly the all-important patron–client ties in Southeast Asia, have much to teach about the creation of social capital. Before turning to that subject, however, we need to examine the third dimension of civility—the management of aggression. Democracy requires strong norms about handling disagreements and controlling the instincts of aggression.

Because anxieties about aggression are particularly intense in Southeast Asia, the dominant rules for social conduct emphasize the suppression of any sign of aggressive sentiments. The Burmese and Thai societies harbor a strong presumption that since people can easily be provoked into violence, the exercise of infinite care and caution in the treatment of others is necessary at all times. One has only one’s self to blame for someone else’s violent reaction. For example, the Javanese attach tremendous value to the ideal of *alus*, that is, acting in a “pure,” “exquisite,” “subtle,” or “civilized” manner. In the same spirit, conduct should never suggest the shame of *kasar*, which signifies “impoliteness,” “coarseness,” or “vulgarity.” Such intense concern with conforming to refined and ritualized behavior and suppressing strong emotions can be inimical to democracy. It compels people to mask their real sentiments, practice conformity, and pretend to positions that they do not really hold. The need for such a high degree of suppression of aggression means that every now and then in Malay and Javanese society, explosive reactions occur. To run “amok” is, after all, a Malay word.

In Thailand and Burma, as well as in Indonesia and Malaysia, the conventional norms against any show of hostility are so strict that the extreme volatility of political antagonism seems almost inevitable. Since these societies recognize no legitimate display of political opposition, they make it difficult for dissidents to disagree without becoming disagreeable. It is an all-or-nothing predicament.
In sum, although civility is a broad concept that encompasses the social standards of an entire society, its norms can also be very precise, focusing on person-to-person relations, especially those based on power. Civility is thus a key ingredient in linking the general culture of a people to their political culture. The Asian cultures have elaborate standards of personal civility, but they are strikingly weak in the areas of impersonal interaction, which is most important for democratic political cultures. They have vivid standards for superior–inferior relations, but few guidelines for the behavior of equals, which are indispensable for democracy. Finally, their oversensitivity to any sign of antagonism is a serious obstacle to any legitimation of political competition.

Civility cannot be encouraged or produced by state policies; it cannot even be maintained by the coercive powers of the state. Rather, civility depends upon social pressure and the shame that comes with the sense of wrongdoing. Social change has created a moral vacuum in many Asian societies, eroding the potency of civility. Incivility exists in all cultures and at all times, not just in those undergoing dramatic change. Yet, in rapid social change, when old norms no longer apply, new ones might not be available to take their place.

Despite the problems that Asian cultures as a whole demonstrate with certain aspects of civility, many of their subgroups manifest appropriate norms for democratic development. Societies embody a host of established role relationships, each of which demands distinct standards of behavior. These relationships can be seen as either more specialized norms of civility or as providing the basic elements of social capital.

SOCIAL CAPITAL: NETWORKING AND LEARNING TO WORK TOGETHER ON THE BASIS OF TRUST

Social progress calls for the accumulation of binding sentiments of trust and reciprocity, which can provide the bases for effective collective behavior. When a society as a whole is deficient in such sentiments, it lacks the capacity for social mobilization and cannot achieve much economically or politically. The process of accumulating social capital is analogous to that of accumulating the financial capital necessary for economic development. When social capital is positive and constructive, it can produce establishments at either the local or national level, in which elites in different walks of life work together for the common good. When the networking is negative, the result
can be a government of corrupt backdoor deals, which, in extreme cases, can end up as mafia rule.

The art of working together requires a significant degree of trust in others so that the benefits of reciprocity can flourish. Members of a society must feel instinctively that if they do a favor, they will in time receive some benefits in return. Trust alone, however, is not enough to further democracy; antisocial gangs can also have codes of honor and trust. Yet, distrust is an unqualified obstacle to positive social development.

Viewed from the perspective of the individual, trust emanates from two sources. The first relates to the basic personality of the individual that is established during infancy and early childhood. Some people have more trust than others; some are characterized by outright distrust. To greatly oversimplify a complex process, during the earliest phase when babies have not learned to differentiate themselves from their environment, they either experience a magical universe in which every cry somehow brings desired responses, or a disconnected, uncertain—even whimsical—universe. The former encourages an instinctive sense of trust in others, whereas the latter can foster a personality marked by distrust.5

The second source of trust comes at a later phase of socialization when children learn to distinguish between friends and enemies. Usually the map is quite simple: Family is the realm of security; then comes the circle of acquaintances, which children know on a face-to-face basis; and finally come strangers and, beyond them, foreigners. Trust is generally highest among those who are most like oneself physically and culturally; those most distrusted tend to look different and follow different practices.

Trust and distrust are also shaped by instruction about all kinds of unseen forces—from the idea of a kind and loving God to superstitions about evil spirits, ghosts, and demons. Hence, the universe becomes either predictable, just, and fair or deceptive and dangerous, unless these hidden powers can be harnessed for protection or good luck.

Cultures vary as to how elaborate and frightening these unseen worlds are, but they all include a magical element to explain...

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5 Erik H. Erikson analyzed the connection between trust/distrust and the Freudian oral stage of development in *Childhood and Society* (New York, 1950).
cause and effect in the political realm. Because nobody can see
the political process in full operation, people have to create their
own fantasies, that is, “theories” about the mysterious capabilities
and operations of power and authority. The mystique of leadership
depends upon a belief in the potency of unseen forces. When
cynicism prevails and authority erodes, society becomes ungov-
ernable. Democracy treads a thin line between respect for author-
ity and the belief that no man is any better than another. The
notion that respect should go to the office and not necessarily the
man is subtle and not at all natural in tradition-oriented societies.

Such basic issues as the value of working hard, the prudence
of saving or delaying gratification, and the reward for behaving
correctly are all instinctive and largely settled during the formative
socialization process. The Chinese, probably more than other
Asians, develop a strong sense of basic trust early, especially with
respect to family and clan ties. They also learn that by careful
attention to rituals, they can increase their “luck” and reduce the
likelihood of misadventure. Several Southeast Asian cultures,
however, are noteworthy for treating infants in erratic ways—for
not systematically relating effort to reward and for teaching that
to delay gratification is to lose opportunity. These cultures carry
elaborate spirit worlds filled with more evil than good.

Differences in cultures’ levels of basic trust and rules about
treating friends and strangers tend to show up in their various
networking arrangements. The Chinese system of quanxi, or per-
sonal connections, is a firmly structured, institutionalized arrange-
ment for ensuring mutual obligation. Family members owe each
other support without question; nepotism is a positive practice in
China. The connections of quanxi extend outward to those who
share a certain identity, for example, those from the same village,
town, or even the same province, those from the same class in
school or even the same school in different years, and select
acquaintances.6

Quanxi is not a form of emotional bonding but a formal one,
declared largely by objective determinants. Neither personal
affinity nor a strong sentiment of debt or obligation for favors
rendered need be part of the relationship. Shared background

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6 For discussions of quanxi, see Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, Gifts, Favors and Banquets: The Art
of Social Relationships in China (Ithaca, 1994); Pye, Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural
alone is enough to force one to recognize an obligation. Moreover, payment for a favor need not be immediate or commensurate. Indeed, a poorer or weaker party can repay repeated favors with nothing more than a show of deference and respect to the more fortunate one. In this sense, quanxi is unlike the comparable Japanese personal ties of on and giri, which entail a powerful sense of obligation and indebtedness that cannot be alleviated without definite reciprocation. In Japan, one would not want to put someone under obligation who could not reciprocate effectively.

The Chinese never developed explicit rules of quanxi to distinguish between the virtuous and the dishonorable. The general feeling in China is that the practice of quanxi has something slightly shameful about it, despite an awareness that the culture could not operate without it. Thus, the domain of quanxi has an amoral quality, which allows it to slip easily from respectable reciprocity to skullduggery.

Although social capital in Southeast Asia varies with the rich cultural differences in the region, it is useful to look at it in terms of two paired cases—Indonesia and the Philippines, where elaborate patron–client networks mean that questions of social capital directly shape the civil society, and Burma and Thailand, where social capital barely involves more than the norms of civility.7

Political and social life in Indonesia is structured according to the elaborate binding system of bapakism, involving a bapak, father or patron, and his anak buah, children or clients. The relationship is like a family, since once someone has declared that he owes the incalculable debt of hutang budi to a bapak figure, the patron can no more dismiss him than a father can rid himself of a son. A rising star in Indonesia may find himself engulfed with lifelong clients who cannot be denied. Just like a natural father, a bapak can be stuck with miserable, no-good anak buaks, and there is little he can do about it.8

7 The analysis of the Southeast Asian cultures in the paragraphs to follow is based on more detailed treatment in Pye, Asian Power and Politics, 90–132.
8 When I once suggested to a distinguished Indonesian political scientist that traditional customs could be used for constructive purposes, he replied, You Americans are incorrigibly optimistic; you can always find a silver lining in every cloud. You don’t really know what tradition is. You probably think that it is just superiors using one form of address to subordinates and subordinates using another in
In contrast to the Western attitude that patrons have all the advantages and clients are constantly exploited, in Indonesian politics, the anak buahs often force their bapaks to assume risks in order to gain more power and influence so that they might benefit from them. Americans tend to think of patron–client relations as analogous to a general of the infantry sending his troops into harm’s way. For the Indonesians, the proper analogy is with the airforce, in which officers risk death by flying into combat while enlisted men remain behind at the base. Furthermore, since the enlisted men pack the officers’ parachutes, the officers are well advised to stay on friendly terms with them.

The ease with which unbreakable bonds can be initiated with patrons means that those in favored positions are constantly under siege from people anxious to declare their loyalty to them. Geertz has described the terrible predicament of aspiring Javanese entrepreneurs who become so inundated with undeniable requests for jobs that their businesses soon collapse. The Javanese understandably tend to feel that the Chinese have an unfair advantage in business matters because they only have to look after their blood relatives; a good Javanese finds it impossible to say “no” to any unfortunate person.9

Since Indonesian culture makes no sharp division between the political and the economic realms, the traditional practices of bapakism generate relationships that Westerners would consider to be blatant corruption and cronyism. The dramatic financial turmoil of 1997/1998 in Southeast Asia exposed the extent to which President Suharto’s six children had built up a $30 billion empire. The pattern was simple: Anyone with a hopeful entrepreneurial plan would ask one of the children to serve as patron; in return, the children became ever-more wealthy. It would have required an unnatural degree of self-restraint and a very un-Javanese independence of mind for the children to have stood aside and not become rich. The financial crisis also revealed the difficul-

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ties of Indonesian bankers operating in a culture in which prying into other people’s affairs and explicitly questioning their motives is unseemly. The requirements of alus demand that a great deal of make-believe must be taken as fact.

The nature of Indonesian social capital is also revealed in the customs of gotong-rojong and musjawarah, community mutual assistance and discussion leading to consensus, respectively. In principle, decisions should be made by consensus after extensive deliberations, but in practice, although the younger participants call for bold actions, and the middle-aged add their cautious wisdom, in the end, the senior figure usually declares what the “consensus” is, whether or not anybody ever articulated it. Since the power of consensus, like all power, involves invisible forces, only a leader with almost magical ability can discern where it lies and assert it authoritatively.

In contrast to the rigid enduring rules of Indonesian bapakism, patron–client ties in the Philippines are looser and less durable. To be a patron in the Philippines is decidedly less onerous and usually more openly profitable. Whereas in Indonesia, power is essentially status, in the Philippines, power, lakas, means privilege and exemption from regulation, sometimes to the extent of being totally above the law. Patron–client relations in the Philippines tend to be freewheeling; networks can form and disband as people move about seeking better patrons.

As Lande has noted, children in the Philippines get an early start in seeking out patron–client relations. Siblings often find themselves in different “families,” since each child has his or her own set of special aunts, uncles, and godparents, or compadres. This fluid form of relations has convinced some scholars that patterns of “bossisms” rather than patron–client ties are the appropriate models of relationship in the Philippines. To keep their power bases, leaders have to go beyond patronage and rely upon coercion and intimidation. Social norms of reciprocity are not strong enough to sustain enduring power structures.10

Both Burma and Thailand have acute problems with social capital. The problem in Burma is especially severe because basic

distrust is so widespread. It goes back to Burmese socialization practices: Infants are not given predictable security, and children are routinely subjected to fear. For example, putting children to bed with the warning that they might never wake up if they have certain dreams is considered not cruel but amusing.

Above all, Burmese culture evinces a deep ambivalence about power. Everyone wants it, but people are too timid to try for it. Nobody wants to be a subordinate, because inferiors are vulnerable and cannot trust anyone with power. Three Burmese concepts help to explain their outlook: Any Burmese, from a villager to a high official, wants to be recognized as possessing pon, that is, a person of quality, deserving of respect. Pon is a blend of charisma, commanding presence, grace, dignity, and holiness. Closely related is the concept of awza, or power, which is, in a sense, pon in a social context. Every group has someone who has the awza, and anyone can aspire to it. The common response to someone else in a favored position is, “Why him, why not me?”

This attitude would lead to endless power struggle and anarchy if not for the third concept, ahnadeh, which the Burmese insist is unique to their culture. It signifies a physical sensation that makes people hold back from asserting their interests and defer instead to the wishes of others. One cannot turn down the requests of others no matter how contrary they are to one’s own. The Burmese contend that they have trouble competing in business with Chinese and Indians because the others are not bound by ahnadeh and the ideals of pon. In short, the Burmese believe that they have a higher level of civility than either the Chinese or the Indians. What we can say for sure, however, is that their development of social capital has not gone much beyond the realm of civility; they show little to no trust.

Unlike the Burmese, the Thais find it comfortable to accept gradations, and they take a positive view of the subordinate’s role. Their ideal of leadership is metta, a form of kindness and compassion. A superior is also supposed to be endowed with karuna—a passion to be helpful and supportive of the self-esteem of lesser people. “Little people” feel vulnerable without the benefits of a superior’s karuna. With it, they experience kamulgjei—an exhilarating sense of will, vital energy, and purposefulness. Subordinates are expected to reciprocate their leaders’ kindness by displaying “awe.” This exchange of “will” and “awe” is the glue of social
relations; it results in more effective collective action than the Burmese pattern permits.¹¹

This review of networking practices in East and Southeast Asia demonstrates that social capital differs greatly depending upon the purposes to which it is directed. The Chinese quanxi networks are powerful forces for economic relationships, but politically they tend to become liabilities, easily serving as the bases for corruption. In Indonesia, the bonding of bapakism can produce political stability but also stagnation. In the Philippines, the looser social ties are compatible with elements of democracy, but the struggle for power undermines effective governance. In Burma, trust is so low that there is little in the way of social capital, and in Thailand, leaders are caught between having to be kindly and considerate, on the one hand, and effective and bold, on the other hand.

CIVIL SOCIETY: AUTONOMOUS POWER GROUPINGS AND THE INTERESTS OF SOCIETY VERSUS STATE

The mystery in Asia is why societies with such pronounced norms of civility and respectable levels of social capital have had such weak civil societies and, hence, such a poor history of democracy. The question is particularly intriguing in the case of the Confucian cultures where much that is assumed to be associated with social capital—such as etiquette, a work ethic, a high valuation of education, and strong rules for mutual bonding—is in evidence.

Weber was not the only one to claim that Confucianism was incompatible with capitalism and liberal democracy. His argument was advanced more shrilly by the Chinese themselves in the May Fourth Movement when they called for the extermination of their traditions in favor of “Dr. Science and Mr. Democracy.” During the 1920s and 1930s, the Chinese overwhelmingly believed that their traditional culture was a curse that had left China backward and weak. In the 1950s through the 1960s, Confucianism was regarded as fertile soil for Leninist Communism, with its emphasis upon authority and ideological conformity, and finally, during the 1980s and 1990s, in a great reversal, as supportive of economic growth and the pursuit of riches. For our purposes, we need only

¹¹ The skill with which Thais are able to discern rankings in the pecking order is evident in the words of a young Thai who told me that he belonged to an informal group of twenty-four students, who had returned from studying abroad, among whom he ranked seventh.
focus on the peculiar nature of civil society in traditional China. The conventional wisdom is that China lacked a strong civil society. China did not develop strong, autonomous, informal political interest groups capable of imposing their will on the state. Nor did it give any signs of an emerging bourgeoisie, even during its periods of economic ascendency during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when it was the world's most advanced country.12

Confucian philosophy placed the merchant next to the bottom in the social scale. Both the mandarin and the peasant, who ranked above the merchant, agreed that the game of the merchant was to cheat the customer. Hence, merchants lacked true civility. In practice, however, merchants belonged to generally well-organized, functional guilds, which operated largely to discipline their members by setting standards and adjudicating disputes, not to exert pressure on the government about public policy. Merchants were content to leave such matters to the mandarins and the imperial court, modestly denying any interest in altering the dictates of officialdom. They sought special consideration only with respect to the application of the laws in their particular cases, and as a token of appreciation, they might slip officials a little something for their troubles. In short, the guilds operated not as pressure groups but as protective associations.

This formula has continued to operate to this day. Businessman and the now-growing middle class in China still passively accept government authority and still engage in various forms of corruption. The tycoons of Hong Kong sing the praises of Beijing's leaders most loudly and oppose any movement toward democracy most strenuously.

The story of the non-development of a civil society in China is, however, even more complicated than the conventional view

12 Max Weber (trans. Hans H. Gerth), The Religion of China (Glencoe, 1951). It would take us too far in the wrong direction to explore why each of these judgments about Confucianism was correct under the circumstances of its times. We can only hint at the answers: During the first period, since the Chinese state was pathetically weak, and the society lacked both large-scale institutions and the framework necessary for national economic growth, the focus of Confucian values operated only in the realm of family ties and personal relationships. During the second period, since the Communist state was all-powerful, the requirement of giving deference and obedience to political authority and the state ideology was seen as a new version of "Confucian" orthodoxy. During the third period, since the political environment was compatible with, and tolerant of, private entrepreneurial activities, the manifestations of frugality, hard work, and stress on education were seen as enduring features of "Confucianism."
can show. The Confucian rules of ethics applied to both the public and private realms but only in a way that reinforced the powers of the state, because, instead of the clear division of state and society that feudalism produced in Europe and Japan, China inclined toward a three-way division—state (guan), public (gong), and private (si) realms. The state comprised mandarin bureaucracy, with the emperor at the top and the local magistrate at the bottom. It monopolized all legitimate political authority. The private sphere contained the extremely powerful and disciplined Chinese family and clan system. Its influence was not supposed to extend outside its legitimate domain. In Chinese culture, the selfish assertion of private interest in the state or public realm was a gross social evil, one of the ultimate sins.13

Between the state and the private arenas lay the clearly defined public sphere, which consisted of the collective actions of the gentry in the countryside and the merchant guilds in the cities. Actions within this sphere help to explain in greater detail why the Chinese failed to develop a civic culture, even though they had a strong sense of civic virtue and public spiritedness (gongzheng).

In addition to the merchant guilds, the cities had a variety of societies and, more particularly, benevolent associations that looked after their members’ welfare. In many cities, these organizations established schools, foundling homes, and community temples, and sometimes under the auspices of local elites, they assumed such civic responsibilities as water control, social welfare, famine relief, the building of roads, ferries, and bridges, and even public security through the formation of a local militia. Significantly, the public role of these local institutions became more active when the dynasties were in decline and the state was weak, as during the late Ming. Thus, the public sphere of action operated on behalf of the state even though it was not an agent of the state. The local elites complemented the state; they did not challenge the state with a different agenda of interests and concerns, as in Europe and Japan.

13 This analysis of the three spheres of traditional Chinese life is heavily indebted to the work of Mary Backus Rankin, particularly “The Origins of a Chinese Public Sphere: Local Elites and Community Affairs in the Late Imperial Period,” Etudes Chinoises, IX (1990), 13–60; “Some Observations on a Chinese Public Sphere,” Modern China, XII (1993), 138–182.
This tripartite division of the state, the public, and the private spheres helped establish in China a vivid sense of what the tasks of government should be, laying a positive foundation for subsequent political development. But it also produced a tradition that inhibited the development of a true civil society, because it worked to suppress the articulation of special interests and to deny legitimacy to a political process in which the society could balance the powers of the state.

The ending of the imperial era and the establishment of the Republican period brought an increase in the number of institutions that could have become the basis for a stronger civil society. In the Treaty Port cities during the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, labor unions, independent newspapers, and publishing houses sprang up, along with many kinds of business and professional associations. During the Mao Zedong era, most of these institutions fell into the hands of the state and the Party and lost their potential for being separate voices for society.

What has been slow in coming is the legitimization of individual and group interests. The traditional perspective of private interests as shameful expressions of selfishness and greed is still strong in China. If China is ever to develop a strong civil society, the public realm between the state and the private ones must go beyond its traditional view of government and champion the free and open expression of every social interest. The traditional Chinese faith in a benevolent government that can take care of society without any help from outside has outlived its usefulness. Such an arrangement might have been possible when China was a predominately agricultural society, but now that the country has become more modernized and industrialized, its legitimate competing and conflicting interests must be allowed to make public their cases for policy support, or they will have to operate in dishonorable ways, using the “back door,” exploiting the powers of quanxi, and practicing outright corruption.

Behind the glitter of the recent “miracle” economy lies a pattern of sordid relationships between avaricious cadres and get-rich-quick entrepreneurs who straddle the line between government and business by arranging tax exemptions for themselves and imposing “management fees” and “voluntary donations” on third parties. The easy acceptance of corruption by the economically successful works against the introduction of democracy; cronyism
is less demanding than transparency in the articulation and aggregation of interests.\textsuperscript{14}

The experiences of all advanced industrialized countries indicate that the only way to manage the growth of interests is to permit a strong civil society. This system is fundamental to the operations of democracy, which, in spite of its faults, remains the best way to accommodate and reconcile social conflicts. Although China has started to take on the appearance of modernity, especially in its coastal cities, it still has a way to go before it will be compelled to give up its antidemocratic and anti-true-capitalist ways and create a vibrant civil society.

In Southeast Asia, the struggles for independence created the rudiments of civil society in the form of the various groupings that challenged the colonial rulers. Most of the first organizations involved young people and students—in Burma, the YMBA (Young Men’s Buddhist Association) and in Indonesia, several Muslim organizations. But, in time, these movements were absorbed into the all-embracing nationalist parties, which, with independence, became the new governments. Although the transition from being an opponent of the state to being part of the state was generally quick and easy, the nationalist leaders subsequently made sure that no new groups would emerge to challenge their authority. Thus, the initial phase of nation building in Southeast Asia tended to stifle the creation of civil society by declaring any disagreement with the state to be a subversive act.

The East and Southeast Asian cultures are not deficient in norms of civility, in social capital, or even in some facets of civil society. But they have combined these elements in ways that diverge from the Western pattern during its evolution toward democracy. Confucian culture had powerful norms of civility, but it lacked the rules for impersonal dealings beyond the face-to-face level that are critical for the development of a pluralistic democracy. Similarly, the emphasis on civility and trust in Southeast Asia largely pertains to relations with familiares; those outside of one’s network circle are to be distrusted. In other words, in Asian cultures role relations are of a particularistic nature and resistant to a universal-

\textsuperscript{14} For an excellent analysis of the people who combine business and government in today’s China, see Margaret M. Pearson, \textit{China’s New Business Elite} (Berkeley, 1997).
istic outlook. That, of course, is exactly the language of modernization theory, which for some people means that we are on the right track.

Are there specifically “Asian values” that evade Western categories? If so, they are not the ones advanced by Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore and by Mahathir Mohamed of Malaysia, who have argued that Asian values differ from Western ones in their emphasis on the community rather than the individual. All societies require individual and collective rights and duties to be in balance. The question of what constitutes the ideal balance has been central in Western political theory. Moreover, the balance point in any dynamic society tends to shift back and forth over time.

Our analysis leads to a significantly different conclusion from this version of the “Asian values” argument in its definition of community. The Singapore-Malaysian view equates the “community” to the state, thereby interpreting any pressure from a civil society against state policy as an affront to the community and a subversive activity. Our analysis of the Asian cultures finds that the issue of the individual versus the community is played out at the much-lower level of family, clan, neighborhood, and immediate community. What is striking in Asian cultures is the huge gap between that level and the realm of the state. The world of the citizen and that of the government remain far apart in non-democratic Asia. To define the state as the only legitimate community, and thus deprive citizens of individual rights, comes close to advancing a fascist ideology.

Our discovery of the great divide between the three concepts—civility, social capital, and civil society—and the domain of the state is, however, not as pessimistic about the prospects of democracy as it might at first seem. It does mean that merely accumulating civility and social capital will not in itself be enough to facilitate transitions to democracy. The void between the realm of social relationships and that of the state must be filled by a national political process in which diverse social interests can be articulated and aggregated to serve as the basis of public policy.

The key to this learning process is a collective effort to define the national identity of the country in terms of the modern nation-state. Society must lead in this quest for a modern national identity; if the state has a monopoly on the national ideals, the result can be a form of fascism. China faces a particularly acute
problem in this regard, because at this juncture in its history, the ideals of nationhood that are going to replace the outmoded principles of Marxism–Leninism–Maoism are still undecided. The Chinese leaders speak about the need to build a new “spiritual civilization” and “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” but they have not yet accepted the need for society as a whole to take a lead in this quest.

The prospects for democracy in the Southeast Asian countries are better where social capital seems to be strengthening the growth of civil society, especially in Thailand and the Philippines. Burma has the most intractable problems. Since its culture aggressively socializes distrust, it offers limited capabilities for collective action. Singapore and Malaysia would be at the forefront of the transition to democracy if not for their current fixation on the false concept of “Asian values.” However, in another generation or two, new leaders might be able to make changes that bring political life more in line with the sophistication of their economies.

The fact that the norms of civility, the forms of social capital, and the structures of civil society differ from country to country in Asia, as well as from the Western countries, means that the evolution toward democracy in each country will have distinctive characteristics. The result will not be an “Asian” form of democracy but a rich variety of types, ranging from the Malaysian and Thai to the Korean and Taiwanese. Each country’s culturally distinct qualities will produce mixes that will yield unique national systems.