

Slater, Dan and Joseph Wong *From Development to Democracy: The Transformation of Modern Asia*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2022. 348. Hardcover, \$35.00.

In the mid-1980s, I was fortunate to study historical-comparative methods with Gideon Sjoberg at the University of Texas. The class explored the then contemporary works of Skocpol (1979), Starr (1982) and Tilley (1984) and more classical works including those of Polanyi (1944), Bloch (1953) and Sjoberg (1960). I have long appreciated well-executed comparative-historical studies and the insights they provide (e.g., Madrid and Wayland, 2019). Because of this, I was very excited about reviewing this work by Slater and Wong.

In *From Development to Democracy: The Transformation of Modern Asia* Slater and Wong do an extensive analysis of twelve countries in “developmental Asia” which has transformed “One of the world’s poorest regions (into)...one of its richest” (p. 1). While some countries in “development Asia” have democratized as they developed per the thesis of Modernization Theory, others have not. Slater and Wong turn to historical-comparative analysis to discern why.

Slater and Wong group their cases into four developmental clusters: Statist (Japan, Taiwan, South Korea), Militarist (Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia), Britannia (Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong) and Socialist (China, Vietnam, Cambodia). Comparisons are made of the developmental/political trajectories within each cluster as well as between clusters. It is through very detailed analyses that Slater and Wong develop the thesis that democratization within “development Asia” is a process that unfolds during times of strength.

Countries in the statist cluster have fully embraced democracy. Here existing conservative elites conceded democracy when they possessed both stability confidence (belief that democracy would maintain or improve social stability) and victory confidence (belief their

power would continue through the democratic transition). Statist elites were past their apex of power but could still leverage their “usable past” (p.76) to assure continuance in the near term while conceding a transition to democracy.

Countries in the militarist cluster experimented with democracy but two (Thailand and Myanmar) have reversed to authoritarian rule. Unlike statist countries, these countries transitioned to democracy without first having achieved significant developmental achievements or having created of a highly developed and far-reaching authoritarian state. Lacking strong, meritocratic civilian institutions and with “intermediate...usable pasts” (p. 176), the retreat to authoritarian rule in the face of weak and unstable democratic institutions was in some ways unsurprising. Stability confidence in these countries was of paramount concern given their common legacy of regional and separatist insurgencies.

Countries in the Britannia and socialist clusters have resisted flirtations with democracy. In the former the legacy of British colonialism left in place strong “social intolerance of political corruption and abuses of power” (p. 222). These countries have been able to foster strong economic performance without conceding political liberalization. Countries in the socialist cluster were late to the developmental game. They were the last to embrace capitalism and engagement with the global economy. Slater and Wong suggest that these countries enjoy “a rough sort of Hobbesian legitimacy” (p. 259) having brought peace to their people. None is inclined to democracy in the near term.

Slater and Wong’s analysis suggest that countries are more likely to concede democracy through strength rather than weakness. Such concessions come after the state has passed its apex of power and entered a “bittersweet spot...bitter because it...includes a significant dose of bad tidings...(sweet) because it contains significant hope for the regime’s democratic renewal” (p.

23). States with stability confidence and victory confidence are more likely to concede democracy. Non-conceding states are likely to enter “embittered authoritarianism” which may include “a surprisingly steep decline from strength to weakness” (p. 223). An irony of successful economic development is “heightened expectations” (p. 132) of its citizenry.

This is a well-researched and well-written book. The case histories provide a depth of detail that makes for meaningful and revealing comparisons. Slater and Wong make good use of existing theory to frame their analysis while making new contributions to developmental theory. The book is appropriate for upper division undergraduate and graduate classes on developmental theory and for courses that explore the relationship between development and democracy. It would be an appropriate text for Asian studies seminars and as a case study in classes focused on the teaching of historical-comparative methods. It is an excellent read.

Michael L. Hirsch
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NOTES

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