

health outcomes in Guatemala and Ghana, he argues, functions like inventory and logistics should be centralized, while planning and budgeting are better decentralized—all within the health sphere. Also innovative are the two chapters that examine attempts to encourage competition between municipalities. One chapter on the Philippines argues that when neighboring municipalities are required by law to publish standardized, comparable information about their spending decisions, “yardstick competition” can improve performance and lessen elite capture. Another chapter, sounding a more cautionary note, finds that Area-Based Competitions in China have generated unintended and negative consequences, as when competing cities demolished older houses in the name of “city beautification.”

Is Decentralization Good for Development? provides a number of persuasive answers to the question posed in the title, but it succeeds less well as an attempt to connect the decision to decentralize with substantive outcomes. First, the distinction between “cynical” and “sincere” decentralization may not be a useful one. By “cynical,” the editors refer to politicians who decentralize not because they are genuinely interested in devolving authority but due to a series of short-term political calculations. By “sincere,” they refer to policymakers, including those who participated in the edited volume, who were motivated by normative commitments to democracy and development, and whose sincerity generates better outcomes. In practice, it can be difficult to determine the cynical versus sincere nature of decentralization, and Sánchez de Losada is a case in point. Although he is offered as an example of a sincerely motivated president who decentralized in order to rein in separatist regional politicians, it is also possible to interpret his support for decentralization, as Kathleen O’Neill has done, in more cynical terms and as an attempt to benefit his own political party disproportionately.

Second, given the complexity, if not impossibility, of determining whether politicians’ motives are sincere, the political science literature on decentralization has probably been correct to assume cynicism in the form of self-interested, career-oriented politicians. More generally, it is not at all clear, as the editors claim, that the effect of decentralization on development is “very much determined by the motives” (p. 7). In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of decentralization is the Pandora’s box it tends to open; cynical politicians seeking limited change often trigger sequential dynamics that end up devolving significant power to local officials, as Tullia Faletti has demonstrated. At the same time, politicians at the center setting out to sincerely and fundamentally transform their country’s politics often manage to change very little. As *Perils of Centralization* demonstrates, politicians’ initial motivations set in motion dynamics that they have a hard time controlling.

The Nature of Asian Politics. By Bruce Gilley. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 272p. \$94.99 cloth, \$34.99 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592716002449

— Sungmoon Kim, *City University of Hong Kong*

Can there be a grand theory that can help us make coherent sense of the unique patterns generally found in Asian countries in areas as diverse as state—society relationship, economic development, democracy, governance, and public policy? In this ambitious and thought-provoking book, Bruce Gilley argues that what he calls the “Asian Governance Model” (hereafter the AGM) can fulfill this seemingly impossible task. Gilley’s central argument is that variegated religious and cultural traditions in Asia notwithstanding, countries in the region have developed a shared political culture that prizes the state—run by virtuous political leaders and public officials committed to the common good and constrained by the social norms of accountability—as the key vehicle toward national integrity, political stability, and economic development. This shared political culture obtains even when their regimes have been democratized, their economies are largely market friendly, and their governance has been decentralized. Underlying this empirical observation is the claim that the AGM can both explain the internal political dynamics of the region, which can hardly be captured by its liberal alternative, and provide an evaluative framework by which to assess the Asian practice of governance on its own terms.

In a sense, the book’s specific vindications of the AGM hinge critically on the author’s overarching claim about the distinctively Asian mode of state—society relationship, and indeed this is the topic with which Gilley begins the first substantive chapter (Chapter 2). After singling out the ideal of the rational, unified, and strong state, which has normative supremacy over society, as the most salient political feature that Asian countries historically share, he argues that modernization of Asian states has been propelled not by bottom-up changes from civil society but through “self-renewal” of the states, from Oriental despotism to “refined Oriental despotism,” according to which “strong states, acting under norms and laws, govern through bureaucracies and according to a conception of the common good” (p. 27). What characterizes Asian societies is the Hegelian embeddedness of society in the state, which enables the latter to remain “dominant but not intrusive or abusive” (p. 38).

In Chapter 3, Gilley discusses economic development from the Asian perspective of state—society relationships. He argues that the society’s normative dependence on the state in Asia facilitates a so-called pro-growth alliance between state and society, engendering a particular mode of *politics* in which the state, while maintaining its social dominance, induces society to participate in the

cooperative venture toward national stability and prosperity. The contentious politics is still there but, according to Gilley, even it unfolds within pro-growth social values to which both state and social actors are precommitted. That is, in Asia, contentious politics is “organized” by the state itself, socially constrained by the norms of accountability in delivering public goods, and it ultimately contributes to “developmental citizenship,” a citizenship “mainly conceived in terms of rights and obligations relating to economic development” (p. 81).

In Gilley’s view, democratization in Asian countries, such as, but not limited to, Indonesia and the Philippines, is another way in which the state-organized contentious politics was expressed. What is notable in democratic transition in the Asian region, he argues in Chapter 4, is that the Hegelian organic unity between state and society renders it “strongly continuist” (p. 99), that is, without a radical breakup with the authoritarian (even ancient) past. The reason is that in Asia, democracy has been pursued as an “indigenous response to new governance challenges” (p. 102) in the era of globalization. As a form of paternalistic meritocracy, argues Gilley, “[democracy] has always been understood as state-preserving, developmental, majoritarian, and consensus-based in its essentials” (p. 103). In short, in Asia, democracy is valued largely for instrumental reasons (i.e., for internal governance purposes), and the contentious politics spurred by democratic movements are deeply oriented toward shared national purposes. The author is convinced that this sort of the state-led, governance-motivated democratization—what he calls “responsive transition” (p. 114)—would be attractive to authoritarian regimes such as China and Vietnam.

In Chapter 5, Gilley turns to the question of governance. He argues that the strongly bureaucratic tradition in Asia gave rise to so-called developmental administration (p. 146), even in those countries that have undergone the recent new public management (NPM) revolution. In fact, he continues, NPM, when employed in Asia, has created a unique mode of networked governance in a way that revitalizes the traditional ideas of good governance and moral mechanisms of accountability, rendering otherwise contentious negotiations between state and society more manageable and effective (p. 152). Here, special attention is paid to the fact that in the course of governance-oriented democratization and public administration reforms, legislatures, courts, and civil societies played mainly “remonstrative” functions in their contentious engagements with the state and rarely asserted themselves as the state’s (i.e., the executive’s) arch opponents.

The harmonious network governance that the AGM generated has made the nature of public policy in Asia more growth oriented than distributive, and this is the main focus of the sixth and final chapter. According to

Gilley, at the center of public policy in Asia is what some scholars call “welfare developmentalism,” the position that ties “social spending closely to employment and productivity, designing programs with an eye to avoiding welfare dependency and introducing programs on the basis of economic logic rather than social rights” (p. 191). Once again, Gilley reminds the reader that the contentious politics in Asia revolves not so much around individual or group “rights” but around the proper (and socially expected) function of the state in promoting genuine public interests (p. 196). He concludes this chapter (and the book) by stressing the domestic origins of democratization and governance reforms in Asia and how the same domestic factors constrain aggressive behaviors of the states in the region, thus contributing to global peace.

Overall, I find Gilley’s argument quite insightful. His greatest contribution lies in drawing attention to the primacy of *politics* in Asian politics, especially its remarkable ability to appropriate modern social, political, and economic institutions in a way aggregable to existing cultural norms and practices, as well as to orient social contestations toward the state’s overall purposes. Moreover, the AGM makes possible a coherent understanding of the otherwise odd juxtapositions prevalent in Asia—between the strong state and the strong market, between persistent state dominance and increasing decentralization of government, and between the strong state and ceaseless social contestations. Of course, it is an open question whether China’s democratic transition will be as smooth as Gilley conjectures, or whether social contestations in Asia are as tractable as he claims.

That being said, the book’s provocative nature comes from the theoretical underpinning of the AGM. What is truly remarkable (in both positive and negative senses) about *The Nature of Asian Politics* is that it derives its theoretical inspirations from such classical figures in sociology and political science as Montesquieu, Hegel, Weber, and Wittfogel, commonly known as “Orientalists.” Admittedly, it is their monolithic and static understanding of “Asia” that brings these figures, with all their differences, into one group. Gilley’s guiding ambition is to draw on the thesis of Oriental despotism as a methodological tool and develop it into a new analytical concept called “refined Oriental despotism.” Nevertheless, it is dubious whether this controversial strategy, positing uninterrupted historical continuity between ancient and contemporary “Asia,” is necessary in making his core argument focused on shared governance style in contemporary Asian states. By tracing the AGM back to ancient Asia and by presenting “Asia” as a self-reproducing social reality, however, the author risks another form of Orientalism, not of his preferred methodological version but of a normative kind that is likely to reify Asia into a static category of social analysis, despite his desire to represent “Asia” on its own terms. Much gets obscured, rather than

revealed, when it is assumed that there is no qualitative distinction among Chinese Confucianism, Indonesian Islam, and Thai Buddhism *as long as* they all buttress a strong state or virtuous political leadership.

This is not to say that to think about modern Asia as a political concept reflecting its increasingly shared political practices and governance styles is impossible or unimportant. My point is that Gilley could have made his core argument, which connects political culture to governance style more effectively and convincingly, even if he did not take the dangerous path of Orientalism. Despite this quibble with the book's methodological strategy and basic assumptions, I find it full of interesting observations and compelling qualitative analyses. This is a must-read for anyone interested in Asian politics, especially those who are struggling with Asia's nonliberal path toward political changes, social reforms, and economic development.

Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes. Edited by Tom Ginsburg and Alberto Simpser. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 282p. \$105.00 cloth, \$39.99 paper.

Opposing the Rule of Law: How Myanmar's Courts Make Law and Order. by Nick Cheesman. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 338p. \$99.00 cloth, \$29.99 paper.
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— Maria Popova, *McGill University*

Why do many authoritarian leaders adopt constitutions and publicly profess their commitment to the rule of law if they regularly abrogate rights and disregard the constitution? Is authoritarian constitutionalism an oxymoron? Tom Ginsburg and Alberto Simpser's *Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes* and Nick Cheesman's *Opposing the Rule of Law* examine authoritarian regimes across geographic regions and historical eras and provide some complementary and some contradictory answers to these questions. Both books make significant contributions to the subfields of comparative judicial politics, comparative authoritarianism, and law and society studies and will be essential additions to any graduate syllabus on these subjects.

Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes is a theoretically sophisticated and empirically sweeping work. Editors Tom Ginsburg and Alberto Simpser outline a research agenda that explores the varied roles that constitutions can play in authoritarian regimes. Anyone who wants to pursue research on the subject will have to engage with this volume's arguments. The book's contributors move beyond the conventional wisdom perception of authoritarian constitutions as mere window dressing—an attempt to fool domestic and/or international audiences into believing that the autocrat's behavior would be constrained by constitutional provisions. Instead, they claim that some

authoritarian constitutions serve as operating manuals and “describe actual political practice” (p. 6). Adam Przeworski discusses the decision by some Communist parties to enshrine their leading political role in the Constitution and Law and Mila Versteeg point to Saudi Arabia's “weak constitution,” which accurately outlines the limited civil and political rights that Saudi citizens have. Authoritarian constitutions could also resemble blueprints that can signal the leader's policy goals and intentions. Stilt describes how Egyptian strongman Hosni Mubarak used constitutional amendments to target his opponents from Muslim Brotherhood, even as he framed the changes in such a way as to fool international audiences into perceiving them as democratizing. Gabriel Negretto argues that Latin American military dictators who “seek broad transformations in the political, social, and economic order” (p. 83) are more likely to adopt constitutions. Authoritarian constitutions can coordinate the relationships among key elites within an authoritarian governing coalition by affecting both formal institutions and “informal political arrangements” (p. 9).

The coordination argument receives the most attention in the book. The gist of the claim is that a constitution is useful to an autocrat because it provides a self-enforcing mechanism that increases regime stability. More specifically, Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo argue that constitutions allow “political groups and organizations other than the dictator [to] codify their rights and interests [. . . thus] fostering loyalty and trust between the dictator and his launching organization” (p. 57). David Law and Mila Versteeg hypothesize that both the structural provisions in a constitution and the rights provisions can coordinate behavior among political and social actors by allocating power among them—thus enhancing regime stability (p. 173). And Ghandi argues that the constitutional definition of presidential powers allows the opposition to unite behind a single candidate in authoritarian elections, because they know by what rules the winner would govern (p. 205).

The limitation of the coordination argument, in my view, is the self-enforcement assumption, i.e. that constitutional provisions become meaningful commitment mechanisms just for being written down and without the need for an external guarantor. In the absence of an independent judiciary, however, why should elites trust the autocrat not to renege on the commitments he has made in the constitution? Authoritarian regimes (like democracies) vary on the level of independence accorded to their judiciaries, so maybe independent courts contribute to regime stability. The cross-national empirical testing of the coordination argument would be stronger if it controlled for the level of judicial independence. Moreover, there is tension between the findings that authoritarian constitutions are less specific (as Tom Ginsburg, Zachary Elkins, and James Melton argue)