Most social scientists associate politics nearly exclusively with the state. But political agendas are set and achieved in Asian countries as much by “informal politics” as by formal politics conducted within the parameters of institutional, authoritative, and legal structures. Some of the terms associated with informal politics – cronyism, factionalism, guanxi (in China) – have negative connotations in a Western context. But the term also includes more publicly accepted forms, such as grassroots activism and other activities that are political but not governed by the general, impersonal rules and procedures set by formal authorities. The authors of Informal Politics in East Asia argue that political interaction within the informal dimension (behind-the-scenes politics) is at least as common and influential, although not always as transparent or coherent, as formal politics, and that this understudied category of social interaction merits more serious and methodical attention from social scientists.

This book is a pioneering effort to delineate the various forms of informal politics within different East Asian political cultures and to develop some common theoretical principles for understanding how they work. Featured here are contributions by political scientists specializing in the regions of China, Taiwan, Japan, the Korean peninsula, and Vietnam. The common thread across these political cultures is a Confucian legacy that emphasizes personal relationships and reciprocity. The authors apply to this dynamic region the classic core questions of politics: Who gets what, when, how, and at whose expense?

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This edited volume represents the homecoming of a scholarly odyssey lasting more than a decade and spanning 10,000 miles from one side of the Pacific to the other. We now find that our intellectual debts are so heavy and our creditors so numerous that we could not possibly repay or even mention them all. In terms of intellectual origins the book represents a confluence of at least two currents: In the study of Japanese politics, it can be traced to Haruhiro Fukui’s pioneering interest in the gaps between formal rules and actual political behavior, resulting for example in his attempt to explain the “consistent inconsistencies” between the theoretically expected and the actual results of every change in Japanese electoral laws since the late nineteenth century. In the study of Chinese politics, although seasoned China-watchers have had an intuitive grasp of informal politics for some time, its methodologically self-conscious analysis dates from a debate between Andrew Nathan and Tang Tsou in the pages of the *American Political Science Review* and the subsequent intellectual fermentation of Tsou’s teachings among his students (including Lowell Dittmer, Joseph Fewsmith, Peter Lee, and Ben Ostrov). These two currents converged in the Santa Barbara–based research project, “Informal Politics in East Asia,” codirected by Fukui and Dittmer and generously endowed with two-year funding (1991–1993) by the Pacific Rim Research Program of the University of California. This enabled us to put together a research team consisting initially of recruits from the UC campuses and later cross-fertilized by other interested scholars. Though fluctuating in membership with changes in academic schedules and research interests,
this team covered not only the relevant theoretical perspectives, but the major representative East Asian political systems, making our project genuinely comparative and cross-cultural.

The book stems from but is by no means limited to a series of panels on informal politics at the annual meetings of the African Studies Association, the American Political Science Association, the Association of Asian Studies, and an international symposium in Hong Kong, held in 1989, 1990, 1992, and 1993. The panel on informal politics in Africa and Asia in 1989 was organized with the help of Professors Victor T. LeVine and Rene Lamarchand, and it also included presentations by Kelley Kun-mi Hwang and Ruth Iyob (UC Santa Barbara), and Haruhiro Fukui and Shigekko N. Fukai. The 1990 panel at the APSA meeting included papers on informal politics in China by Lowell Dittmer and Yu-shan Wu (Taiwan National University), on Korea by Hwang, and on Japan by Fukui and Fukai. The panel, “Informal Politics of Leadership Recruitment in East Asia,” organized for the 1992 AAS Annual Meeting, included papers on China by Dittmer, on Korea by Soohyon Chon, on Japan by Fukui and Fukai, and on Taiwan by Tun-jen Cheng, with Fukui doubling as chair and Brian Woodall (UC Irvine, later Harvard) serving as discussant. A few months later, several members of the team attended a symposium on informal politics in East Asia organized by Peter Lee at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Cosponsored by the UC-based project and the China Reform and Development Programme of the Hong Kong Institute of Asian-Pacific Studies, the symposium heard papers by Chon, Dittmer, Fukui and Fukai, and Hwang from the UC side, and by Lee, M. C. Lo, Benjamin Ostrov, and King Tsao from CUHK; serving as discussants were Yasheng Huang (University of Michigan, now Harvard Business School), Chien Chiao (Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica), Elizabeth Heiman (UC Santa Barbara), Janet Landa (York University), Byron Weng and Chinnan Chen (CUHK), and Yih-jiun Liu (Academica Sinica’s Sun Yat-sen Institute for Social Science and Philosophy). In 1993, a second (tandem) panel was organized for the AAS Annual Meeting on “Informal Politics and Economic Development” in communist and noncommunist systems, which included papers by Ying-mao Kau (Brown University), Guoliang Zhang (UC Berkeley), Woodall, Chon, and Dittmer; serving as discussants were Brantly Womack (University of Virginia) and T. J. Cheng.

The next three years were devoted to revisions and compilation for publication of a selection of the outstanding papers from this series of conferences as augmented by contributions solicited from distinguished scholars whose interests coincided. Three of the papers appeared in quite different forms in a special edition of Asian Survey in March 1996, to which Robert Scalapino (UC Berkeley) wrote a succinct but lucid introduction. All benefit from
numerous critical commentaries, both anonymous and solicited, and from seminars and informal conversations with colleagues.

The book thus marks the culmination of a research project launched a decade ago but hopefully not the end of the investigation of informal politics, with its potentially far-reaching implications. Needless to say, none of the individuals or organizations mentioned above is to blame for any flaws to be found in the book; for these, the editors and contributors accept full responsibility.

Lowell Dittmer, Haruhiro Fukui, and Peter N. S. Lee