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The Nature of Asian Politics

The Nature of Asian Politics is a broad and thematic treatment of the fundamental factors that characterize politics in the fourteen key countries of Southeast and Northeast Asia. Bruce Gilley begins with an overview of state-society relations, then moves on to the fundamental questions of development and democracy, and finally shifts to an exploration of governance and public policy in the region. This book proposes an Asian Governance Model that is useful for understanding politics from Japan to Indonesia. By reviving an earlier paradigm known as “Oriental despotism” and applying it to political theories about the Asian region, this book is likely to attract wide debate among students of Asian politics and among Western policy makers seeking to engage the region.

Bruce Gilley is a leading international scholar on the comparative and international politics of Asia and China and an expert on questions of democracy, state building, and political legitimacy. He is an associate professor of political science and the director of the doctoral program in public affairs and policy in the Mark O. Hatfield School of Government at Portland State University. His books include *The Right to Rule* and *China's Democratic Future*. His research articles have appeared in journals such as *Comparative Political Studies*, *Environmental Politics*, and *Political Science Quarterly*. He serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Democracy* and the *Journal of Contemporary China*.

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*For my children, Julia and Jasper, who
will write their own stories*

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Preface

While visiting Indonesia in 2011, the premier of China proclaimed: “We are witnessing the all-round rise of Asia and a great rejuvenation of Oriental Civilization.”¹ The claim was notable but not because of the first part. The “rise,” or “awakening,” of Asia has been anticipated or announced with regularity since Japan defeated Russian forces in a series of skirmishes on land and sea in 1904 and 1905. That event ushered in a period in which both Asians and non-Asians alike argued that the region was in the ascendance.² The rise of Asia is an old story, and it is a reasonably accurate one as well.

Rather, it was the second part of the declaration that was interesting: the definition of an “Oriental Civilization” that spans the eastern half of Asia from Beijing to Jakarta. In the early 1900s, this region was considered the core of Asia. China’s premier seemed to be saying that whatever divergences it witnessed during the twentieth century, it was again converging on a common Asiatic heritage. It was a claim that the region, which is often referred to as Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, or just East Asia, is both internally coherent and globally distinctive. Peking Man and Java Man, those ancient human ancestors whose lineages begat the peoples of the East Asia, were making common cause.

What is Asia and what, if anything, makes it distinctive? There are cultural, social, economic, and political dimensions to this question. My focus here is on the political dimension, broadly defined. The aim of this book is twofold: to describe and explain the essential facts of politics in Asia; and to use these findings to inform contemporary debates about politics in general. While a better understanding of Asian politics is inher-

ently worthwhile, there is no reason why the experiences of one-third of humanity should be confined to the region itself.

Two great intellectual debts are important to note. Substantively, Lucian Pye's *Asian Power and Politics* of 1985 remains unsurpassed as an interpretation of the political sociology of Asia. It is the sort of book that has withstood the test of time. In the decades since its publication, the study of Asian politics has exploded. As a result, it has become more difficult to integrate findings. One key aspiration of this book is to make a claim about what we have learned about Asian politics as a whole since Pye. This task is different for different chapters. The literature on economic development (Chapter 3) and democracy (Chapter 4) on Asia is vast, and the challenge here is to beat a pathway through a very thick jungle. By contrast, the literature on state-society relations (Chapter 2), governance (Chapter 5), and public policy (Chapter 6) is remarkably sparse, and the challenge here is to create and integrate these subjects into the understanding of Asian politics.

In pursuing a broad interpretation of Asian politics, I have found myself moving freely between grand narratives and comparative statistics on the one hand and often very fine-grained stories on the other hand – the Malacca Sultanate; the rise of Taiwan's Shinkong Group; Indonesia's democratic transition; the Narita Airport protest movement in Japan. Sometimes long excursions on the ground can illuminate the landscape better than can broad surveys from the mountaintop. Throughout, I have extensively footnoted the text to highlight what I believe are the major works on various subjects.

More prosaically, this book owes its inspiration to Goran Hyden's magnificent synthesis and meditation on African politics, entitled *African Politics in Comparative Perspective*, first published by Cambridge University Press in 2006. Hyden's work strikes me as a rare treat in our hyperspecialized world. It is both accessible and far-reaching, as well as solidly social scientific and comparative. While using it in the classroom, I wondered what a similar book on Asian politics would look like. Cambridge University Press was equally curious. My answer is in your hands.

I owe special thanks to Benjamin Reilly of Murdoch University and Andrew MacIntyre of Australian National University, kingpins of Australia's unrivaled Asian politics assemblage, for encouraging this ridiculous enterprise in its early days. I also want to acknowledge the faculty, students, and staff at my cozy home institution, Portland State University, which manages to achieve so much despite its modest resources, mainly because of a remarkable will to excel.