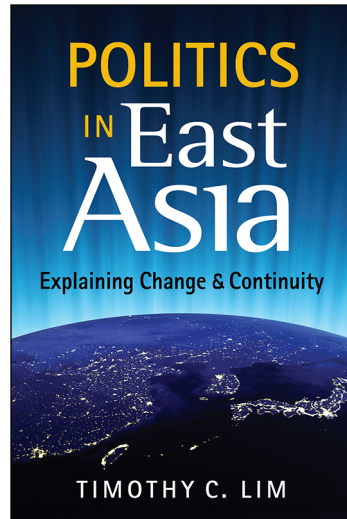


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Politics in East Asia:  
Explaining Change  
and Continuity

Timothy C. Lim

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# 1 Explaining Change and Continuity in East Asia

Change does not just happen. It is not merely an accident of history, a random or arbitrary event. Rather, it is the product of decisions, both great and small, made by individuals, individual societies, and individual **states**. Similarly, change—especially large-scale political, social, and economic change—does not occur in a vacuum. What happens, say, in South Korea reflects not only the decisions made by Koreans, but also, and perhaps even more important, decisions made by other national, international, and transnational actors. In addition, change is almost certainly influenced, even partly determined, by powerful structural forces and underlying global processes, some of which may be invisible to the casual observer. This book, in part, is about how to better understand, explain, and evaluate the changes that have occurred and are occurring in East Asia, especially since the end of World War II in 1945 (in this book, for reasons explained below, East Asia is construed narrowly to include Japan, China, South Korea, North Korea, and Taiwan). Many of these changes have been profound. Today, for example, Japan is a stable, prosperous, and peaceful democracy. But this has not always been the case. Indeed, from the beginning of the **Meiji Restoration**\* (1868–1912) to the end of World War II—and despite a short-lived experiment with limited democracy (which developed during the **Taisho period**, 1912–1926)—Japan was dominated by decidedly illiberal and nondemocratic political regimes. Even more, Japan’s foreign policy during the entire pre–World War II period was aggressively militaristic and expansionary, as the country used its industrial might, first, to subjugate its East Asian neighbors (Korea, Taiwan, and **Manchuria**) and, later, to challenge Western imperial dominance throughout Asia. Since 1945, by contrast, Japan has embraced an almost pacifistic stance toward the outside world.

Japan’s prewar industrial might, of course, also marked a significant economic change. For centuries, during the **Tokugawa** era and before, the country

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\*Terms appearing in boldface are defined in the Glossary at the end of the book.

was locked into a quasi-feudal system based on a self-sufficient and decidedly nonindustrial economic **structure**. As William W. Lockwood (1968) explains, as recently as the early nineteenth century, Japan “remained at a stage of economic development hardly more advanced than that of Western Europe in the late Middle Ages. Of her 28 to 30 million people the overwhelming majority were unfree, poverty-stricken peasants. They lived mostly in self-sufficient rural villages. The foundation of the economy and chief source of wealth was the cultivation of rice, carried on by primitive methods little changed over the centuries” (p. 3). With the beginning of the Meiji era, however, “there set in a feverish process of modernization” (Lockwood 1968, p. 12), which laid the groundwork for a highly industrial and commercialized economy that would eventually compete with the most advanced Western economies of the time—although, as Lockwood carefully points out, the process of modernization was more gradual and spatially limited than is generally assumed. Nonetheless, by the early part of the twentieth century, Japan had achieved a major economic transformation.

Change in South Korea and Taiwan has, in some respects, been even more dramatic both politically and economically. Politically, for example, both countries emerged from decades of colonial domination only to be embroiled in an intense and long-lived postwar struggle between the former Soviet Union and the United States—or more broadly, between the **communist** world and the West. In the case of Korea, this struggle resulted in the wrenching division of the country into two extremely hostile regimes—the pro-US Republic of Korea (hereafter, South Korea) and the pro-Soviet Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (hereafter, North Korea). South Korea’s affiliation with the United States led to the establishment of a democratic government in 1948, but the country still faced a series of major difficulties, both internal and external, including an anemic economy, a devastating war against North Korea, heated domestic ideological rivalry, and intense political factionalism. Indeed, these difficulties led to a turn away from democracy and toward **autocracy** and **authoritarianism**. Ultimately, a rigged presidential election in 1960 set off a firestorm of popular protests that led to the downfall of South Korea’s so-called First Republic<sup>1</sup> led by **Syngman Rhee** and to the imposition of military-authoritarian rule in 1961 under **Park Chung Hee**.

In Taiwan, the Cold War struggle also had both immediate and long-lasting effects as the island’s “native” population was subjected to yet another invasion—this one, though, was sanctioned and given legitimacy by outside powers. Prior to the end of World War II, an agreement (the Cairo Declaration of 1943) was reached by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Republic of China (which was then based on mainland China and led by the anticommunist **Chiang Kai-shek**). The three parties agreed that Taiwan, or the island of Formosa as it was then called, would be “returned” to mainland China after the war or after Chiang’s nationalist forces defeated the Chinese communists, who were led by **Mao Zedong**. In 1949, though, Chiang’s forces lost to the Chinese

communists, and Chiang, along with more than 2 million fellow nationalists, fled to Taiwan and established their own, strongly authoritarian regime on the island. (One should take notice of the significant debate over the political status of Taiwan and more specifically of the issue of Taiwan's legitimacy as a state. Figure 1.1 provides a very brief discussion of this issue.)

The change or transformation that has garnered the most attention for South Korea and Taiwan has been in the realm of economics (or, more accurately, political economy). In the 1950s, both countries were desperately—and seemingly irredeemably—poor: they were quintessential **third world** countries with per capita incomes comparable to or below most other countries in the world, including those in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. In 1950, for example, **per capita GDP** in South Korea and Taiwan was less than half that in Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Ecuador, and it was significantly lower than in Morocco, Jamaica, and Honduras. In addition, Sri Lanka, Ghana, and the Philippines all had higher per capita GDPs than either South Korea or Taiwan, while Egypt's per capita GDP was about the same (see Figure 1.2). Yet, in a little less than one generation, Taiwan and South Korea had caught up with or surpassed all the aforementioned countries except Mexico. But Mexico's lead, too, vanished by the mid-1980s; by 1990, moreover, per capita GDP in Mexico was only 70 percent of South Korea's and about 60 percent of Taiwan's. Even more, both Taiwan and South Korea had essentially caught up (again, in terms of per capita wealth) with Western Europe by 2008 (see Figure 1.2)—an utterly remarkable achievement. Consider, on this point, that other countries mentioned above all

### Figure 1.1 Is Taiwan a Country?

Taiwan's political status is subject to intense debate. Most international organizations, including the United Nations, and the large majority of states do not formally recognize Taiwan as a sovereign **state** or country. Under international law, recognition by other states and state-based organizations (such as the UN) is considered a core attribute of statehood. From a strictly legal perspective, then, one can fairly safely conclude that Taiwan does not possess all of the necessary requirements for statehood (for an in-depth discussion of this issue, see Shen 2000). For the purposes of this book, however, Taiwan's strict legal status is not a critical issue, since the government of Taiwan, or the Republic of China as it is formally known, has, in practice, clearly exercised authority over a specific territorial space and population. The capacity of Taiwan's government to exercise internal sovereignty means that it has had the same basic control over its economic and political systems, in practical terms, as any other fully recognized sovereign state. In this view, Taiwan can reasonably be treated in the same manner as South and North Korea, Japan, and China.

fell much farther behind Western Europe during the same period. The Philippines, for instance, started off with a per capita GDP that was about one-fourth (23 percent) of Western Europe's in 1950, but by 2008, the proportion had fallen to just a little more than one-tenth (13 percent).

More than sheer economic growth, however, both South Korea and Taiwan also developed a strong degree of domestically based technological and industrial capacity, which is reflected in their ability to compete head-to-head against the most advanced and largest Western corporations. South Korea, in particular, has a number of world-class corporations, including Hyundai, Samsung, and LG. Each of these companies has established a strong—and, in some cases, a dominating—presence in major international markets, and each is engaged in sophisticated, often cutting-edge production. Taiwan's strongest companies, while less well known to the general public (at least outside of Asia), are equally formidable. These include, among others, Acer, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), Quanta Computer, Hon Hai Precision Industry (also known as Foxconn Technology Group), Kingston Technology, and United Microelectronics Corporation. As in South Korea, each of these companies has

**Figure 1.2 Comparative per Capita GDP Figures (in international dollars, for selected countries and years)**

	1950	1970	1980	1990	2000	2008
Mexico	2,365	4,320	6,320	6,085	7,275	7,979
Guatemala	2,085	2,919	4,005	3,240	3,927	4,461
Bolivia	1,919	2,176	2,572	2,197	2,561	2,959
Ecuador	1,863	2,845	4,129	3,903	3,219	3,987
Morocco	1,455	1,616	2,272	2,591	2,652	3,465
Jamaica	1,327	3,849	3,121	3,786	3,598	3,688
Honduras	1,313	1,556	2,062	1,857	1,912	2,323
Sri Lanka	1,253	1,499	1,830	2,424	3,597	4,895
Ghana	1,122	1,424	1,157	1,062	1,265	1,650
Philippines	1,070	1,764	2,376	2,197	2,377	2,926
Taiwan	916	2,537	5,260	9,938	16,872	20,926
Egypt	910	1,254	2,069	2,523	2,936	3,725
South Korea	854	2,167	4,114	8,704	14,375	19,614
Western Europe (avg.)	4,569	10,169	13,154	15,908	19,176	21,672

*Source:* Maddison (2008).

*Note:* The international dollar, also known as the Geary-Khamis dollar, is a hypothetical unit of currency that has the same purchasing power that the US dollar had in the United States at a given point in time. In the data above, 1990 is used as the benchmark year for comparisons that run from 1950 to 2008. While the international dollar is not widely utilized, for per capita GDP comparisons across a range of countries over a relatively long period of time, it is a useful statistic. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) use the international dollar in some of their published statistics.

become a major global player: Quanta Computer is the world's largest maker of notebook personal computers (PCs) and a key supplier to Dell and Hewlett-Packard, TSMC is the biggest semiconductor chip producer in the world, and Hon Hai Precision Industry is a major producer of consumer electronics for Apple (the iPhone, iPad, and iPod) and Sony (PlayStation), among others.

Significantly, too, rapid economic development in both countries also seemed to lead to another major political transformation: by the late 1980s, the two countries were well on their way toward the establishment of sturdy—albeit far from perfect—democratic political systems. In many respects, the transformation of South Korea and Taiwan into “full-fledged democracies” (I specify what I mean by this phrase in Chapter 6) is as remarkable as their economic ascendances. For in both cases, the timing of the transition was unexpected and, more significantly, unexpectedly smooth. Indeed, many observers assumed that the initial transition from authoritarianism to democracy was more illusion than reality or, at the least, subject to reversal at almost any time—especially if the interests of the most powerful social and political actors were to be threatened. In the beginning, these assumptions seemed accurate, as the initial phase of the democratic transitions in South Korea and Taiwan were dominated by the same groups and parties that had been in power during the authoritarian era. Eventually, however, once-subordinated opposition parties and groups won political power through the ballot box, and contrary to the predictions of many, their right to rule was not challenged or summarily usurped through extraconstitutional means (e.g., a military *coup d'état*).

There is, of course, far more to the story of political, economic, and social transformation in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea than presented here. But telling this story is, in large part, the objective of this book, so I save additional discussion for later. For now, we need to turn our attention to two other East Asian countries, both of which are also very important in their own rights: China and North Korea. In China, the world is witnessing a reoccurrence of the stunning postwar economic ascendance of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Once a slow-moving, industrially and technologically backward leviathan, China has become—since the 1990s—one of the fastest growing, most dynamic capitalist economies (another issue that I examine at much greater length in subsequent chapters). The significance of this change is hard to exaggerate, for unlike its East Asian neighbors, China is a country of immense proportions: its population of over 1.3 billion people is the largest in the world and accounts for fully 20 percent of the Earth's people. Thus, while China remains a relatively poor country in per capita terms, it is already a tremendously powerful country in terms of its overall GDP. In 2011, China's GDP in **purchasing power parity (PPP)** terms was, according to the **World Bank**, over \$9.1 trillion, larger than any other single country except for the United States. On its present growth path, moreover, China's overtaking the United States is only a matter of time, as soon as 2025 according to many economists' predictions. However, no one can guarantee China's

continued ability to reproduce its remarkable record economic growth. In the 1980s, in fact, many scholars predicted that Japan would overtake the United States, but it did not due to long-standing economic difficulties in Japan that began in the early 1990s. Still, China's sheer size means its continued growth will provoke changes throughout the rest of Asia and the entire world, even if that growth slows considerably.

Despite its embrace of capitalist and market principles, China is still dominated by an authoritarian, decidedly nondemocratic, and ostensibly communist political regime. In light of political changes experienced by its East Asian brethren, China's ongoing economic transformation raises a number of important questions: Will rapid capitalist development in China necessarily lead to significant political change, that is, to democratization? Or will something unique about China prevent this political transformation from taking place? These questions lead to broader inquiries about the nature of the relationship between economic and political change. Can a direct causal connection be established between economic and political processes? If so, what is the basis of this connection, and how exactly does it work? Or, as others might argue, are the two processes largely unconnected or, at best, tangentially related? Whatever the answer is, one also needs to consider what other processes, **institutions**, and actors might be relevant to an explanation of the prospects for major political change in countries such as China.

Whether—or more pertinently—*why* China may or may not democratize is a crucial question, and one that I address at some length. At the same time, one should also recognize that, like China's heretofore resilient political system, dramatic and profound change is not evident everywhere in East Asia. The most obvious case is North Korea, which has seen remarkably little political, social, and economic change since its official birth as a communist state and society in 1948. While not frozen in time, both North Korea's political and economic systems have remained remarkably untouched. Consider that in 2010—more than fifty years after its establishment—the country had experienced only a single leadership change, and that only because North Korea's first leader and president, **Kim Il-sung**, died of natural causes in 1994. Kim Il-sung was replaced by his son, **Kim Jong-il**, in 1997, in the first “dynastic” succession ever in a communist regime. Notably, Kim Jong-il's accession was not a foregone conclusion; in fact, he did not assume complete control until three years after his father's death. On December 17, 2011, Kim Jong-il died. He was succeeded by his son, **Kim Jong-un**, whose credentials for leadership are shaky, at best. The key point, however, is that the accession of Kim Jong-un further underscores the continuity of the regime and system in North Korea.

The longevity and stability of the North Korean political system are not unique, but they are highly unusual. As such, they call out for an explanation, particularly in light of the country's extremely poor record of economic growth



since the 1970s. In many countries, long-term and serious economic difficulty provides the basis for political instability and regime change. While North Korea's isolation and extreme secretiveness—it remains one of the most isolated countries in the world—make accurate assessment of its level of economic development difficult, the country's **centrally planned** or **command economy** has clearly suffered from debilitating inefficiencies for several decades and has been unable to sustain sufficient production, especially agricultural production, for the population. The evidence of this situation is clear: in the mid-1990s, to cite a particular salient example, nearly 1 million North Koreans—in a population of about 24 million—died as a result of one of the worst famines of the twentieth century (Haggard and Noland 2007). The country's abysmal economic performance has led to some market-based reforms, but for the most part, these reforms have been limited and carefully controlled. In short, both North Korea's political and economic systems (except for their inception) have seen precious little change for well over a half-century.

Continuity is not limited to North Korea or to China's political system. The other East Asian countries have not, by any means, been completely remade. In particular, the social, institutional, and cultural features that have made each a distinct society have not simply disappeared with changes in their economies and political systems. Understanding continuity, I should stress, is equally as important as understanding change. For no less than change, continuity does not just happen. It is often, if not almost always, the product of intense but varied political, social, and economic forces: keeping things from changing can take a lot of effort and power. In this book, therefore, I examine both change and continuity in East Asia—although, I should stress at the outset, the emphasis is decidedly on the former. Still, as will become evident, both are critical to understanding the political, economic, and social dynamics of individual countries within East Asia and of the region as a whole.

## **Beyond the "Usual Suspects"**

So far, the discussion in this chapter has revolved around the two most conventional topics in studies of change and continuity in East Asia: high-speed capitalist industrialization and democracy versus authoritarianism. Good reasons, of course, can be found to focus on these topics. Yet a number of other issues—albeit strongly related ones—of great import and interest also deserve equally serious attention. One of these has to do with a common corollary of capitalist industrialization, namely, labor repression. As Frederic Deyo (1989) forcefully puts it, "a preoccupation with the sources of [economic] growth diverted attention from a dark underside of the East Asian 'miracle': the extreme political subordination and exclusion of workers" (p. 1). Just how "extreme" has the political

subordination and exclusion of workers in East Asia been (especially in the four capitalist economies of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and China)? Does East Asia as a whole, or as individual countries, stand out from the rest of the world, or do the experiences of workers in East Asia largely mimic the experiences of workers in any industrializing economy? If differences can be found between East Asia and other parts of the world, what are the sources of or reasons for these differences? Whatever the answers to these and similar questions, understanding or explaining change and continuity in East Asia requires that one not just consider the ostensible economic triumphs of the four capitalist economies, but that one also think very carefully about the shortcomings. Labor repression, some argue, is one of the most important of these shortcomings, which is why I devote space to an examination of this issue—albeit in the context of the discussion of political change (especially in Chapter 6).

The adverse implications of China's burgeoning economy also deserve special attention. As should already be apparent, China's rapid economic ascendance is not all "wine and roses." Unlike the other East Asian economies, for instance, China's economic expansion has been accompanied by one of the worst cases of increasing domestic income inequality on record: over the course of about two decades from the late 1980s to the mid-2000s, China experienced a virtually unprecedented deterioration of income equality—or, as Barry Naughton (2007) succinctly puts it, "there may be no other case where a society's income distribution has deteriorated so much, so fast" (p. 218). What are the reasons for this "virtually unprecedented" deterioration of income equality? Is it an unavoidable, but temporary, by-product of high-speed economic growth? Or does it portend an essentially permanent division between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in China? In assessing the varied dimensions of economic change, these questions are clearly important to address. Another extremely important issue revolves around the larger system-wide effects of China's rapid industrial expansion on the world economy and, perhaps even more importantly, on the global environment. I only touch on these issues in Chapter 7, but the approach I introduce and apply throughout this book will give readers the means to pursue a fuller and more in-depth analysis on their own.

Over the past few decades, the world has been witnessing another significant change throughout East Asia: in-migration or immigration. For decades, East Asia was primarily a source of migration to other countries, but this outward flow has started to reverse itself. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are becoming significant destinations for people from around the world but especially from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China. Comparatively speaking, the numbers are still fairly small, but they nonetheless represent a momentous change. This change is especially true for Japan and South Korea, two self-described homogeneous (i.e., racially and ethnically "pure") nations. While pure homogeneity has never actually been the case, the concept of ethnic and racial homogeneity has

occupied a central place in the nationalist mythologies of both countries. Increasing immigration, then, raises crucial questions about the **intersubjective** foundations of the two countries. Can Japan and South Korea maintain continuity in their respective national identities, or will migration necessarily lead to fundamental social changes? Whatever the answer, any contemporary analysis of change and continuity in East Asia needs to examine the causes and implications of this growing migration. Not surprisingly, Taiwan is undergoing the same basic experience, although the context is different (a point I discuss later). China and North Korea, on the other hand, have very different stories to tell. In North Korea, almost no in-migration can be found for obvious reasons, although North Korea is beginning to witness much more out-migration. Finally, in China, migration is a massive socioeconomic and political issue, but the migration is primarily internal, from the countryside to urban areas. Chapter 8 is devoted to an examination of these issues.

In short, I cover a lot of ground in this book, from the usual suspects to a number of equally important, equally complex issues. This task is not easy and requires a number of fairly big trade-offs. In general, the sacrifice is that adequate attention cannot be given to everything. But this problem is smaller than it may at first appear to be. For, as I have already suggested—and as I discuss more below—one of the overarching goals of this book is to give readers the conceptual and analytical tools to carry out more in-depth analysis of important issues on their own. Despite this qualification, some issues certainly deserve an independent, in-depth examination and would have added to the book but are not included. One of the most salient of these issues is regional security and regionalism (economic, political, and military) more generally. Yet, while regionalism is a crucial topic, a number of excellent sources already cover regionalism in East and Northeast Asia and could serve as useful supplements to this text.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, few, if any, books cover political, economic, and social change (and continuity) in Japan, China, South Korea, North Korea, and Taiwan in the manner that I do in this book.

That being said, in the following section I am going to take a step back, so to speak. Specifically, I will take a step back to engage in a brief discussion of the core concepts around which this book is organized. I have already spent the first part of this chapter discussing two of these concepts—change and continuity—but a bit more discussion is warranted. *Change* and *continuity*, after all, are basically generic terms, and while I have already clarified both to some extent, being more explicit about the use of the two terms in the context of this book behooves me. I also examine two additional concepts: “development” and “East Asia.” Development is typically and closely associated with notions of change, especially progressive change. Indeed, the original title of this project was *Explaining East Asian Development*. However, the term *development* has important and generally hidden connotations, which need to be addressed. The same caveats apply to the ostensibly clear-cut geographic term *East Asia*. My

use of the term *East Asia* in this book is limited to Japan, China, Taiwan, South Korea, and North Korea. But I intentionally use the term in a geographically delimited way, which I need to explain and justify.

## Change and Continuity in East Asia: Key Concepts

Let's begin with the idea of change, an ambiguous concept at best. Consider the dictionary definition of *change*: "to make or become different." Based on this one definition, I, or anyone else, would find trying to explain change an impossible or, at least, an impossibly vague task. Minimally, I need to specify the type of change with which I am concerned. Thus, I could talk about "economic change," "political change," "social change," and so on. Yet I soon run into the same basic problem: What sort of economic or political or social change am I trying to explain? For researchers and others concerned with explaining or understanding social, political, or economic phenomena, such ambiguity is not a virtue. Of course, I can drill down a little further. Instead of "political change," for example, I might say "democracy," which is a type of political change. On the surface, democracy does seem to be a much more specific concept. Yet I still need to specify what distinguishes a democracy from a non-democracy. Otherwise I would have no basis for asserting a change has occurred. I also need definitional criteria against which to judge if democracy (or any other type of political change) is "weakening" or getting "stronger"; without such definitional criteria, change could easily become a static, as opposed to a dynamic, concept. Similarly, if I am to offer an adequate explanation of a political change such as democracy, I need to provide an equally concrete definition of the factors or variables that create that change. In short, I need to make sure that the **dependent** and **independent variables** in my analysis and discussion are defined with as much clarity and precision as possible.

To sum up, I need to set forth the minimal conditions and boundaries of the changes to be studied in this book. For the most part, I take up this challenge in subsequent chapters. In the examination of the East Asian "miracle" (Chapter 2), for example, I provide a full discussion of the concrete economic changes around which the chapter is organized. For now, then, I use the concept of change only as a generic marker or as a temporary stand-in for a more specific concept. The same is true for the use of the term *continuity*. Unlike the notion of change, however, continuity is an intrinsically less nebulous concept to deal with in the context of this book. Consider, again, a standard dictionary definition: "a state of stability and the absence of disruption." In this view, when I examine continuity in East Asia, I am examining those aspects of economic, political, and social life that have tended to remain relatively stable over time. The most important task, then, is to provide an

adequate description of extant conditions or circumstances. Before I move on, I need to discuss one other concept that is closely associated with change and inversely related to continuity: development.

### *Change and Development*

Change is most often associated with the notion of development. Both terms suggest movement from one condition to another, but *development* connotes a progressive (or positive) change. It also connotes an evolutionary movement from a primitive (i.e., nondeveloped or underdeveloped) state to a higher, more advanced stage. While seemingly innocuous, these two connotations, when put into the larger historical context within which the term first emerged, have made the concept of development extremely controversial. Vincent Tucker (1999) goes to the crux of the issue:

Development is the process whereby other peoples are dominated and their destinies are shaped according to an essentially Western way of conceiving and perceiving the world. The development discourse is part of an imperial process whereby other peoples are appropriated and turned into objects. It is an essential part of the process whereby the “developed” countries manage, control and even create the Third World economically, politically, sociologically and culturally. It is a process whereby the lives of some peoples, their plans, their hopes, their imaginations, are shaped by others who frequently share neither their lifestyles, nor their hopes nor their values. The real nature of this process is disguised by a discourse that portrays development as a necessary and desirable process, as human destiny itself. (p. 1)

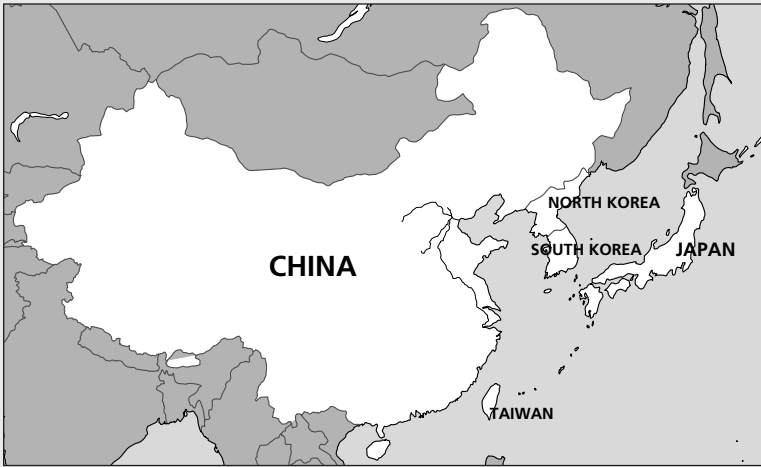
Tucker’s language may seem overstated, but the main point is not particularly controversial: development is an **ethnocentric** concept. That is, the term is defined strictly in Western economic, political, and cultural terms. In other words, the word *development* means capitalist industrialization, democratization, and the unqualified embrace of liberal values. I agree that the concept of development reflects an insidious and potentially destructive form of **ethnocentrism**,<sup>3</sup> which is one reason I avoid—but not altogether eschew—using the term in this book.<sup>4</sup> I do not entirely eschew the concept of development for a simple reason: clearly, the most significant changes in East Asia involve the **Westernization** of the region’s economic and political systems. Thus, much of the attention in this book is centered precisely on the key elements of Westernization: capitalist industrialization and democratization. I more thoroughly discuss these two concepts in subsequent chapters. However, attention must also be given to those areas in which economic, political, and social change has involved a hybridization of Western and East Asian traditions and modes of “development.”

### *What Is East Asia?*

The main title of this book, *Politics in East Asia*, suggests that the concept of East Asia itself is unproblematic. Unfortunately, this is far from true. One general reason is simply that ostensibly geographic labels often carry a great deal of disguised baggage. And, as with the concept of development, this baggage is usually the product of both overt and underlying relations of power. Patrick Ziltener (2007), for example, suggests that the “idea of East Asia as a region has been introduced to the region from the outside, by European colonial powers and the US. It has never been widely used as a self-description” (p. 112). The imposition of geographic labels does not mean that physical geography is irrelevant; East Asia is a case in point (see Figure 1.3). But it does mean that other factors are often at play, as I have already suggested. As Airf Dirlik (1998) bluntly puts it, “to define, as to name, is to conquer” (p. 5). Again, Dirlik’s point may seem to be overstated, but denying that the imposition of a name or label can have important implications is hard. A name implies, in particular, some coherence, commonality, or relationship among the parts that is defined *for* them, rather than *by* them. Consider, on this point, Japan’s insistence on “abandoning Asia, joining the West (Europe)” (*datsu-A nyu-O*) during the Meiji era (Ziltener 2007, p. 112). Being part of Asia during this period consigned Japan to third-rate status, while being part of Europe would have underscored Japan’s “proper place” in the international hierarchy. Ironically, Australia’s more recent efforts to redefine itself as part of Asia—after decades of denying any connection at all to the region (Jupp 1995)—indicates that neither the meaning nor the physical structure of a geographic space is fixed; in the minds of many, Asia has moved—or will eventually move—to center stage in world affairs, and becoming part of this movement behooves hitherto and self-described non-Asian countries.

The foregoing discussion raises a number of important issues—issues that should not be blithely ignored. At the same time, one needs a way to move forward, toward a practical conceptualization, and one can begin by accepting the ideas of T. J. Pempel (2005), who writes, “No self-evident and essentialist East Asia forms a single logical and self-contained regional unit . . . [because] different problems ‘create different regions’” (cited in Ziltener 2007, p. 113). My conceptualization of East Asia, therefore, is not meant to impose an essential and unchanging identity on East Asia, nor is it meant to impose other elemental qualities on any of the units in this region. Rather, it represents a convenient way of demarcating a group of geographically and historically related countries sharing a similar set of concerns. Geography is important, but it certainly is not everything. Geography has *significance* to the extent that it may play a role, although not necessarily a central one, in shaping economic, political, and sociocultural processes in a region. The same can be said of historical forces and experiences and their impact on a particular geographic space or region. In this regard, the conceptualization of East Asia in this book is also based on an assumption that

Figure 1.3 Map of East Asia



particularly strong linkages—some direct and obvious and some indirect and obscure—can be found between and among the five countries on which I focus: Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan, and North Korea. The nature of these linkages varies among these countries, but it reflects a level of intraregional connectedness—which is not the same as affinity or a sense of kinship—that makes the notion of East Asia much more than just an arbitrary geographic label.<sup>5</sup>

Left out of the current conceptualization of East Asia are a number of other countries that occupy the same geographic space, including Mongolia and Russia (the latter of which borders both China and North Korea). Also left out are the ten countries belonging to the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)**—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam—and territories controlled by China, including Hong Kong, Macau, and Tibet (see Figure 1.4). The exclusion of some of these countries is admittedly arbitrary or at least partly so (e.g., Hong Kong is typically considered part of East Asia). But this approach reflects a practical methodological choice, too: to give justice to the East Asian countries I do focus on, I needed to impose a limit. Even so, the conceptualization of East Asia used here provides a good deal of demographic, economic, political, and sociocultural diversity. At the same time, wherever relevant and practical I incorporate discussion of a number of other Asian countries.

Now that I have discussed the core concepts around which this book is organized, I need to take on another basic task, one that centers on *how* to explain

**Figure 1.4 A More Inclusive Map of East Asia**

change and continuity. However, explaining change and continuity in East Asia is not something one just does “off the cuff.” Explanations are not self-evident, especially explanations of complex economic, political, and social phenomena. Neither are explanations generally, if ever, the product of casual observation or facile analysis. Instead, explanations—or at least good explanations—require that one thinks carefully and seriously about theoretical and methodological issues, a task I take up in the following sections.

## How to Study Change and Continuity

Before beginning to study change and continuity in East Asia, a basic question needs to be addressed: What is the best way to analyze these phenomena? That is, how does one go about identifying, understanding, and explaining those forces or factors most important to the processes of change and continuity in



the region? This question is not a simple one. It is also not a question, more importantly, to take lightly or gloss over by making a few cursory comments and then moving on to the more “important stuff.” Although I do not pretend to have a definitive answer, I do intend to provide a systematic, balanced, and theoretically based framework of analysis for addressing the question.

Let’s begin with *theory*, a term that is often misunderstood, especially by anyone who just wants to “get to the facts.” Theory, however, cannot be avoided (see Figure 1.5 for a basic definition). No matter how pragmatic or commonsensical one thinks he or she is, any time a claim or argument is made about a social, political, or economic phenomenon, the maker of the claim or argument is engaged in a process of theorizing. Consider, for a moment, the factors one might focus on if asked to answer the question, “What are the reasons for East Asia’s economic success?” Some readers might emphasize a culture that puts strong emphasis on educational achievement, a strong work ethic, solid ethical values, or a combination of all three. Others might look to the free market as the main reason. If so, they would likely be persuaded by Michael Schuman (2010) of *Time* magazine, who emphatically writes, “All rapid-growth Asian economies—including China’s—succeeded by latching onto the expanding forces of globalization, through *free trade* and *free flows of capital*. South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore may have had active bureaucrats, but the true source of their economic growth was exports manufactured by private companies and sold to the consumers of the world” (emphasis added). Still others might focus on far-sighted but also highly nationalistic and incorruptible political and business leaders who were absolutely committed to achieving rapid industrialization, regardless of the social costs. Or they might argue that the “special relationship” East Asian countries enjoyed with the United States—particularly during the Cold War—made the difference. The list of possible answers, while not quite endless, is cer-

### Figure 1.5 A Basic Definition of Theory

Theory can be defined in a number of ways. For this book’s purposes, I define theory as a simplified representation of reality and a framework of analysis within which facts are not only selected but also interpreted, organized, and fitted together so that they create a coherent whole (Lim 2010). Embedded in this definition are the following key points:

- Theory necessarily simplifies reality.
- Theory helps to determine what facts are important, meaningful, and relevant.
- Theory guides interpretation of the facts. (What do the facts mean?)
- Theory acts as a guide to organize the facts. (How do different facts relate to one another? Which are primary and which are secondary?)
- Theory allows for the development of “whole arguments.”

tainly very long. No matter what the view, however, all possible responses are a product of theory—albeit not necessarily “good theory.”

The preceding paragraph, I should note, provides purposefully oversimplified versions of four very broad theoretical approaches used to explain economic and political change: *cultural*, *liberal*, *statist-institutional*, and *structural*. Each approach emphasizes certain factors—education, values, work ethic, free markets, strong leadership, a special relationship between East Asia and the United States—while simultaneously deemphasizing or dismissing other factors. Put another way, each response posits a causally significant relationship between a specific factor, or a small set of factors, and economic growth. In this regard, one might say that each approach, albeit to varying degrees, offers a competing theoretical perspective on the specific issue of economic growth. The existence of competing perspectives can be confusing, but it also offers an opportunity for better understanding if one begins with the assumption that each competing perspective has something important to say. I began this book with just this assumption, and this assumption, in turn, is the basis for the first part of my “systematic, balanced, and theoretically based framework of analysis.” Specifically, I explicitly adopt a competing-perspectives approach. In this approach, I examine contrasting arguments about major issues in East Asia: economic growth and industrialization, political continuity and change (i.e., democratization), and the dynamics of migration/immigration. Each provides indispensable insights into a proper understanding of continuity and change in East Asia, and thus each needs to be taken seriously. Moreover, the systematic juxtaposition of these competing viewpoints will allow for a more enriching and multidimensional understanding than any single perspective. In the following chapter, I dive headfirst into the competing-perspectives approach.

At the same time, I recognize that a competing-perspectives approach, while valuable, is also potentially very confusing for readers unfamiliar with the theoretical debates on economic and political change. The potential for confusion, not surprisingly, lies in the disagreement—frequently quite vehement and fundamental—among and even within the various perspectives. To put the issue simply, how is the reader or anyone else to know who is right (or which argument is right)? I cannot definitively answer this question in this book. Nor is it a question that I necessarily want to answer. What I can do is to provide, at a general level, a firm and clear basis, first, for understanding what each perspective does and does not address and the conclusions each perspective might reach. One needs to understand not only the strengths of each perspective but also of the weaknesses. In this respect, another overarching goal in this book is to provide, within the framework, a guide for critical thinking and analysis. I want readers, by the time they finish this book, to evaluate the various and varied arguments about change and continuity in East Asian on their own in order to come to their own critically informed conclusions.

Second, I endeavor through this framework to cut through some of the confusion by providing a path toward the synthesis or integration of insights from the competing perspectives. On this point, understanding that the differences among the perspectives are not just skin deep is vital. That is, the perspectives mentioned above do not have only slightly different emphases. Rather, each perspective is premised on very different assumptions both about what constitutes the fundamental processes, forces, or factors at work in the world, and how these processes, forces, or factors function to produce specific outcomes, such as rapid economic growth or democratization. For this reason, one cannot merely and unthinkingly throw together elements of the four perspectives—as many people are tempted to do.

To help illustrate this point, I ask the reader to think again about some of the stylized (or purposely simplified) arguments used above. Economic liberals assume a priori that markets function best when they are left alone. In particular, some economic liberals assert that any outside intervention in the operation of markets can only degrade, and even destroy, efficiency while inhibiting economic growth (this position is most closely associated with **neoliberalism** today). To economic liberals, the key to East Asia's economic growth, therefore, is crystal clear: getting the "fundamentals right," by allowing the forces of supply and demand to operate in an essentially unfettered manner. In sharp contrast, some statist-institutionalist scholars argue that nonmarket (i.e., state) intervention has been the key to East Asian economic success. They argue, more specifically, that East Asian economic success was, in no small measure, a product of state power, first, in building viable and strongly functioning capitalist markets and, second, in making sure business decisions contributed to national economic goals. Completely reconciling these two different arguments, as should be apparent, is not possible: the two arguments—at least in their "pure form"—cannot both be right. One or the other has to give. At the same time, however, some room may exist to link together elements and principles from both arguments—and from structural and cultural arguments—to create a coherent, integrative explanation.

### **Toward an Integrative Framework: The "Constructed Actor" Approach**

So how can the various perspectives be brought together in a coherent and useful fashion? Is this even possible? Obviously, I think it is, although I need to emphasize at the outset that a completely balanced theoretical synthesis is not possible. Greater "theoretical weight" or primacy must unavoidably be assigned to some principles over others. Partly for this reason, any effort to develop a comprehensive and integrated perspective will be subject to criticism. I accept the validity of this criticism, but I also want to emphasize that I see great heuristic

value in making the effort (one basic meaning of *heuristic* is “encouraging a person to learn, discover, understand, or solve problems on his or her own, as by experimenting, evaluating possible answers or solutions” [Dictionary.com]). After all, such an effort requires one to think more clearly, critically, and seriously about both his or her own assumptions and key operating principles and about the assumptions and principles embedded in other perspectives. It also requires one to think more openly by compelling consideration of how the pieces of a complex explanatory puzzle fit—or do not fit, as the case may be—together. In a strongly related vein, it forces one, at least temporarily, to dispense with binary or either-or thinking (e.g., “either markets are all-important or states are,” “either the structures of global capitalism determine economic growth or they do not”). To be sure, binary thinking may not always be wrong, but it often results in overly narrow analysis. My purpose, in short, is not necessarily to replace existing explanations with an all-encompassing integrative one but instead to provoke and challenge readers to think about different “theoretical possibilities.”

With all this in mind, I begin with a seemingly simple concept around which I organize the integrated framework: the constructed actor. The constructed actor is shorthand for a more elaborate notion articulated by Daniel Little (2005), who used the phrase “the structured circumstances of choice of socially constructed actors” (p. 2). A number of critical, and not very obvious, assumptions are embedded in this phrase. Most basically, the phrase emphasizes actors, or individual decisionmakers. In this regard, the constructed actor model begins at the *microlevel*, although Little uses the term *microfoundations*. At the same time, Little portrays the individual as a “socially constituted actor, affected by [a] large current of social facts such as value systems, **social structures**, extended social networks, and the like” (p. 10). In this view, individuals make decisions or choices, and, through these choices, certain outcomes are produced (such as rapid economic growth). Yet these choices are always conditioned or constrained by circumstances outside the direct control of the actor or actors. As Little puts it, his framework “affirms the existence of social constructs beyond the purview of the individual actor or group”; furthermore, these social constructs “have real effects on individual behavior and on social processes and outcomes” (p. 11). This discussion is a bit abstract, but the key point is not complicated: People do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they exist in a world composed of all sorts of political, economic, and social relationships and arrangements and social structures.

Little (2005), I should note, is primarily focused on social constructs (relationships, arrangements, and structures) that exist at the *mesolevel* (see Figure 1.6), specifically institutions and political arrangements (property systems, legal systems, educational systems, political organizations, and the like). In principle, however, both intersubjective and *macrolevel* social constructs—particularly cultural milieus and the structures of global capitalism—can also be included. I argue that both are necessary in the constructed actor framework.

**Figure 1.6 A Basic Analytic Tool: Levels of Analysis**

In the social sciences, analysis is often focused on or located at different levels of abstraction—or levels of analysis—depending on the theoretical orientation or purpose of the researcher. The three most common levels of analysis are the microlevel, the mesolevel, and the macrolevel. For example, if a researcher believes that explanations of social, political, or economic phenomena can be primarily explained by focusing on how individuals interact or on how individuals make decisions, then as described in the table below, the researcher is focused on the microlevel (here the primary **unit of analysis** is the individual). Microlevel analysis assumes that individual actors have a significant degree of agency.

Microlevel (individual)	Mesolevel (interactional)	Macrolevel (structural/systemic)
Focuses on aspects of individual experience and on the impact that experience has on how actors behave and interact with other actors.	Focuses on the social, institutional, cultural, and economic environments or milieus in which individual action takes place.	Focuses on the largest or most significant processes and structures that shape and govern societies and individuals.
Presumes that individual action is largely or at least significantly unstructured, that is, not dependent on external forces that compel individuals to behave in certain ways.	Presumes that individual action is shaped and influenced by social interactions or by social norms, beliefs, practices, and so on. Individuals have agency but are not entirely “free agents.”	Presumes that individual action is profoundly shaped and influenced—and sometimes determined—by overarching forces over which individuals, acting alone or in groups, have limited ability to control.
At the microlevel, the individual is also the primary unit of analysis.	At the mesolevel, society and key elements of society (e.g., social organizations, formal and informal institutions, the state) are the primary units of analysis.	At the macrolevel, “whole systems” are the primary unit of analysis. These whole systems include global capitalism and the international system.

*Source:* Adapted from Scott Schaffer (n.d.).

*Note:* No consensus exists on the dividing line between the meso- and macrolevels. The definition of the macrolevel above, therefore, reflects only one of many possible conceptualizations.

Another important aspect of Little’s (2005) approach (and the constructed actor model) is a focus on the **mutually constitutive** relationship that exists between agents and institutions/structures. So, while institutions, as noted above, have “real effects” on individual behavior, they are also shaped and sustained by individual actions. Little explains the process this way: “Agents create

institutions [and structures]; they support institutions; they conform their behavior to the incentives and inhibitions created by institutions; they defy or quietly defect from norms; they act opportunistically or on principle” (p. 12). More simply, institutions are not independent of human actors, nor do they wholly determine individual behavior. Even more, because institutions (and structures) do not exist independently of human action—because they are constituted by the individuals who participate in them—institutions and structures are not fixed, unchanging entities. Simply put, institutions and structures can and do change over time, which means, in turn, that the choices and opportunities available to actors are never exactly the same between any two periods of time. Thus, the repertoire and implications of institutional choices, say, for Japanese decisionmakers in the mid-1800s were significantly different from those available to Japanese decisionmakers in 1945—or Chinese decisionmakers today. This point is a basic one, but also one that is often forgotten by both novice and seasoned researchers alike.

What does all this mean at a more down-to-earth or practical level? First and most simply, people matter. Thus, the focus needs to remain on individual actors: again, what choices people make and what actions they take matter. I examine cases of individual choices made in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China, and North Korea that have had—and continue to have—far-reaching economic, political, and social effects. Yet one must take a step back from the actors; one cannot, in other words, ignore all those factors and forces that go into shaping an individual’s attitudes, perceptions, values, and beliefs. The cultural and social milieu in which people act and interact also matters. Nor can one ignore the institutional and structural context within which individual decisions are made. To quote Karl Marx ([1852] 2008), “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (p. 15). The already existing circumstances, to repeat, may refer to institutions or to large-scale or macrolevel structures. Macrostructures, such as the system of global capitalism, are undeniably powerful forces in the world.

Structures both enable and constrain: they can give actors more power, or they can erect huge obstacles to the effective exercise of **agency**. As an example, consider how the dynamics and “needs” of global capitalism in the early post-war period might have opened up opportunities for Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan that helped pave the way for their rapid economic ascent. One would, in this regard, be foolish to ignore the structural processes that made East Asia’s upward mobility possible (or at least more possible). I have much more to say on this issue in the next chapter. For my present purposes, the main point to remember is not merely that a reciprocal relationship exists between actors and structures, but that making sense of this relationship requires observers and researchers, as Little (2005) asserts, to “embrace the point that individuals are bearers of social structures and causes” (p. 10).

## Summing Up and Breaking Down the Constructed Actor

The two words in the term *constructed actor* carry a great deal of meaning. In the model in this book, to repeat, actors have agency, which means that they have a capacity to operate independently of the determining constraints of institutions and larger social structures. Still, actors are not free-floating entities. They are, to a significant extent, weighed down by a range of social constructs, which directly and indirectly delimit the choices available to them as actors. Even more, actors themselves are “constructed.” That is, their decisions and actions reflect—often quite deeply and even unknowingly—powerful cultural, institutional, and structural forces, forces that literally shape their very identities. Both the structured circumstances of choice and actors’ identities, I should reemphasize, can vary widely across time and space. More simply, who actors are and what they can (or cannot) do differs from period to period and from place to place. These ideas may be little more than common sense, but they have important theoretical implications. In particular, they likely suggest a great deal of contingency and variability in any social, economic, or political process. And this contingency and variability suggests, in turn, that one needs to be very cautious in putting forth generic or ahistorical explanations of economic (or political or social) change and continuity.

I realize the foregoing discussion is probably much too abstract to make a whole lot of sense right now. As I proceed throughout the book, however, I intend to apply the constructed actor model to the various issues I explore, beginning in Chapter 2, with the economic rise of East Asia (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan). These demonstrations of its use makes the constructed actor model more concrete and more understandable. At the same time, my intention is not to provide a full-blown theoretical and empirical account for each of these topics. One reason for not doing so is strictly practical: it would require a completely separate book or, at the very least, many separate chapters. A second and more important reason as I have already noted is heuristic. In other words, as with the discussion of the competing perspectives, the main goal is to enable readers new to the study of East Asian politics, economy, and society to learn how to theorize, or develop explanatory accounts, on their own. Accordingly, the application of the constructed actor model is, at times, far more suggestive than definitive. I provide avenues for exploration rather than complete explanatory maps. (Although, in the first application of the constructed actor model, in the following chapter, I provide a more detailed discussion.)

## Studying East Asian Development: Methodological Pitfalls and Choices

Explaining change and continuity in East Asia requires more than a discussion and application of theory. One also needs to be cognizant of what researchers



refer to as **method** or methodology. In the social and natural sciences, method is simply the procedures or techniques used to gather, evaluate, and analyze evidence. Despite this very basic definition, *method is vital*. In part, method provides the means for supporting and evaluating theoretical claims and arguments, which also means that it provides a basis for evaluating competing theoretical perspectives. Unfortunately, as with many terms in the social sciences, the word *method* is also the subject of much debate and dispute, both philosophical and practical. The philosophical debate is diverse, but one strand centers on a number of related questions: Are humans capable of producing objective knowledge of the social world? If so, what is the most appropriate way to produce this knowledge? If not, what type of knowledge can be produced? These are important, albeit abstruse, questions, which are best and more appropriately examined elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> For immediate purposes, focusing on the practical—but no less contentious—side of the debate is more constructive, particularly the question, which method should researchers use? This question, too, is regrettably complex, but I simplify the issue in the discussion that follows by proposing a basic methodological “advice column” for novice researchers and students of East Asia. Before tackling that specific issue, however, addressing an important and related question would be useful: What are the pitfalls of using method poorly?

### *Problems of “Bad Method”*

Too often, researchers make serious mistakes because they fail to consider even the most basic methodological principles. For example, both novice and seasoned researchers examining East Asian economic growth and industrialization face a strong temptation to *compare* Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (comparing being a basic methodological strategy in the social sciences). This approach makes sense: after all, all three countries occupy a similar geographic space, all share certain political, social, and cultural characteristics, and—perhaps most importantly—all experienced a similar and similarly rapid process of industrialization and economic growth at about the same time. Since all three countries are “essentially similar,” so the thinking goes, the natural assumption is that one can learn something by comparing them to one another. And one most certainly can. But the critical question is how to go about making this comparison. Should researchers focus only on the similarities? Should they assume that, once a similarity is found among the three countries, it must necessarily be causally significant? Some researchers, in fact, do both. They may look at the three East Asian countries and say, for instance, “Aha! They all have a Confucian heritage, and they all achieved rapid economic growth in the postwar period. So there must be something about **Confucianism** that explains their rapid economic rise.”

At first glance, concluding that an obvious similarity among the three countries is causally connected to their rapid economic rise seems reasonable. Unfortunately, a fundamental problem haunts this type of admittedly stylized,



although not necessarily exaggerated, example. To wit, if all three countries also share a range of other similarities in addition to a shared Confucian heritage, how do researchers know which of the many similarities are causally significant and which are not? How do researchers know if any are? Even more, how can anyone tell if instead of a single similar factor mattering, a combination of similarities interacted in specific ways that led to rapid economic growth? More concretely, what if further analysis showed that each country also had a similar type of “**developmental state**,” or that each is a major exporter, or that each has a generally homogenous population? Any of these similarities could be key, but based on the foregoing comparison, one does not and cannot know which ones. The reason is well known to methodologists. When comparing countries or other units of analysis that share a range of similarities—referred to as “most similar systems” (MSS)—a somewhat counterintuitive requirement must be met: the units must be different in at least a couple of respects. More specifically, a difference must exist with regard to the outcome (i.e., the dependent variable) one is trying to explain, and differences must exist with regard to the presumed cause (i.e., the independent variable). In methodological terms, the important point is that the characteristics the systems share can, in principle, be held constant or loosely controlled for and can therefore be considered irrelevant in explaining the particular social, political, or economic phenomenon that varies between or among the systems. Having controlled for a range of similarities, the researcher can focus on finding the significant dissimilarity (or set of dissimilarities) between or among the systems, which can be put forward as the causal factor or key independent variable. Failing to understand this principle results in bad comparisons.

Badly constructed comparisons, unfortunately, represent only one of many possible methodological problems. Another very common problem, especially among novice researchers, is shallow and **ahistorical analysis**. The example of Confucian culture can be used to illustrate this point, too. When the same careless observers I describe above look at Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, they might notice only the fact that Confucian values are present in each society. From this observation, they may jump to the conclusion that Confucianism plays basically the same role in all three countries, or that it is similarly embedded in their economies, political systems, and various other institutions. More careful and astute observation, however, may reveal significant, even profound, differences in the role Confucianism plays in each society and in the effects it has. Danny Lam and Jeremy T. Paltiel (1994), for instance, provide a narrative that contradicts the conventional view. In particular, they argue that, in Taiwan, the embrace of Confucian orthodoxy is primarily found among the political elite and the owners of large-scale enterprises. In the rest of Taiwanese society, by contrast, Confucian values are not only far less important but are actively rejected. According to the authors, this rejection of Confucian values by ordinary Taiwanese—including owners of and workers in small-scale enterprises—has had important economic implications. As they explain it, “in their market-oriented

behavior, small businesses are inspired by the heterodoxy of Taoism that calls on them to challenge the established order. Freed from the constraints of orthodoxy, small firms challenge segments of industry dominated by vulnerable large-scale enterprises, question the established order of brand name products, and ‘pirate’ know-how and technology” (p. 211). The end result, according to Lam and Paltiel, is a vibrant, hypercompetitive domestic economy—the basis for Taiwan’s amazing economic ascendance.

I examine similar arguments more closely later. For now, just remember that, while Confucian values clearly can be found in Taiwan, only in-depth or on-the-ground analysis can reveal what role these values play within the Taiwanese society and economy. More generally, shallow and ahistorical analysis—that is, analysis that fails to examine, in depth and in detail, the substance of “Confucian” culture in specific historical, sociopolitical, and economic contexts—is likely to lead to unsupported and fully unwarranted generalizations and conclusions. Good historical analysis is a type of **qualitative method**.

### *Method as a Tool*

I realize that the foregoing discussion likely raises as many questions as it answers, but the main point is straightforward: bad method necessarily leads to bad analysis and explanation. In explaining continuity and change (including rapid economic growth) in East Asia, then, the use of “good method” is essential. As I suggested at the outset, in the social sciences especially, identifying a good method, still less the best method, is not a simple matter. Researchers have a seemingly endless number of choices: statistical analysis, comparative historical research, analytical induction, ethnomethodology, framing analysis, content analysis, discourse analysis, the comparative method, and quasi-experimental design, to name just a few. Attempting to wade through the multitude of competing methods would be an overly complicated and probably pointless task for current purposes. Instead, to make this discussion more manageable and useful, I adopt an extremely simplified and pragmatic approach, one that begins with the assertion that methods are simply tools. As tools, some methods are clearly better suited to certain tasks or objectives than others, but a certain number of basic tools and techniques can be used effectively for a wide variety of tasks. I introduce in this chapter a few tools especially appropriate to a novice but also of importance to pretty much any project. Mastering the basic tools provides a foundation for more sophisticated and challenging methodological work later. With this in mind, here are three tools that readers can begin using right away, and which I use throughout this book:

- Descriptive statistics and other quantitative data
- Case-oriented comparisons
- Historical analysis

### *Descriptive Statistics*

A common example of a descriptive statistic is the GDP growth rate, which provides important information about the average and relative performance of an economy and also allows one to discern major trends or patterns. Figure 1.2 was focused on a similar statistic: per capita GDP expressed in international dollars for various countries and selected years between 1950 and 2008. As noted above, these statistics allow one to easily discern that the relative economic performance of Taiwan and South Korea has been remarkable during this period. From these statistics, one also knows that the two countries have reached a level of national wealth that is on par with Western European countries, which, in a discussion of economic development, is a significant outcome. Descriptive statistics, in short, are extremely useful and often necessary to support assertions of fact. They are also widely and publicly available, especially for economic issues. However, understanding their limitations is equally important.

First, while they can indicate that something significant has happened or is happening, they offer little to no information about causes and effects. More concretely, descriptive statistics indicate that a country's economy is expanding at a rapid pace, but they cannot indicate *why*. This is a crucial point to keep in mind. Second, descriptive statistics are, in an important sense, very crude (albeit still useful) measures: they reduce complex social, political, and economic phenomena to a single number or a series of numbers. Third, statistics can be misused or misinterpreted, accidentally or on purpose, and they can be dangerous if not analyzed completely.<sup>7</sup> Fourth, sometimes statistics are subject to serious miscalculation. A particularly relevant example are estimates of China's GDP and the important debate over how to calculate it. Arvind Subramanian (2011), for example, argues that most estimates of China's GDP are far off the mark either because they use the market exchange rate to value goods and services or because they use the wrong starting point for PPP-based calculations. Correcting for these errors, Subramanian argues that China's GDP in 2010 was not \$9.12 trillion as the World Bank estimated (or \$10.1 trillion according to the **International Monetary Fund**, a pretty big discrepancy in itself), but \$14.8 trillion. Subramanian also argues that Chinese officials have been complicit in this underestimation since "China likes to exaggerate its growth rate (to showcase its strength and dynamism) and simultaneously understate its level of GDP (being seen to be poor may have advantages internationally, such as not being expected to contribute financially to global institutions or global **public goods**)." Whether or not Subramanian is right, his warning underscores the care that must be taken when using statistics.

Can the limitations of descriptive statistics—and of quantitative data more generally—be overcome? The short answer is yes. Some scholars would say the best approach would be to use more sophisticated statistical analysis (inferential

as opposed to descriptive statistics). While I agree that inferential statistics have their place, I argue that, for current purposes, a qualitative approach is a much better complement to descriptive statistics. Qualitative research, in general, eschews statistics and numbers for in-depth analysis of whole cases. Perhaps the best model of qualitative research is the case study, or case-oriented comparisons.

### *Case-Oriented Comparisons*

Case-oriented comparisons are holistic comparisons of events, decisions, institutions, policies, outcomes, and the like that typically occur within a specific geographic space (e.g., a country). Many important and even essential reasons can be given for holistic case-based analysis. However, most important among them is that it allows one to deal with causal complexity (Ragin 1987), which might be defined as the combination and interaction of a bunch of different (and varying) conditions producing a specific outcome. Consider, on this point, the process of democratization. How does democratization happen? Is only one factor at play, or are numerous factors coming together in a particular time and place that lead to this type of political change? Almost certainly, the latter is true. And perhaps the best way to deal with that level of complexity is through analysis of cases “as a whole” (Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1997, p. 58). Examining cases as a whole allows researchers to take into account specific historical experiences, institutional and societal configurations, and cultural influences, as well as varying relationships of power at the domestic and transnational levels. The importance of all this will become more apparent as I proceed, so for now, just keep in mind that case-oriented analysis is very different from variable-oriented or statistical analysis.

Comparing cases is equally important. Most basically, comparisons bring a critical disciplinary element to our analysis. Recall the example I used earlier about the supposed role of Confucianism in East Asia’s rapid industrialization. If a researcher looks only at one country or case, say Japan, and concludes that Confucian values played a central and even primary role, assessing the validity of this conclusion is very difficult, if not impossible—that is, the researcher cannot know if the argument is right. By examining postwar Japan in relation to other cases, however, the researcher is immediately given a stronger basis for evaluation. Even the addition of just one more case study (Taiwan) allows the researcher to see that Confucian culture has not played the same role everywhere. The in-depth analysis of both countries and societies makes this conclusion possible by giving the researcher a more comprehensive and deeper (i.e., a qualitative) understanding of the individual cases.

“Comparing cases,” however, does not always mean direct comparisons. In the example from the preceding paragraph, the researcher does not necessarily have to directly compare Japan to Taiwan; instead, the principal aim might be, say, to assess the impact of Confucian values on economic growth. To

accomplish this goal, the researcher might first carefully examine the case of Japan in its own right. After completing the analysis of Japan, the researcher turns his or her attention to Taiwan, again looking at Taiwan as an individual case. Once the two case studies are complete, the researcher could compare the results of the analysis. Are the results similar or are there significant differences? What do the similarities or differences in results suggest about the relationship of Confucianism to economic growth? I realize that the distinction between directly comparing cases, on the one hand, and comparing results from individual case studies, on the other hand, may be confusing. The key point, however, is fairly simple: cases can be compared in several ways, and not all involve a direct comparison of Case A to Case B.

I could say much more about case-oriented comparative analysis, but I want to keep this discussion as uncomplicated as possible. Nonetheless, especially in light of the foregoing example, concluding this section with a brief overview of two basic approaches in comparative analysis would be useful. I have already introduced one, namely, the MSS design. Keep in mind, as I present these two strategies, that they underlie a lot of actual research, sometimes explicitly but often implicitly. Keep in mind, too, that awareness of the logical principles upon which comparison is based is crucial. Failing to do so generally results in “bad comparisons.”

*MSS design.* To most easily understand the logic behind this approach, consider a set of identical twins. Identical twins obviously share an extremely wide range of genetic similarities, and they also typically share a range of social-environmental similarities, assuming they grow up in the same household. Thus, identical twins can be thought of as exemplars of MSS. Yet, as is frequently the case, identical twins will exhibit differences, both minor and major, over time and sometimes even at birth. When an observable and significant difference occurs between the twins (or MSS) such as illness or disease (e.g., arthritis, breast cancer, multiple sclerosis, or diabetes), the main task is to find out what factor or factors (the independent variable) might have caused one twin to develop the disease. In this real-world scenario, one can assume that the many similarities between the twins are irrelevant to the explanation; the similarities, in short, can be eliminated from the analysis (this is the same point I made earlier). Elimination of similarities allows for a more focused examination of the phenomenon or outcome the researcher is trying to explain.

As I suggested above, though, some studies of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are seriously flawed from a methodological standpoint because they assume the three countries are MSS but only search for similarities among the three. Does all this mean that the MSS design is unusable in studies of change and continuity in East Asia? The short answer is no. As I discuss and highlight in subsequent chapters, many opportunities exist in which an MSS design can be fruitfully used in a study of change and continuity in East Asia. One of these

is the “within-case comparison” (which is a misnomer, since two cases are used). Briefly put, a within-case comparison takes the same basic unit but then divides it into two separate cases based on the added dimensions of time and change. Consider this example: Between 1948 and 1960, South Korean economic growth was anemic. From 1961 to 1987, by contrast, the country grew at a dramatically faster pace. These two timespans provide a near-ideal basis for an MSS comparison because of the strong “variance on the dependent variable” (that is, the outcome I am interested in explaining—the rate of economic growth—is very different between the two periods). The question then becomes, what else changed between the two periods? The answer to this question could go a long way toward providing an explanation for the country’s economic transformation. Of course, I am not limited to just the single issue of economic development. Other important aspects of change and continuity can be found in South Korea and East Asia more generally, for which a comparison based on an MSS design could be extremely valuable.

*Method of agreement.* The method of agreement, which is a comparative strategy described first by John Stuart Mill in 1843 but still used today is very simple (see Mill [1843] 1967). It can be best understood through an example. Suppose a researcher is interested in explaining instances of successful mass uprising (the type that recently occurred in North Africa and the Middle East). Now consider this list of possible causes:

- Long-standing economic malaise with attendant problems (e.g., high unemployment and underemployment, low incomes, and pervasive poverty)
- Persistent and rising levels of socioeconomic inequality
- Emergence of strong, class-based identities in the working and middle classes
- Splits within the ruling elite
- Loss of international support
- Emergence of prodemocratic “mass culture”
- Increasing levels of urbanization, education, and social activism
- Aging dictator
- Weak military or independent military

The basic strategy in the method of agreement is to find commonalities among the cases under examination. Do any of the factors mentioned below appear in all cases? If so, the researcher can tentatively conclude that the common factors help to explain a common outcome. On the surface, this conclusion is reasonable, but the researcher needs to be very careful. As Charles Ragin (1987) points out, the method of agreement can lead to faulty empirical generalizations for two reasons. First, a cause-and-effect relationship cannot be firmly established. Second, “the method of agreement is completely incapacitated by multiple

causation” (p. 37). For example, from the list of reasons above, a successful mass uprising may be the result of either Factor 5 or Factor 6, or the presence of Factor 5 or Factor 6 and a third contingent factor, such as an economic crisis or natural disaster.

The method of agreement is a popular method of comparison and is often used in comparisons—usually implicitly—of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. It is a viable substitute for the MSS design, but it should never be relied upon as an exclusive method of analysis for the reasons just stated in the preceding paragraph. Instead, the method of agreement might be best employed in conjunction with other methods or as a starting point of analysis.

### *Historical Analysis*

Historical analysis begins with the premise that what happened in the past continues to affect what happens today. Even more, how and when things happened in the past—the sequence in which particular events unfolded, when specific institutions were first created, the historical timing of large-scale processes (such as capitalist industrialization), and so on—are often key to explaining contemporary outcomes and processes. Thus, to adequately explain East Asia’s rapid economic ascent or the manner in which political change came to the region, one would likely have to know about the specific histories of each country. Why did Japan become the first non-Western nation to successfully industrialize in the late nineteenth century? Almost certainly, its industrialization had something to do with more than two centuries of centralized political rule and the bureaucratization and professionalization of the government structure—historical features that stayed largely in place in the postwar period. As a further issue of interest, why were South Korea and Taiwan able to reproduce Japan’s economic success? Here, one might point to over four decades of Japanese colonial rule—a period of time in which the social, political, and economic landscapes of both countries were completely reconfigured by the Japanese. What role did the particular historical configuration of the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union play in the process? This question highlights the importance of timing: East Asia’s postwar economic rise, some argue, is at least partly a function of the Cold War structure. On this point, consider what the end of the Cold War has meant for still-poor countries today.

Historical analysis requires the researcher to move well beyond a mere listing of historical events and processes. History, in this regard, cannot be treated as a static or dead set of facts. Nor is history simply a well of wisdom—an example of which can be found in the oft-quoted statement of George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Historical analysis, instead, treats history as a process and as an integral part of the present. This approach, in turn, requires that a researcher adopt a long view, especially in the specific cases I address in this book. In other words,



historical analysis compels examination of cases over long stretches of time, to trace how particular events or issues unfolded and how they influenced and shaped societies.

## Conclusion

I have covered a lot of admittedly abstract, academic, and even abstruse material in this chapter. Some risk is involved in providing such a broad overview in a book meant for students engaged or interested in **area studies**, if only because those who want to learn about the specific history, politics, geography, culture, and so forth, of particular regions (such as East Asia) will be immediately bored or turned off by a long-winded discussion of concepts, theory, and method. But the risk is well worth taking, and even necessary, for reasons I have already made clear. Even more, a focused discussion of concepts, theory, and method will make the study of East Asia more interesting and stimulating, since it seamlessly leads those interested in East Asia to think more seriously about how to relate experiences in the region to broader events and processes throughout the world. It engenders more open and critical thinking about economics, politics, and social change and continuity in general. Ultimately, this deeper examination is my overarching goal.

## Notes

1. In South Korea, each time a change in leadership occurred between 1948 and 1987, a new republic was declared; after the 1986 elections, however, this practice was abandoned.

2. Some examples of books on regionalism in East or Northeast Asia include *Cross Currents: Regionalism and Nationalism in Northeast Asia*, edited by Gi-wook Shin and Daniel Snider (2007), *Regionalism and Globalization in East Asia: Politics, Security, and Economic Development* by Mark Beeson (2007), *Asia's New Regionalism* by Ellen Frost (2008), and *The Making of Northeast Asia* by Kent Calder and Min Ye (2010).

3. Some scholars go further and argue that the term *development* not only represents a “particular form of ethnocentricity [but] is also closely linked to racist theories” (Mehmet 1995, p. 90).

4. A better approach would, of course, be to come up with an alternative concept. But this task would be extremely difficult to accomplish. As Munck (1999) explains, “the language of development is all-pervasive . . . [and] consequently it is most difficult for alternative conceptions to break out of the prison of that language” (pp. 202–203). Indeed, Munck himself, while devoting an entire chapter to the possibilities of alternative conceptions, concludes by suggesting that the task ahead is “to *imagine* a postdevelopment era that avoids likewise the restrictions of modernism and the excesses of anti-modernism” (p. 208; emphasis added). In other words, he implicitly admits that a viable alternative to the concept of development does not exist.



5. According to one study, only 26 percent of Japanese and 30 percent of mainland Chinese considered themselves to be East Asian. On the other hand, 77 percent of Koreans thought of themselves as East Asian (cited in Ziltener 2007, p. 112).

6. One nicely balanced and fairly accessible discussion of the philosophical issues surrounding method in the social sciences can be found in Sayer (1992, see especially Chapter 2).

7. For a general discussion on the misuse of statistics, see Dodhia (2007).