

Saadia M. Pekkanen, ed.. *Asian Designs: Governance in the Contemporary World Order*. Cornell Studies in Political Economy Series. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016. 400 pp. \$89.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-0051-4.

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Asian Designs, edited by Saadia M. Pekkanen, is a collection of well-organized essays analyzing contemporary mechanisms of Asian governance. Each chapter offers issues-based analysis of existing governing institutions and articulates the domestic and regional factors determining institutional structures. In many cases, chapters also offer insight into which existing institutional types are, or potentially would be, best suited to the task of regional governance. Structurally, this book is divided into sections focusing on economics, traditional security, and human security, each of which are easily navigable for the reader.

The introduction to *Asian Designs* recognizes the existing lack of a “uniform rubric for understanding the wide variety of institutional types across different domains” in Asia (p. 2). To remedy this, it establishes its own rubric of governing types that labels institutions as having either “hard” or “soft” rules and “formal” or “informal” institutional structures. These four points, while seemingly simplistic, offer enough flexibility to meaningfully categorize institutions without being either too vague or too specific to the point of irrelevance. While I am hesitant to endorse the book’s broad claim that the typology covers all possible instances of governance in the region, it is certainly adequate to draw general conclusions

and gain important insights into the development of Asian governing structures.

There are several stand-out features in this solid collection. First, from start to finish, this book is well written. The narrative progresses quickly and is quite engaging. This is due to the book’s balance between larger theoretical concepts and the grittier on-the-ground approach to analysis that offers interesting and realistic insights that bolster the larger typological claims established in the introduction.

Second, each essay clearly and effectively engages with the analytical framework established in the introductory chapter. Many edited volumes suffer from a lack of coherence as individual authors pursue their own analytical preferences. This consistency speaks to the diligence of both the authors and the editor in ensuring coherence across chapters. Such adherence does not limit the liberty of individual authors to both challenge and expand on the framework in the introduction and several authors make additional valuable contributions.

There are a few standout essays that deserve specific mention. For example, chapter 9 on health institutions in Asia deftly employs country-specific cases that add valuable additional layers of analysis. This particular essay does an excellent

job of noting that decentralization at the national level (in the case of Thailand) was a primary driver of why national health institutions were largely informal. This illustrates that, for many national and regional institutions, structure is not driven by ideology (i.e., the ASEAN or “Asian-way”) but is instead driven by the level of centralization in national governing structures. Chapter 10, which examines environmental governance, is notable for highlighting the practical constraints on institutional development present in many Asian countries. It also contributes interesting arguments as to why weak civil society, weak epistemic communities, and a lack of consensus on scientific data make it extremely difficult to develop formal institutions adhering to hard rules. In the conclusion to the collection, the editor of the volume also self-reflectively notes the limitations of the framework and comments that “the IR [international relations] field needs better situational and evolving awareness of the internal realities of the countries across Asia” (p. 236). This collection is a solid step in the right direction.

The final strength is this book’s direct challenge to Western notions that hard rules and formal institutions are the best forms of governance. Various chapters highlight that the “norm” of such institutions is actually an exception only rarely seen outside of Europe and North America. The conclusion reiterates this point by noting that the large majority of institutions in Asia remain informal and adhere to soft rules. As chapter 8 on human rights argues, a lack of institutionalization does not indicate a lack of seriousness and current institutions are reasonable given the evolving political climate, weak state capacity, complex domestic politics, and the varying strengths of in-state civil society actors. Pekkanen goes so far as to note that “hardening rules and formalizing organizational structures is not the panacea for all problems in the international system and may have unintended consequences” (p. 241).

The biggest missed opportunity for this collection is that some authors do not delve into the future of institutions, clear or otherwise, for their respective topics. As noted above, some do so to great effect but there are a few chapters that shy away from drawing conclusions concerning the future of governance in their respective areas—including failing to articulate why changes are not likely to occur.

What other criticisms I have of this collection are mild and based largely on the need for some clarification of scope. While the title indicates that this book focuses on Asian governance, and the included database includes all of Asia, the individual chapters are largely focused on China, Japan, South Korea, and to a lesser extent India. This is only a minor criticism, and some essays, such as chapter 6, focusing on the Asian space rivalry, do an excellent job of placing largely nationalistic politics into broader regional perspectives. There is also some confusion as to analytical scope—with one chapter using East Asia as a catchall phrase for Asia in general.

This book concludes, rightly so, that Asian states are as actively engaged in institutions as other states, that European-style institutions should not be held up as the benchmark for institutional effectiveness, and that “multi-style governance” is the order of the day (p. 226). It also offers a plethora of follow-up research opportunities, the most obvious of which is the creation of the ASIABASE-1. This table is a list of all the regional institutions as defined by the nine expert authors of this book. Relatively exhaustive, ASIABASE-1 provides a good starting point for scholars to discern dominant institutional types by region and issue area and to look for regional trends in governance (beyond what is discussed in this volume).

I am impressed by *Asian Designs* and would highly recommend it to scholars and students of Asian regionalism. Well written, the entire collection moves along smoothly and comes to an artic-

ulate and satisfying conclusion, with informed suggestions for future research. Instead of offering a reiteration of existing knowledge, it offers new insights and evidence into explaining current forms of Asian governance and makes valuable steps toward understanding and predicting future governing forms.

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