

Book Review: Governance in Pacific Asia: Political Economy and Development from Japan to Burma

by blog admin

October 16, 2012

In his latest book, **Peter Ferdinand** discusses the increasing economic integration of the Pacific Asian region as well as its impact on global affairs. **Kent Deng** is impressed by the breadth of the book's coverage and the way it rethinks the once narrowly conceived boundaries of Asia.



Governance in Pacific Asia: Political Economy and Development from Japan to Burma. Peter Ferdinand. Continuum. February 2012.

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The notion of Asia has been drastically broadened since the rise of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), China and India since the later part of the 20th century. Prior to this, Asia and more specifically, East Asia claimed a prominent share of the development literature. However, the term Asia and East Asia had become nearly synonymous with Japan and the four 'tiger-economies' – South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. This seemed conceptually convenient not only because they are all Asian but also 'Confucian' and capitalist. This grouping of countries persisted despite the fact that they are all scattered off-shore or along sea coasts, and their aggregate population constitutes a mere minority in Asia.



Peter Ferdinand's *Governance of Pacific Asia* has come at a time where there is a great need for a fresh vision on the continent's growth and development in light of a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes 'Asia'. To a great extent, that Asia which we are now facing is qualified as a mini world: It has most of the world's main religions (if one stretches the definition): Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism and Confucianism; it contains all sorts of localised resources endowments: coal deposits in China, timber supply in Southeast Asia, and high-skilled workers in Hong Kong and Singapore; it has many parallel modes of production from hunting and gathering in tropical jungles, ice-farming on terraced paddies to dust-free production lines for super-fast computer chips; it also has the entire line of evolution of services from street-corner food stands to bullet trains and posh hotels in neon-lit skyscrapers.





It is a formidable challenge for any individual to make a good sense out of such a collage of extremes. In this regard, Ferdinand's book is very timely. In many ways, his book serves as a mini-encyclopaedia. He tackles a breathtakingly wide spectrum of 18 political units on the western side of the Pacific: from birth rates to internet, literacy to pollution, urbanisation to inequality, import substitution to export-oriented industrialisation, militocracy to democracy, and from regionalism to globalisation. Ferdinand sets a geographical boundary at the Malaysian state of Malacca; everything else inside that boundary serves as a legitimate target for scrutiny.

But such a huge matrix of topics does not prevent the book from data-richness. Political units are

purposely lined up for a systematic comparison with their growth rates, law and order, economic openness, income distribution, government inputs, political freedom and rights, corruption, and so forth. In addition, a wide range of works have been consulted for a comprehensive survey which leads to a pan-Asian mega-narrative.

The main theme of the book is change in Asia. Although changes and experiments in post-war Asia have not all been positive and Pareto optimal, namely official corruption (Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, and contemporary China), racial discrimination (Japan, Malaysia, and Indonesia), bloodshed of civil wars (Vietnam and Cambodia), political violence, poverty and starvation (Mao's China and North Korea), there has been a clearly identifiable mainstream towards political, social and economic modernity. The author also indicates, implicitly at least, that all changes have been predominantly decided by a tiny minority, often on the top, in Asian society.

Rightly, in the context of changes in Asia, the author points out the "China Factor" which has been upsetting the old equilibrium in post-war Asia. Granted China was once the regional hegemon (until *circa* 1800) and China has just resumed its position as the largest economy inside Asia, is Asia going to be moulded by another tribute system with China on the top? Such speculations have produced all sorts of scenarios in light of the current global rush for territory-cum-resources. China's high input production system and its inevitable outward search for resources have triggered a string of, often re-emptive, actions from its Asian neighbours including Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines. Such quarrels have made China more or less friendless in the Pacific Rim.

The author keeps a close eye on the issue of governance as the book title suggests: domestic governance of society and the economy inside nation-states, international governance between states in Asia (e.g. ASEAN + 3, AFTA) and beyond (e.g. APEC, T20). More interestingly, the author identifies the difference between "governance for the sake of it" (to maintain legitimacy, political and ideological stability) and "governance for something greater" (to pursue economic growth and social development). After an in-depth discussion of a "predatory state" and a "developmental state", an array of good practices has also been singled out which, predictably, includes the usual suspect of "political control for economic efficiency."

The greatest contribution of this book is to revisit the question of what has made Asia 'Asian' and why. Our conventional wisdom is to have an international benchmark (often based on Western Europe and North America) and a long checklist, anything missing in Asia from that list is considered Asian. This book tells us that in fact cultural, political and economic differences inside Asia are often much greater than those inside the Western world. Besides, the legacy of western colonisation, a fate only Thailand and China managed to avoid, has remained highly visible in many parts of Asia, and so is the American presence in the Pacific. Consequently, the concept of 'Asia', or the concept of 'something Asian', has remained as elusive as ever. If so, what really matters for us is Asian's past track record and current trajectory of growth and governance.

The only thing that has remained tacit is the horror of the Second World War that has scarred Asia permanently, which in turn determines to a great extent how Asian countries behave today. What has been haunting Asia is Japan's war atrocities when its Imperial armed forces swept most part of the Pacific Asia in the name of 'Asia for Asians' and the 'Great East Asian Sphere of Co-prosperity'. It will be naïve to assume that time has already healed that wound. Here, what separates Asia and the West is that much of Asia sees Japan as a war villain and has not forgiven its war crimes while the West sees Japan as a war victim due to Hiroshima and Nagasaki and has thus pardoned it. This has made Japan perpetually double faced when dealing with the rest of Asia and the West. That point has unfortunately not been brought up by Ferdinand, but this is only a minor defect.

On balance, this is a very readable book for those inside and outside academia who desire a better sense of the main players and factors that will continue to shape Asia as the new powerhouse of the world economy.

Dr. Kent Deng is Reader in Economic History at the LSE and FRHistS. He teaches economic changes, growth and development in East and Southeast Asia from *circa* 1500 to the present day. He publishes widely on China's very long-term history over two millennia, including the literati, peasantry, merchants, artisans, demography, currencies, property rights, taxation, knowledge transfer, market expansion, reforms and state governance. His most recent book, *China's Political Economy in Modern Times: Changes and Economic Consequences, 1800–2000* (Routledge, 2011) deals with state-building and its economic consequences. [Read more reviews by Kent.](#)

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