

Decentralization and Subnational Politics in Asia

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Scholarship on decentralization and subnational politics in Asia is burgeoning, with increasing works on the subject produced by researchers within the broader Asia-Pacific region, in addition to the scholarship coming from researchers based in North America, Europe, and Australia. Reflective of heterogeneity in the Asian cases – from some of the world’s geographically smallest states to the two largest populations on earth – the research agenda on decentralization in Asia covers a wide range of topics, including civil conflict and peacebuilding, ethnic and religious influences on electoral politics, and the causes and consequences of regional disparities in economic growth and capacity. Yet, much of this work remains focused on single case studies and heavily driven by specific topics in the political economy of development. Increased production of and attention to region-oriented and global datasets that include Asian cases would result in more comprehensive scholarly understanding of regional-level political processes and outcomes.

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The world subregions of Northeast Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia are home to more than half of the world's population. Many of the countries in these regions are sufficiently large in geography and population to encompass large swaths of Europe within each of their national borders. Despite this, and the companion reality that such large countries tend to necessitate (if not embrace) decentralized forms of governance, there has been limited engagement of the regions' cases in broader discussions of decentralization within political science. Though recent attention to some of the most prominent cases of decentralized governance has emerged in the past two decades – notably with respect to China, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines – there remains a gap between those who study decentralization in Asia and those whose geographic gaze is trained elsewhere.

The space between scholarship on decentralization and subnational politics inside and outside of Asia does not derive from an absence of decentralized authority in the region. Asian nations have been susceptible to the same pressures as much of the Global South during the past three decades of development agency fascination with and attention to decentralized forms of governance. Many countries in the region have been recipients of aid from development agencies and/or multilateral institutions, and thus subsequently subjected to programmes designed to devolve authority from central governments to subnational and local levels (White and Smoke 2005). As elsewhere around the world, experimentation with decentralization across Asia has produced mixed results; for each modest success story in one policy domain in one country, there is a counter-narrative of failure in another.

Given the diversity within the region, and the relatively weak state capacity in many Asian countries, such conclusions about the heterogeneous success of decentralization programmes are unsurprising. Part of this derives from the sheer size of the region, where more than 50% of the world's population resides in territory that spreads from the Pacific Ocean to Europe's doorstep. Economic heterogeneity across the region is high: two Asian

cases are members of the OECD (Japan and South Korea), two are among the world's top ten countries in GDP per capita (Brunei Darussalam and Singapore), and two are the world's second and fifth largest economies (China and India); at the same time, the region also boasts some of the poorest countries in the world (e.g. Afghanistan, East Timor, and Papua New Guinea). Of the ten largest countries in Asia by population – Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam – only Bangladesh does not score above 0.5 (on a scale of 0 to 1) on at least one of Alesina et al.'s 2003 ethnic, linguistic, or religious fractionalization measures.¹ The region is so physically large that it spans five distinct subregions and ten timezones.

Thus, it is paramount that a research agenda on the relationship between politics and decentralization's shape, causes, consequences, and conditions take place in conversation with the topic on a more regionally integrated and global scale than it has previously. Given the many common pressures, influences, and characteristics among Asian countries, there are likely to be many lessons learned from increasing the amount of systematic and cross-temporal intra-region analysis. Yet, given the diverse decentralized structures across the region, there are likely a number of lessons that comparisons to other countries in other regions might yield as well. Without a greater emphasis on collaborative efforts, such research and associated findings will remain elusive.

¹ Given that the source from which these measures are coded is the Encyclopaedia Britannica, they are almost certainly undercounting what linguistic scholars believe to be the extent of language and dialectic heterogeneity in most Asian nations.

For practical reasons, scholarship on 23 countries in Northeast, South, and South Asia will be the focus of attention in this chapter.² In the next section, I briefly outline the major themes that dominate the literature on decentralization and subnational politics in Asia, paying close attention to the cases that receive the greatest scholarly attention. Then, I highlight the trends and key challenges facing scholars embarking on this work, drawing attention to issues in data access that limit the generalizability of much of the current work. Finally, I offer suggestions for future approaches to research on the topic. There is a lot to learn from the experience of Asian countries with respect to decentralization, and greater collaboration can produce scholarship that spans across subregional and regional boundaries and contributes to both more nuanced and more generalizable findings on the subject.

Has it worked? Mixed evidence from Asian decentralization

The recent literature on decentralization and subnational politics in Asia is characterized by a number of different themes, many of which reflect trends in the broader comparative literature on decentralization. One of the most common themes focuses on the relationship between decentralization and governance, with increasing attention to the links, both theoretical and empirical, between decentralization and distributive politics. A second theme addresses the association between decentralization and subnational politics, highlighting the evolution of political parties and identity politics at subnational and national levels. The final

² This chapter excludes studies of Western and Central Asia, which tend to occupy their own band of scholarship on the Arab Middle East, in the case of the former, and Post-Soviet space, in the case of the latter. Some disciplines includes these within the broader remit on ‘Asia,’ but for political scientists the socio-political distinctions often render these two Asian subregions as effective world regions unto themselves.

theme tackles the potential for decentralization and subnational politics to serve as cause and/or consequence of political violence, civil conflict, and secession. Many of these themes lead back to increasing pressures for recentralization within Asia, which often results from functional responses to inter-group conflict or pressures by rent-seeking elites. While often written by scholars working in different disciplinary fields or from distinct empirical perspectives, a number of common conclusions emerge from a survey of this literature.

Decentralization & governance

Attention to the relationship between decentralization and governance spans nearly the entire developing world, and has dominated scholarly and policy-making attention in Asia for the better part of the past 40 years. Resting on a series of arguments as to the improved efficiency and effectiveness of local self-government, most early work on the subject emerged from within the broader confines of development economics and public administration.

Eventually attention turned to the relationship between decentralization and democracy, particularly in the context of local accountability and responsiveness. From this emerged two key expectations: 1) more decentralized states would produce more accountable leaders and thus better governance; and 2) more decentralized states would produce more responsive leaders and thus better provision of welfare and public goods. A corollary to both expectations is that more decentralized states would lead to better economic development as less constrained leaders of subnational units “experimented” with innovative development policies and programmes. Three decades of evidence from Asia suggest a wide range of caveats and conditions under which these expectations can be met.

It is true that many decentralized Asian countries have improved access to basic infrastructure, goods, and services, though isolation the positive effect of decentralization has been difficult. Since decentralization in many Asian countries occurred alongside or shortly

after the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals, improvement in the delivery of public health has been a key area of concern for scholars of decentralization and welfare provision. Here the record is quite mixed, with evidence of both a positive effect of decentralization (Regmi et al. 2009) and a negative impact (Langran 2011; Hipgrave, Anderson, and Sato 2019). In particular, decentralization is often not the primary driver of (lack of) improvement in areas such as maternal or child health. Instead, the effect of decentralization is likely to be conditioned by other factors, such as subnational political representation (Kumar and Prakash 2017), coordination across different levels of government (La Vincente et al. 2013; Lakshminarayanan 2003), variation in local governance capacity (Halimatusa'diyah 2019), and the specific treatment under study (Maharani and Tampubulon 2015).

Particularly in the Chinese and Vietnamese cases, debates have proven somewhat inconclusive as to the degree to which decentralization actually encouraged or permitted policy innovation that led to both countries' stunning economic growth in the 1990s and 2000s (Malesky and London 2014). In the Vietnamese case, scholars focused on the curious occurrence of "fence-breaking," in which nearly all provincial actions were de facto in nature and yet highly effective in areas such as land titling (Malesky 2008; Van Arkadie and Mallon 2003; Van Arkadie et al. 2010). In the Chinese case, disagreement centered on the role of political factionalism versus a specialized form of fiscal federalism that actually permitted experimentation at the subnational level (Cai and Triesman 2006; Montinola, Qian, and Weingast 1995; Xu 2011).

Decentralization & political representation

Studies of multi-level governance, federalism and decentralization have focused on explaining the nature of political party conduct, as well as party system fragmentation and

development, at the sub-national level. While the underlying theories originate and then are tested on primarily Western European and North American cases, in recent years a number of studies have begun to shed light on the relationship and emergent tensions between central and subnational interest in electoral politics within Asia. As many of the Asian cases have only democratized since the beginning of the Third Wave, the processes and outcomes associated with decentralization indicate high degrees of variation in the success of self-government mechanisms from a representation and accountability standpoint.

Among the more common findings in this literature is that rent-seeking and resource capture is high among subnational and local elected officials in more decentralized states such as Indonesia (Aspinall and Fealy 2003; Mietzner 2014) and the Philippines (Atkinson, Hicken and Ravanilla 2015; Fafchamps and Labonne 2014; Hutchcroft 2012). One likely cause of this, which reinforces the problem of rent-seeking, is that subnational and local politics have become increasingly personalized and party systems more fragmented in these countries over the course of the first decades of democratic decentralization (Tomsa 2014). Thus, young, relatively weak democratic institutions prove susceptible to elite influence that undermines the good governance and accountability aspect that decentralization is expected to provide.

In contrast, the South Korean case demonstrates a distinct path, taking the country from grassroots movements and local pressures to more extensive nationwide decentralization reforms (Bae and Kim 2013). This in turn has led to a system in which local elites foster closer ties with constituents, helping them translate local incumbency status to an electoral advantage at national level elections (Kang, Park, and Song 2018), and where trust in government emerges as a byproduct of fiscal decentralization (Kim, Lee, and Kim

forthcoming). Yet South Korea remains one of the less decentralized states in Asia, and so it is unclear the degree to which these findings are reflective of broader trends in the region.³

Decentralization & political conflict

Pressures for self-governance can be resolved contentiously and peacefully, but most national governments fear the form of self-governance demands that may turn violent. Such conflicts can be highly destabilizing and tend to be among the more intractable than other forms of civil conflict. As a response to conflict, decentralization may be seen as a way to achieve democratic consolidation by sharing power with local authorities (Diamond and Tsalik 1999), even as it may also result in minorities becoming more marginalized or vulnerable within the context of a divided society (Lijphart 2004; Reilly 2001). Decentralization may initially serve to reduce social conflict by more efficiently allocating economic resources (Horowitz 2006), but subsequently lead to greater sovereignty demands by empowering subnational units and providing the resources and justification to mobilize for even more self-determination (Brancati 2006). In other words, dispersion of authority and resource control may lead down a “slippery slope.” This is reflected in the central Chinese state’s perspective regarding the Tibetan and Uiyghur populations in two autonomous regions, which is best characterized by a policy of centralization, standardization, and assimilation (Sheng 2009).

Asymmetric forms of power dispersion were originally posited to encourage this “secession potential” (Tarlton 1965, 873), a conception that has gained political traction

³ There is evidence in the Philippines that good governance demonstrations at the local level can increase political interest and participation (Capuno and Garcia 2010), but little systematic evidence as to the strength of this finding or to what levels of subnational government it applies.

during debates in recent years about the position and pressures for greater autonomy in ethnically or economically distinct regions such as Catalonia, Quebec, and Scotland. Within Asia, asymmetries are actually quite common (Shair-Rosenfield, Marks and Hooghe 2014; Hooghe et al. 2016). For example, many of India's states hold special agreements with the central government and result in extremely diverse state-level party systems and levels of public expenditures (Chhibber and Nooruddin 2004; Saez and Sinha 2010).⁴ Indonesia and the Philippines have highly evolved systems of power dispersion to standard subnational entities (e.g. provinces) combined with specialized power dispersed to particular entities outside the context of general decentralization (e.g. Aceh and Mindanao) (Buendia 2002). These asymmetries appear to have an ameliorating effect on the potential for conflict reemergence (Bertrand 2007), though may themselves encourage new grievances from indigenous groups that fail to receive greater control over their self-government (Duncan 2007).

Recentralization

While earlier work focused on the reasons that decentralization was undertaken and in what context it took hold, more recent efforts to roll back decentralization reforms in Asia have captured scholarly attention. "Recentralization," as it is commonly known, appears to stem from a number of different sources rather than as a result of unilateral central edicts (Malesky and Hutchinson 2016). One common path is pursued by subnational elites at provincial or first-order administrative levels, either in an attempt to safeguard existing resources (Mutebi

⁴ Joshi (2013) confirms that the local participatory model in India does not produce improvements in public service delivery, especially in marginalised sections of villages where women and backward castes remain underrepresented.

2004; Shair-Rosenfield 2016) or seek a rebalancing of resources between themselves and second-order administrative levels (Ostwald, Tajima and Samphantharak 2016). Another case revisits to a familiar rationale for decentralization: where governing inefficiencies are not reduced by decentralization, experimentation with recentralization (via retrenchment of provincial authority) is one potential solution (Malesky, Nguyen and Tran 2014). As with decentralization, recentralization in Asia appears somewhat case and context specific.

Trends and challenges in studying decentralization and subnational politics in Asia

Substantial ground has been covered in the study of decentralization and subnational politics in Asia in recent decades, particularly as improvements in data quality, government transparency, and international benchmarking have enabled rigorous analysis in a number of countries. Nevertheless, challenges remain to increasing the prevalence of cross-national studies within Asia, better integration of Asian cases alongside comparable cases outside of Asia, and assessing the ways in which regional and international influences may shape decentralization processes in the Asian cases. To contextualize the structural impediments that give rise to these challenges, I will focus on two of the key trends that have limited the ways in which scholars can learn more generalizable lessons and answer complex puzzles surrounding the causes and consequences of decentralization in Asia.

Case studies are the norm and comparisons are mostly within subregions

Despite a proliferation of studies in recent years that focus on more than one country, single country studies are still the norm in assessments of the causes and consequences of decentralization in Asia. There are numerous scholars who point to the fact that studying politics at the subnational level allows for within-case medium- or large-N comparisons (c.f. Pepinsky 2019), and this is certainly a common occurrence especially where within-country

variation in outcomes is being studied in the Asian context. Indeed, many Chinese provinces, Indian states, and Indonesian provinces are themselves double or triple the geographic size and population of many European nations. This reality provides compelling justification for the attention to each of them as a single, stand-alone entity, let alone constituent subnational units within a single national case study.

Nonetheless, the reality of political and economic developments across Asia stands somewhat at odds with this approach to scholarship. Aid and development projects routinely look for ways to learn from cases that may seem quite disparate but actually nicely fit into epidemiological models of inclusion and exclusion criteria for case selection. A recent edited volume by Rodden and Wibbels (2019) draws on work in a number of cases in both Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and highlights exactly the rationale and need for cross-national comparisons. The volume focuses on how and in which ways to link the preferences of aid donors – who invariably favour quantitative approaches from which generalizations may be made about how to implement aid projects – with traditional empirical work done by political scientists – who tended to favour analytical case studies. Particularly in the context of Asia, single-country work has dominated the discipline even where quantitative or causal inference approaches are employed.

The result is that the body of research on decentralization and public service delivery stands out for its greater reliance on cross-national, intra-Asia comparisons. Such comparisons tend to be the result of collaborations among scholars who specialize in cases across different subregions or world regions. Yet, these collaborations and the work produced by them fall largely outside the disciplinary boundaries of political science, politics, and government; instead most such works are the product of specialists in public health and development economics. This then leads to a notable gap in much of this literature between

the underlying logic of decentralization (e.g. the politics) and the outcomes decentralization may produce.

The extension of this focus on single-case analyses is to recognize that where cross-national analysis of decentralization or subnational politics occurs in Asia, it is primarily on cases within a single subregion and rarely between Asian cases and cases from outside the wider Asian region. It is increasingly common to find recent studies or even collections of articles comparing policy evolution or outcomes regarding decentralization between Indonesia and Philippines, South Korea and Japan, or India and Pakistan. There are some exceptions to this, such as China-Vietnam comparisons, but these are less common and predominantly confined to studies of economic development, such as the association between decentralization and the entrée or influence of foreign direct investment (FDI).

The general strategy of intra-region comparisons is often rooted in a logic of comparability and mindfulness of the scope conditions of a given argument. These types of comparisons are typically written in such a way as to demonstrate a clear logic of case selection: these two or few cases were chosen because they demonstrate sufficient similarity on key and/or control predictors. Most inclusion criteria with respect to studies of decentralization and subnational politics revolve around one of a few key considerations: geographic shape and composition, population size and/or diversity, level of economic development, regime type/variant. There is nothing fundamentally incorrect about such logic, insofar as it makes quite clear the limits of any given argument and the scope conditions to which the argument applies.

Yet an alternative perspective might question whether this strategy and strict adherence to carefully defined scope conditions tends to limit, rather than expand, the potential range of cases that could actually be included and from which theories might be more rigorously tested and refined. Indeed, authors rarely address case selection from the

frame of potential *exclusion* criteria: rather than consider why to *include* only certain cases, what are the factors that would *exclude* a case from consideration in a comparative framework? Following from an exclusion principle requires a different attitude toward case selection, and could lead to alternative perspectives.

Take, for example, a question of whether party congruence models of voting apply differently in cases characterized by both universal and asymmetric decentralization of authority. Existing congruence models are derived from and tested predominantly within European and North American settings,⁵ where the majority of tests are conducted in systems with fairly universal models of decentralization. But in Asia, asymmetries in authority held by different subnational governments is the norm rather than the exception (Shair-Rosenfield, Marks, and Hooghe 2014; Shair-Rosenfield 2016; Shair-Rosenfield et al. 2020). A case selection strategy trained on an exclusion principle – e.g. non-democracies or non-multiparty competition – could then result in the inclusion of many Asian cases. For example, the Philippines is an electoral democracy with robust regional party competition; the actual and aspirational asymmetries in the Cordillera and Mindanao regions could further test some of the proposed mechanisms of existing congruence voting models.⁶

⁵ Plus Australia, New Zealand, and Japan.

⁶ While subnational electoral returns are not available for many Asian cases, the GeoReferenced Electoral District dataset from the Constituency-Level Election Archive project (GRED CLEA) provides sufficiently fine-grained election returns data to be able to match this data to individual subnational units (Kollman et al. 2019). This could enable cross-national evaluations of voting congruence.

Challenges of data quality & language

By far, two of the largest hindrances to cross-national, and often cross-temporal, analysis in Asia on almost any topic are issues related to data availability and quality and the challenges of language barriers when conducting fieldwork and primary source analysis. These impediments are not unique to Asia, also plaguing scholars of decentralization in Africa and Latin America to varying degrees. Yet, few world regions have such dramatic variation in country-level economic development and capacity: Singapore and Brunei are two of the world's highest GDP per capita and Japan and South Korea are OECD members, while Cambodia, East Timor, and Papua New Guinea rank in the bottom quartile of global per capita GDP. Furthermore, there is fairly widespread recognition of just how vast the linguistic differences are in the geographic stretch between Jakarta, Mumbai, and Tokyo. In particular, the largest, and thus most decentralized, countries in Asia tend to have the largest numbers of distinct languages and dialects, leading to additional complications in data collection and analysis.

Many subnational data sources are simply not available for a host of cases across the region, except when researchers possess sufficient language skills and/or access to domestic agency resources. For example, scholars wishing to work on analysis of subnational units in South Korea will largely be limited to data sources for the first tier of administrative divisions – the *do*, *gwangyeoksi*, *teukbyeolsi*, and *teukbyeol-jachisi* – for a range of variables including average incomes, pollution levels, unemployment rates, and numbers of university students. Such data for the next lower level of administration, which includes all cities in South Korea that do not fall into the provincial-equivalent class of *gwangyeoksi*, must be gathered province-by-province as there is no central state statistics portal that contains this information. This task requires direct contacts with provincial-level statistics bureaus and/or navigation of the bureaus' non-standardized websites, which effectively requires working

knowledge of the Korean language. This means that a scholar wishing to study electoral politics or environmental policy in Korean cities must be able to read Korean, have connections to provincial statistics offices who can send data directly, or conduct analysis without a range of relevant control variables. Despite being one of the most centralized and high capacity states in Asia, the constraints posed by an absence of language skills in the Korean context highlight the nature of the difficulties facing researchers in the region.

In less developed, lower capacity contexts, additional challenges across Asia confound researchers. To find provincial-level election data in many Asian countries, let alone for more local units of analysis, trips to photocopy hard copy results at each provincial election commission office is common. Though household surveys in many Asian countries can enable subnational analysis of welfare access, employment patterns, and many other outcomes of interest to political scientists, gaining access to those surveys may be difficult without the resources to purchase the data. In the past decade, a number of Asian nations have become members of the Open Government Partnership, increasing the chances that certain types of data will be more easily accessible to researchers and citizens in the future. However, the region is plagued with a number of cases where reliable data at the subnational level is simply rarer than is useful to executing many research agendas focused on decentralization. Consistent access to subnational sources of data are necessary to conduct the types of research done by scholars of decentralization in other world regions. While such data limitations are common in other world regions – particularly in terms of language limitations in sub-Saharan Africa and data quality and access concerns in both sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America – scholars of decentralization in Asia, with its extreme size and diversity, face somewhat unique difficulties in this regard.

A new agenda for the future of decentralization and subnational politics in Asia

Two paths forward can help to address some of the limits on current studies in decentralization and subnational politics in Asia. The first item on the agenda is to encourage more collaboration among case specialists and the cultivation of scholars who specialize in more than one case. This has distinct implications for scholarship characterized as intra-subregion, intra-Asia, or intra-Global South. The second item on the agenda is to incorporate Asian cases into the study of decentralization and subnational politics more globally. This can be achieved in multiple ways, including greater familiarity and inclusion of individual Asian cases into global or multi-region collections of works, as well as the extension of comparative datasets to coverage of Asian cases. Here I will elaborate on each of these agenda items and their potential to reshape the study of decentralization and subnational politics in Asia.

Developing more collaborative and intra-regional analysis

The first component of this future agenda for scholarship on decentralization and subnational politics in Asia focuses on collaboration among case specialists within subregions and the cultivation of scholars who specialize in more than one case within an Asian subregion. The underlying logic here is simple: many of the countries across Asia have endured similar decentralization processes, pressures, and/or outcomes; these countries also share a number of historical, geographic, and governance features that suggest a basis for comparison. The failure to exploit this potential comparative framework of analysis likely limits broader knowledge and understanding about the causes and consequences of patterns and trends on decentralization within the subregions.

For example, Indonesia and the Philippines are occasionally compared by development specialists interested in decentralization because they are both nominally democratic, are archipelagos, have large populations, and bear some similarities in their

levels of economic development. Despite a number of similarities that suggest the potential benefits of comparison, the comparison is made less frequently than the baseline comparative merits would suggest. In a similar vein, Indonesia and Malaysia are infrequently compared with respect to decentralization despite both being highly decentralized, Muslim majority, with substantial extractive industries and common territory on the island of Borneo. Part of the limited nature of this comparison undoubtedly stems from two distinctions: Malaysia is federal while Indonesia is unitary, and Indonesia is democratic while Malaysia is only just now democratizing. Yet, depending on the specific research question at hand, either of these comparisons might seem appropriate from a research design standpoint, as well as highly useful to thinking about lessons learned from the comparative dimension.

Beyond the utility rooted in comparable domestic political frameworks, subregional economic and political associations may exert additional influence on decentralization processes and policy outcomes across Asian subregions. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) exist to promote cooperation within the subregions, which can subsequently promote or hamper efforts of subnational units to implement policy initiatives. An increase in the flow of individuals, trade, and ideas within the associations' members also may have knock-on effects for policy innovation at the local and subnational levels; conversely, increased intra-bloc flows of people and goods may increase exposure to epidemics and pandemics that challenge local capacity and responsiveness. As these Asian subregional pressures increasingly exert an influence on domestic, especially subnational, policies, scholars will need to consider the common effect these associations have on policy adoption and outcomes in member states.

A related potential path involves collaboration among case specialists working across subregional boundaries and the cultivation of scholars who specialize in more than one case

across Asian subregion boundaries. The underlying logic is similar, though not precisely the same as with intra-Asian subregion work. The Asian subregions have several common influences in their decentralization processes, as well as their associated political and economic systems; these commonalities should render within-Asia comparisons more fruitful. Failure to develop broader comparative frameworks further limits knowledge and understanding of a range of international and transnational factors related to decentralization and subnational politics, both within and outside of Asia.

Historical context is crucial here: colonial influences and wartime invasions across Asia were rarely confined within subregion boundaries. Take, for example, British colonial legacies that shaped many of the Asian decentralization contexts. The British fully or partially colonized many countries in South and Southeast Asia, and the markers of that influence live on in the structure of many constitutions that delineate federal institutions. A number of former British colonies, including India, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Pakistan, have similar structures embedded within their constitutions to differentiate policy issue control at and shared between different levels of government. Patterns of asymmetries are evident when evaluation the federations of former British colonies, regardless of whether the country is located on the Indian subcontinent or peninsular Southeast Asia. To the degree that history shapes institutions, norms, and worldviews about decentralization and decentralization-adjacent political concepts, comparisons between cases need not stop at subregional borders.

Once again, regional trade agreements and regional political and economic associations may matter in the context of research in decentralization and subnational politics. Across Asia, many such associations are not confined to membership within a distinct subregion. While the Southeast Asia region has ASEAN and the South Asia region has SAARC, broader Asian associations have become dominant players in regional trade and cooperation. The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and East Asia Summit (EAS),

along with different formulations of ASEAN+ groupings, have emerged as players affecting the shape of local, subnational, national, and international policies on topics as wide-ranging as trade, natural disaster response, and human rights protections. As the international pressures from across Asia begin to exert an influence on domestic, and subnational, policies, consideration of the role the associations play when assessing the effects of decentralization will likely lead scholars to rely on comparisons within the wider Asia.

A final related potential route focuses on extensions of work beyond Asia, specifically with an eye toward increasing collaboration among case specialists working in different world regions in the Global South. Though difficult to achieve in terms of time and resources, the cultivation of scholars who specialise in more than one case across Global South regions could also be encouraged to a greater extent than it is now. This route excludes some of the Asian cases, such as Japan and South Korea, if reliant on common definitions of “Global South.” However, there are a number of reasons to consider the utility of inter-regional comparisons between Asian countries with developing economies and their counterparts in world regions like Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa.

Included among these reasons are: shared historical legacies of colonialism and economic dependence, common religious institutions such as the societal influence of the Catholic Church (in comparisons to Latin America) or Islam (in comparisons to sub-Saharan Africa), and average levels of economic development circa the twenty-first century (particularly in comparisons with Latin America). The same INGOs and aid agencies that encouraged many nations towards decentralization have promoted similar paths across world regions; many of the decentralized structures and rationales adopted by countries in the Global South follow similar designs because they originate from a common set of sources (e.g. World Bank, US Agency for International Development, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH). Such intra-Global South comparisons have

previously been called for by others studying decentralization's causes and effects, especially in the context of comparing Asia to Latin America (Smoke, Gómez, and Peterson 2006).

While careful research designs and well-defined scope conditions will preclude some cross-regional comparisons, previous work demonstrates the utility of such contributions (c.f. Eaton 2006).

Integration of Asia in global analyses

The second agenda for future research is to more fully integrate Asia, and Asian cases, into global analyses of decentralization and subnational politics. This most directly relates to how scholarship on the topic is produced in two key ways. First, researchers working on Asia can be included in the curation of collections of work on topics of decentralization and subnational politics. Second, researchers working on global datasets can include Asian cases, e.g. data, in their datasets. While there have been occasions where this agenda has already shown promise, more could be done on this integration effort.

In the first case, only a handful of Asian cases tend to be included in non-Asian collections of work, whether the research is purely scholarly or developmental. India is a case included in non-Asian research, partly as a result of a lower language barrier (depending on the specific topic), its long-standing classification as a democracy, its federal system, and the sheer importance of a country with nearly 18% of the world's population. Examples include assessments of federalism as a means of moderating or managing diversity (Agranoff 1999; Moreno and Colino 2010), diversity of subnational regimes within democratic states (Behrend and Whitehead 2016), and with respect to redistributive policies (Golden and Min

2013).⁷ Less commonly, the Indian case serves as the basis for theoretical argumentation and then analysis extends to other non-Asian cases (c.f. Stepan, Linz, and Yadav 2011).

In recent years, some attempts to incorporate the Chinese case into studies of “quasi-federalism” or debates over fiscal federalism have emerged, likely again due to the sheer size and relevance of better understanding of China on a global stage. The OECD has long included Japan and now includes South Korea, meaning that the organization’s datasets, analysis, and policy briefs on regional, rural, and urban governance extend to these cases. As such, the countries of Northeast Asia tend to be included more frequently by non-regional specialists than their South or Southeast counterparts, due to their perceived global importance and/or level of economic development.

Occasionally, additional cases make their way into collections covering a wider diversity of themes regarding decentralized governance (c.f. Reynolds 2002; Saxena 2011), but this is relatively uncommon. Yet, it is unclear why studies of federalism continue to include, or seemingly tokenize, only the Indian or Chinese cases. In the context of studying federations or federalism, Asia provides alternatives for consideration and inclusion: Malaysia, Myanmar, and now Nepal. From the perspective of scholars in other world regions studying these countries themselves, language barriers may be insurmountable.⁸ Yet there

⁷ India is the lone Asian case in the entire Global Dialogue on Federalism series from McGill-Queen’s University Press published between 2005 and 2010.

⁸ While Malay language skills would undoubtedly aid in-depth case analysis from a historical perspective, Malaysia is a multinational federation plagued with its own diversity issues under the auspices of federalism left behind by British rule, but with a long-standing tradition of English-language scholar and a large amount of English-language primary sources. A

appears to be no scholarly justification offered as to why scholars of decentralization and federalism who specialize in these cases cannot be included in the occasional collection addressing the topic. In fact, there is arguably quite a lot to learn from studying the management and governance of the other multinational federations in Asia, particularly those where boundaries between subnational units are drawn less strictly along ethnolinguistic lines. If the issue is familiarity with cases that fit within the scope conditions of arguments, there is a lot of existing literature to help guide scholars looking for new cases on which to test and expand their theories.

A second avenue for researchers is the integration of Asian cases into global datasets on decentralization and subnational politics. This likely means expansion of existing measures to include Asian cases, though it may also result in the creation of new measures that capture greater variation to reflect systems and processes outside the realm of Western Europe and North America. Two examples of this type of data expansion and integration processes demonstrate the importance of such ventures: 1) the recent creation or expansion of cross-national datasets on decentralization and federalism, and 2) the advent of a range of conflict-oriented global datasets that measure political violence and state-sponsored repression at the level of geospatially- and/or subnationally- disaggregation.

In the realm of datasets estimating decentralization and subnational authority, recent efforts to expand coverage to Asia have emerged. One of the most comprehensive, particularly in terms of both temporal and geographic coverage, is the most recent waves of expansion of the Regional Authority Index (RAI). The RAI was first introduced in 2010 as a multidimensional measure of subnational authority with geographic coverage across the

similar reality is true for Myanmar, though language barriers are higher for both primary and secondary source collection and analysis.

OECD world. The coverage included 42 cases in Western Europe, North America, Central and Eastern Europe, plus Turkey, Israel, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. The data on the first Asian cases outside of Japan were introduced alongside the first wave of expansion, which encompassed 39 additional cases in Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean (Hooghe et al. 2016; Shair-Rosenfield et al. 2014). In 2020, a second wave comprising of geographic expansion and temporal extension was introduced, which covered most of the remaining cases in Northeast, South, and Southeast Asia (Shair-Rosenfield et al. 2020). The RAI is currently composed of data from 1950 through 2018 for 92 countries, including the following 22 Asian cases: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, East Timor, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam. The Asian cases included in the RAI encompass more than 50% of the world's population in 2020, making comparisons and analysis using the data much more globally and historically representative than any comparable measure of decentralization.

In the realm of conflict and peace studies, geospatially- and subnationally-disaggregated datasets with global coverage are being produced which enable scholars to assess the causes and effects of decentralization on civil conflict and other forms of political violence. In the context of Asia, this is especially important given the propensity for civil conflict and war to erupt amidst secessionist pressures, high levels of demographic diversity, and long-standing grievances that trace their roots to (pre-)colonial periods. The most applicable of these datasets for inclusion of Asian cases are: 1) the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project (ACLED) and UCDP georeferenced event dataset (UCDP GED), which provide geographically-tagged event level data on conflict outbreak and persistence; 2) the Geo-referencing Ethnic Power Relations dataset (GeoEPR), which provides geographically-coded data on politically relevant ethnic groups; and 3) the Sub National

Analysis of Repression Project (SNARP), which provides georeferenced data on physical integrity violations within first-order administrative units (Cordell et al. N.D.; Raleigh et al. 2010; Sundberg and Melander 2013; Vogt et al. 2015). Each of these datasets allows for Asian cases to be included in global analyses of the causes and consequences of political violence occurring *below the level of the nation-state*.

What these more geographically comprehensive or global datasets enable is comparisons within Asia and between world regions. Such comparisons allow for both more nuanced lessons to be learned and more generalizable explanations about the relationship between state structures, such as decentralization, and episodes or periods of violence. The increased availability of globally-comprehensive datasets, for indicators such as corruption, economic development, economic inequality, welfare provision, minority representation, and electoral results⁹ will further enable comparisons and extensions from theories generated by existing Asian case studies.

Conclusion

Contemporary political challenges, such as environmental degradation and rising economic inequality, face countries seemingly regardless of national borders and regional boundaries. Collaborative research and collections of works designed to highlight similarities and common lessons across Asia and the wider world may prove invaluable to scholars seeking a better understanding of how decentralization and subnational politics may both ameliorate

⁹ For example, the Constituency-Level Election Archive (CLEA) provides sufficiently fine-grained election returns data for many Asian cases to be able to match this data to the individual subnational units in the RAI. This could enable cross-national evaluations of voting congruence.

and exacerbate local, national, and international responses to such policy challenges. Those scholarly insights may in turn help to inform domestic and international policymakers seeking solutions to current and future crises, including pandemics like the novel coronavirus.

Indeed, the relative success in dealing with the pandemic by countries like Vietnam, Taiwan, South Korea, and even China indicate the importance of intragovernmental coordination and local-level decision-making to combatting such difficult and all-encompassing challenges such as that posed by COVID-19. In countries as large as these, it is worth underscoring how local action and centre-periphery coordination enabled and facilitated their responses. While a number of lessons from Asia regarding the causes and consequences of decentralization and subnational politics may have had limited historical generalizability, it is increasingly clear that experiences once deemed as “regional” phenomena have general applicability in an ever-globalizing world.

I have set forth an ambitious agenda for the future of scholarship on decentralization and subnational politics that engages with, learns from, and integrates the study of Asia into intra-regional, inter-regional, and global analysis. None of this can be done without the excellent country-specific, and often subnational unit-specific, knowledge and expertise that forms the bedrock of most current studies on decentralization and subnational politics in Asia. Nevertheless, it is time for scholars to stop treating Asian cases and subregions as unique or unfamiliar entities largely divorced from the broader scholarship on within-country governance. Instead, scholarship produced by those within and working on Asia and those working in other world regions and on a global scale, should take stock of and incorporate into broader analysis the diversity of systems, processes, and policy activity occurring at the subnational level across Asia.

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