



International Conference

**Civil Society versus the State?
Emergent Trajectories of Civic Agency in East Asia
in Comparative and Transnational Perspective**

University of Zurich

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Organizers:

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1 Outline and Hypothesis

East Asian economies have been characterized by a remarkable and rapid industrialization process, which has transformed East Asia into a new core region of the world system besides the West. In contrast to a liberal economic model, this growth and transformation in the region has been guided by strong states that successfully activated and integrated private interests and citizens into national projects of developmentalism and shared growth. As part of this economic growth, large middle classes marked by mass consumerism have emerged and Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have developed into stable democracies. Despite significant differences in their respective economic structures, social institutions and political systems, recent global sociopolitical changes are mirrored in citizens' claims for more political participation in each of these nations.

In Taiwan for instance, recent civic mobilizations under the previous Kuomintang (KMT) administration (2008-2016) related mostly to what citizens perceived as an increasingly "cross-strait friendly" mode of administration, which had started with the promotion of direct links with the Mainland in 2008 and culminated in the enactment of a series of trade agreements between the two sides. From 2008 onward, civic groups with dissimilar aims have experienced a "cross-pollination" of interests and have unified under the banner of opposing the previous government's non-transparent behavior, as seen in the three-weeks long occupation of the Legislative and Executive Yuan in March-April 2014, and in the



Kuomintang (the China-friendly party) losing the presidency in January 2016 to the opposition party. It is thus fair to say that the country has entered a new phase of democratization with a president who for the first time since the lifting of martial law has centred her campaign mostly on non-traditional topics, such as transitional and social justice issues. However, one year after winning the elections, optimism inside Taiwan has already been dampened by a series of factors ranging from a persistent economic recession, job insecurity, sluggish wages and a rather massive decrease of tourists from the Mainland, among other reasons, which have reignited discontent among the general population.

In the case of Hong Kong, the 2003 free trade agreement with the PRC significantly increased cross-border economic cooperation and provided a platform for Beijing to co-opt local economic elites in the city. Less obvious was the parallel process, which has been pointed out by observers and researchers, to induce political, cultural and educational integration of Hong Kong through closer links with Mainland China. These developments have led to mass protests and clashes, such as the Umbrella Movement of 2014 and the recent riots of February and November 2016. On one side of these riots stood social movements and academics opposed to the local administration, who demand: true universal suffrage; the preservation of civil liberties; and the safeguarding of Hong Kong's distinctiveness. On the other side stood the authorities operating under Beijing's controlling hand. The recent decision by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government to prosecute nine activists/scholars, former student leaders, as well as former and current legislators involved in the 2014 Umbrella Movement has re-launched protest against what is considered a political persecution towards those who oppose the Hong Kong SAR government and undermine Hong Kong's foundation as a free and open society.

More than two decades of economic stagnation have shaken Japan's self-understanding as economic superpower and universal belief in its postwar social contract of shared growth. In view of the Fukushima Dai'ichi nuclear disaster of 2011, established and new social movements in Japan have started to question the excessively tight links between the state and private industries. Moreover, the current Abe administration is facing strong opposition in view of their plans to amend the postwar peace constitution, to introduce a more "patriotic" curriculum, and further constrain freedom of press. While a majority of Japanese still supports the government, mainly due to its promise to relaunch shared growth through a series of economic policies called "Abenomics", a growing number of citizens is standing up against the increasingly authoritarian political reform agenda. At the same time, mounting socioeconomic insecurities have also led to the emergence of new ultra-right-wing movements which stage public demonstrations and engage in outright hate speech.

From November 2016 onwards, the impeachment and removal from Presidency of Park Geun-hye for abuse of power has been accompanied and driven by mass demonstrations in South Korea, and has also led to large counter-rallies by supporters of Park. But even in



preceding years, South Korea was marked by political conflicts over labor market and education issues, which led to mass demonstrations. The former administration was attacked by a large collation of civic society actors, including labor unions and peasant organizations, for its business-friendly policy of labor-market deregulation, which had led to deteriorating labor conditions and rising social inequalities. Moreover, the government's plan to introduce state-issued history schoolbooks was heavily criticized as an attempt to whitewash South Korea's past dictatorships, also triggering public protest.

In Mainland China, several steps by the authorities to regain control over the population (e.g. the much heralded war on corruption and the further centralization of powers under the central government and in particular under Xi's position) reflect the government's awareness that the population has gradually lost faith in the ability – and in the willingness – of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to address China's most pressing issues. These include environmental degradation, privileges of party cadres and a sluggish economic growth, and have prompted a spike of protests over land expropriation as well as labor disputes and strikes since 2010. Strict state repression and an ideological war against so-called "Western values" reveal the governing elites' increasing awareness that civic actors and social movements could become a political force with the potential to undermine the CCP's dominance despite economic development and growth.

With this conference we aim to consolidate research on recent interactions and conflicts between states trying to exert more influence across several fields (e.g. the environment, the labor market, freedom of expression, education) and newly emerging social movements as a counter-reaction to what is perceived by many as an "illiberal turn" on part of the authorities. By bringing together different theoretical positions from a variety of disciplines, the relationship between civic awareness and different forms of agency, including resistance against non-democratic decision-making, shall be re-examined. We hope to increase our understanding of these recent developments in comparative and transnational perspective by widening the lens on East Asia, seeking to explore both similarities and differences behind these new protest movements. Questions we will raise include: How do country-specific institutions and contexts shape the recent protests and conflicts? How are these protest movements connected transnationally? Do they mark the beginning of a transnational civic society – or even the beginning of a regional integration process from below?

Specifically, we aim at exploring the most recent developments of strategic importance, which have influenced the whole East-Asian region and touch upon inter-connected spheres of influence, such as globalization, strong developmental states and their impact on civil society by either weakening or empowering it. The following five hypotheses will serve as framework and starting point for the conference:



Hypothesis (1): Negative consequences of globalization

For decades during their modernization phases, East Asian societies were not only examples of economic success, but – as new industrial producers and export economies – driving forces of globalization. However, as growth has slowed down in many states and globalization's negative effects are beginning to show, the old model of developmental states, in which the elites single-handedly managed economic growth and subsequently shared the fruits of hard work with the population, is no longer realized to the same degrees as before. This has led to new social and economic conflicts and the demand for more political participation among the population.

Hypothesis (2): Questioning of strong states

Aside from the elites' declining ability to successfully steer the economic development and guarantee shared growth, East Asian societies have also matured into fully modernized societies marked by a highly educated population with stable jobs and life-paths. This (new) middle class' identity involves an evolving understanding of the concept of citizenship. Its members are no longer willing to leave important decisions regarding their societies' future solely in the hands of the strong state elites, but instead voice their demands in politics by forming civil society organizations and social movements. Moreover, citizens now more strongly focus on issues like environmental protection and similar quality-of-life postmodern concerns, which shake the previously solid shared goal of achieving economic growth at all costs.

Hypothesis (3): Saturation through mass consumerism and the limits of upward mobility

In general, the East Asian success story was framed by developmental states and social policies based on a productivist welfare regime. Social inclusion and equality were neither achieved through significant redistribution, nor through a well-established social security net. Rather, East Asian societies enjoyed a general increase in purchasing power, new mass consumer life-styles and a general intergenerational social upward mobility through the widening and proportional growth of the higher social classes. However, due to declining growth rates, but also due to the saturation through mass consumerism and the limitations regarding upward mobility, the previous model of social inclusion and equality is beginning to break down. This not only leads to new social stress and personal insecurities, but also gradually undermines these nations' political stability.

Hypothesis (4): Transnational links and regional integration

East Asia has not only been characterized by economic growth, but also by regional



integration and strengthened transnational ties. While the integration is foremost happening on an economic level, links between civil society actors in different states are also continuously deepening. This has led to new spillover effects, in which political protest in one society of the region influences and even triggers new social movements and political demands in other East Asian countries.

Hypothesis (5): Rising Mainland China

Due to its economic and political weight, Mainland China's rise is increasingly disrupting East Asia's commercial and diplomatic equilibrium, pressuring Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as other nations in the Asian continent, to reposition themselves. At the same time, this regional transformation raises further questions of national identity. Hence, new forms of civic engagement and political protest including new nationalism and identity politics is a reaction to these tectonic changes in East Asia's geopolitical order.



2 Program (all speakers confirmed)

Wednesday, September 13

15:00-16:00 **Keynote Speech**

Steve Tsang (University of Nottingham, UK)

16:00-16:30 Coffee break

16:30-18:00 **Panel 1: Environmental disputes**

Kathinka Fürst (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands)

Simona Grano (University of Zurich, Switzerland)

Miranda Schreurs (Technical University of Munich, Germany)

19:00 Dinner

Thursday, September 14

9:30-11:00 **Panel 2: Labor market and social inequality**

Mahito Hayashi (Kinjo Gakuin University, Japan)

Kwang-Yeong Shin (Chung-Ang University, South Korea)

Samson Yuen (University of Oxford, UK)

11:00-11:30 Coffee break

11:30-13:00 **Panel 3: Establishment and civil society**

Ming-Sho Ho (National Taiwan University, Taiwan)

Akihiro Ogawa (The University of Melbourne, Australia)

Chen Xi (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, China)

13:00-14:30 Lunch



- 14:30-16:00 **Panel 4: Identity politics**
Dafydd Fell and Chung Yin Kwan (SOAS, UK)
Naoto Higuchi (University of Tokushima, Japan)
Malte Kaeding (University of Surrey, UK)
- 19:00 Dinner

Friday, September 15

- 9:30-11:00 **Panel 5: Comparative and transnational perspectives**
David Chiavacci (University of Zurich, Switzerland)
Mary Alice Haddad (Wesleyan University, USA)
Hwa-Jen Liu (National Taiwan University, Taiwan)
- 11:00-11:30 Coffee break
- 11:30-12:30 **Final discussion**
- 12:30 Lunch