

Book Review: Daniel C. Lynch, *Rising China and Asian Democratization: Socialization to “Global Culture” in the Political Transformations of Thailand, China, and Taiwan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 299 pages, including notes, bibliography, character list, and index.

Response to “Culture Clash: Rising China vs. Asian Democratization”

Ashley Esarey’s Review of *Rising China and Asian Democratization*

Daniel C. Lynch

Ashley Esarey’s critique of my book, *Rising China and Asian Democratization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006)—which appears in the *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 2 (December 2006): 189-194—contains numerous inaccuracies and mischaracterizations of the book’s central arguments. While I appreciate Professor Esarey’s willingness to write a review, the problems in it demand a response.

Rising China finds that democratization in Asia is a function of state socialization to a set of liberal constitutive norms that originated in the West some two centuries ago and now anchor a “global culture.” The book’s method is to trace the development of a widespread elite eagerness to accept socialization to global culture in Taiwan and Thailand and to draw a contrast with China, where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rejects democratization. *Rising China* explains how numerous CCP (and other elite) writers—including China’s top leaders—define culture as a tool that states use to compete in Realist international power struggles. In the CCP’s international ontology, states are the primary, irreducible core actors. They are not socialized by a universal culture; they instead manipulate culture to pursue their own material interests in endless contests with other states. To establishment Chinese writers, claims that liberal constitutive norms are universally valid are little more than cynical attempts by the United States and its Western allies to use culture to subjugate other states. Accepting democracy means yielding to their domination.

In contrast to China, few people of influence in Taiwan or Thailand hold such views. Through many decades of discussion and praxis, Taiwanese and Thai elites have come to the conclusion that liberalism is—with some

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qualifications—universally valid. The “normal” state is either already democratic or else embarked upon a democratization trajectory, however tortuous the path might sometimes seem. Liberal global culture is not a tool that Western states use to vanquish others. Widespread acceptance of this viewpoint facilitated Taiwanese and Thai democratization.

Esarey’s critique of *Rising China* distorts the book’s central argument in a number of serious and troubling ways. First let us consider his core claim that the September 2006 military coup in Thailand is “highly problematic for Lynch’s theory” (Esarey, p. 190). Esarey contends that “the [Thai] monarchy—a far older institution in Thailand [than democratic institutions]—retained sufficient power and legitimacy to roll back democratic reforms the King himself had fostered in the 1990s. For most Thais, honoring the wishes of their monarch was more important than conforming to ‘global’ democratic culture” (Esarey, p. 191).

This decidedly Orientalist interpretation of Thai politics completely misapprehends the September 2006 coup (and, for that matter, the 1990s democratic reform movements, in which the King played only a passive role). Esarey presents overthrown premier Thaksin Shinawatra as a heroic democrat, victimized by a scheming autocratic monarch in alliance with an easily-hoodwinked Asian populace. Yet, even a casual reading of the English-language Thai newspapers in recent years easily establishes the fact that Thaksin massively assaulted democratic institutions during his five-and-a-half years in power, especially from December 2002 to July 2006. That was precisely what all the fuss was about on the streets of Bangkok in the first half of 2006.

That Esarey appears not to read the Thai newspapers carefully is perhaps forgivable since he is not a Thailand specialist. What is disconcerting is that *Rising China* makes precisely the same points concerning Thaksin’s evident ambition to establish a populist dictatorship. In the opening pages of the book and in the second half of chapter 3, I detail Thaksin’s autocratic (and, to some Thai critics, even megalomaniacal) challenges to the country’s democratic consolidation and the profound elite and popular revulsion Thaksin’s drive elicited. I document how King Bhumipol himself criticized Thaksin’s dictatorial tendencies—not his democracy—and tried to convince him to change course. Why did Esarey not discuss this material in his review? Could the reason be that it undermines his contention that the coup was “highly problematic for Lynch’s theory” (Esarey, p. 190)?

The coup was launched with broad elite and popular support to block the Thaksin juggernaut and restore Thailand to the path of democratic consolidation. It was not launched by King Bhumipol to restore autocracy: No serious analyst of Thai politics has ever suggested such an interpretation. The new constitution, drafted after the coup by a broadly representative assembly, including democracy activists, contains a number of measures designed to strengthen democratic institutions and culture and plug the loopholes exploited by Thaksin. Building on the strengths of the 1997 “People’s Constitution,”

the new document recognizes community rights vis-à-vis the developmentalist state; prohibits media ownership by the prime minister and other key government officials; requires public hearings to be held, and other hurdles cleared, before the state can legally sign international agreements (since they might be injurious to weaker groups); and strengthens the independent National Human Rights Commission so that it can initiate legal action in the Constitutional Court when laws and other state actions violate human rights. The new charter attacks the corruption problem by reducing the size of the lower house and transforming the Senate into an appointed body. But since this latter change is controversial, it is at this writing on the verge of being stricken from the document by the Constitutional Drafting Assembly. Meeting the public's demand for a charter at least as democratic as the 1997 document is essential because the new constitution must be approved in a popular referendum—the first in Thai political history.

Therefore, despite—or actually because of—the coup, my forecast (very different from a prediction) offered for Thailand's political future still strikes me as reasonable: “As long as democracy remains a compelling model globally, the vibrancy of Thai civil society will ensure that Thailand remains formally democratic (though democratic quality will remain a problem)” (Lynch, p. 87).

As noted above, Esarey makes the culturalist argument that the reason the “antidemocratic” coup succeeded was because “for most Thais, honoring the wishes of their monarch was more important than conforming to ‘global’ democratic culture” (Esarey, p. 191). However, when he turns to assess the book's take on Taiwan and China, he rotates 180 degrees and declares: “It is unclear that analyzing Asian democracy in terms of culture is more effective than analyzing Asian countries in terms of democratic procedures and processes...or institutions” (Esarey, p. 193). But why should cultural factors explain what Esarey considers the restoration of authoritarianism in Thailand, yet be ruled out of court as a possible explanation for continuing Chinese authoritarianism?

The answer may be that Esarey is interpreting the concept of state identities, which I use throughout the book, from the narrow perspective of a Comparative Politics political culture literature that is now several decades out of date. Conflating identity with culture results in a conception of societies as timeless entities with relatively constant traits and no real histories. Such a conception seems to underlie Esarey's portrayal of Thai people as essentially authoritarian monarch-followers. It might also explain his misreading of *Rising China* as using culture as a fixed variable, when it actually uses state identity as a contingent and constructed factor in a complex process of ongoing change.

On p. 194, Esarey criticizes the book for “predicting” that China will never democratize, since its essentially authoritarian culture will keep it undemocratic forever. But *Rising China* never predicts the eternalness of Chinese authoritarianism. In fact, on p. 208, I state explicitly that “Thai,

Taiwanese, and Chinese identities could change. In particular, as people in China continue to expand their cultural and intellectual horizons, they might pressure the CCP into redefining the democratization *problematique* in ways that finesse [Chinese] decentering [in world history].” All through the China chapters, I present elite discussions of the country’s political future in carefully contingent terms, making no attempt at any point to offer “predictions.” Esarey’s disinclination to convey the arguments in the subtle and nuanced manner in which they are presented leads to unwarranted caricaturing. It is analogous to his failure to acknowledge the discussion of Thaksin’s assaults on Thai democracy, apparently to facilitate his claim that the book’s theory is “highly problematic.”

Similarly, Esarey writes that, “according to Lynch, China’s identity is rooted in a historical tradition that compels CCP leaders to oppose” democratization (Esarey, p. 191). In fact, there is no place in the book that argues or implies that the CCP is “compelled” by “historical tradition” to do anything. Straw-manning the argument as historically deterministic helps to appear reasonable in criticizing the book for predicting (which it does not do) that China will never democratize. Esarey writes: “*Rising China* may well prove inaccurate at divining the future of China’s rise” (Esarey, p. 194). But the book never *attempts* to “divine the future of China’s rise.” It instead makes the decidedly more subtle point that assuming China is certain to democratize distorts interpretations of contemporary politics. Following Esarey’s transmogrification, this formula becomes: “China will remain authoritarian forever.” Yet, I state explicitly on p. 8 that “any analyst convinced that China is certain *not* to democratize” will “fail to comprehend its development trajectory” no less than any analyst who is convinced that China *will* inevitably democratize.

There are numerous other points in Esarey’s review that mislead *TJD* readers by caricaturing *Rising China* or claiming wrongly that it omits crucial information. For example, on p. 192, he writes that “Lynch...should have acknowledged the fact that Chinese intellectuals operate in a political context that penalizes divergence from orthodox norms, as determined by the CCP leadership.” However, in chapter 4, endnote 2 (pp. 232-233), I state explicitly that “almost all intellectuals are directly or indirectly employed by the party-state. This fact sharply constrains the range of opinions intellectuals express publicly....Mavericks erring on the side of liberalism frequently get themselves into serious trouble.” The point, in any case, is *precisely* that persons who do not toe the party line are constrained by CCP power. I want to understand why that power prevents democratization. So why, for this book, should I analyze what the mavericks are writing? *They* are not the ones blocking democratization.

Esarey additionally complains that “Lynch does not produce a ‘smoking gun’ or crucial evidence demonstrating that the Chinese establishment explicitly resists decentering [in world history],” which is central to comprehending their rejection of socialization to global culture. He then makes the astonishing statement that “to support his argument, Lynch considers the writings of

several Chinese establishment intellectuals” (Esarey, p. 191; emphasis added). For the two chapters on China alone, I cite 101 Chinese writers, including intellectual and political elites and journalists. So how, exactly, do 101 become “several”?

Yet another example: On pp. 192-193, Esarey concedes that “Lynch is right to highlight the endogenous pressure for reform caused by identity politics” in Taiwan. “However,” he says, “the exogenous shock of Taiwan’s loss of most formal diplomatic allies in the 1970s also served to pressure the KMT to democratize.” In using “however,” Esarey implies that this “exogenous shock” was utterly beyond the scope of *Rising China*. Yet, in a section of chapter 6 entitled (literally) “International Shocks and the Intrusion of Global Society” (pp. 166-178), I discuss precisely this factor, albeit in a formulation more complex than Esarey’s standard story of the KMT’s democratizing so that it could “increase domestic legitimacy” and “as a means of winning support from democratic states” (Esarey, p. 193).

I could go on. I could surely challenge Esarey’s contention that China “is ethnically more homogenous than Taiwan” (Esarey, p. 194), the rather startling claim he makes at the end when he wants to argue that democracy is possible in China and that the book is therefore seriously flawed. But I will stop here and invite readers to come to their own conclusions.

Response to Daniel Lynch

Ashley Esarey

In my review of Professor Lynch’s book, *Rising China and Asian Democratization*, I considered empirical facts that pose challenges to his theory concerning the manner in which the adaptation of global culture led to democracy in Thailand and Taiwan as well as to his argument that resistance to global culture is likely to inhibit democratization in China, and in the Asian region more generally. For the case of Taiwan, in particular, I suggested that for Lynch’s theory to prove its merit, his argument had to be superior to long-standing theories focusing on modernization, on the political role of a middle class or political leadership, or on institutional adaptation by regimes seeking to improve legitimacy.

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Writing before the September 2006 coup in Thailand, Lynch argued that Thai elites had concluded that liberalism and democracy were universally valid; democracy in Thailand, while far from perfect, was likely to remain, in the words of Juan J. Linz, “the only game in town.” This has not proven to be the case. Promulgated on October 1, 2006, Thailand’s interim constitution expressed the monarchy’s tacit support for the coup and elevated that status of King Bhumibol Adulyadej by granting him the power to appoint members of the National Legislative Assembly. In addition, the recently released draft constitution written by a junta-appointed committee proposes an emasculated parliamentary system eliminating direct elections for the country’s Senate, reducing the size of parliament, lowering the threshold for a vote of non-confidence in the prime minister from two-thirds to one-quarter, and absolving the leaders of the September coup of all wrongdoing. While Thailand may one day return to democratic rule, the road to doing so seems fraught with difficulty, as elites in Bangkok, frustrated rural residents (many of whom supported the deposed prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra), and disgruntled Muslims in the country’s south consider the imposition of a political system less representative of their political views.

Lynch’s puzzling portrayal of my explanation of Thai support of the coup as “Orientalist,” implies that I see Thais as adherents to a backward belief system that drives them to slavishly follow the wishes of King Bhumibol. Nowhere in my review, or elsewhere, do I conflate “identity with culture” or suggest that societies are “timeless entities with relatively constant traits and no real histories.” Lynch misunderstands my point which is the following: Faced with protracted political turmoil and desirous of change, the Thai majority who supported the September coup did *not* do so for “cultural” reasons. Rather, they saw intervention by the military (with permission from the King) as more likely to contribute to the country’s stability, prosperity, and perhaps future democratization, than a continuation of the bitter stalemate over Prime Minister Thaksin’s leadership. In doing so, Thais, reluctantly in many cases, permitted the junta to settle the dispute. The end result of the Thai decision to favor nondemocratic institutions over democratic ones in a time of crisis remains unclear. What is clear is that Lynch overestimated the breadth of support for democratic norms among the Thai elite.

In all scientific inquiry, the methods employed by a scholar profoundly shape the nature of research findings. It was not surprising that Lynch found Chinese intellectuals to be highly critical of democratic ideals seen as the agents of United States hegemony, based upon their writings in internal and official publications. Intellectuals in the Chinese establishment are subject to intense political pressure and often publish with an eye toward pleasing the Communist Party leadership—a point to which Lynch alludes in a footnote. Had he conducted numerous interviews in China, as he did in Thailand and Taiwan, Lynch might have uncovered a greater diversity of political perspectives, including those of individuals within the establishment who tentatively

support liberalization or even intraparty or multiparty democracy. In a tightly controlled political environment such as China's, it is essential for scholars to seek out what James C. Scott has called "hidden transcripts," or secretive but pervasive discourses, that challenge the dominant views of power holders. Instead, Lynch based his conclusions on the politically acceptable views of Chinese elite, without exploring dissenting views that cannot be published in official journals but are bubbling beneath the surface.

