

# South-East Asia and authoritarian temptation | The impact of the Chinese model

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**In recent years, China's Xi Jinping has been testing the attractiveness of its authoritative and sophisticated "model" in the countries of South-East Asia. Can the introduction of "democratorship" in countries such as Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines be seen as an effect of the strengthening of the Chinese model and its attraction in the eyes of these regimes? It seems so: in China as in these countries, democracy and the rule of law are increasingly seen as utopias endangering stability and prosperity.**

The time is long gone when Western countries would dream of a world moulded in their image and where the democratic project embodied the promise of a certainly brighter future. After the political unrest of the 1997 crisis, we thought the case had been settled in South-East Asia: the authoritarian debacles which had largely fuelled the turmoil left hope for the implementation of mechanisms involving beneficial democratic progress for all citizens, i.e., a rule of law guaranteeing civil, legal, and political equality.

But in vein: in addition to a rapid resumption of growth through the Chinese powerhouse (a recovery that literally suspended the implementation of the reforms), the events of 11 September 2001 had a double impact on this renovation by weakening the newly-instituted democratic structures and mechanisms and reinstating a military factor (Armed Forces) in the political space. From spasmodic upheavals to deep crises, the political transformation of South-East Asia does not occur linearly; the unbridled excesses that we see today augur a bleak future for democratic transitions.

Among the processes and interactions at work, the Chinese factor is not the least. This factor is expressed on

multiple fronts by creating interdependencies that confine leaders like corporations more or less closely to flows that could potentially tie the region to dependency patterns it seems appropriate to explore in greater depth. With a crucial underlying question: is the concomitant timing of the Chinese pressures and the authoritarian temptation as manifested in South-East Asia coincidental? What does it announce?

The more or less ostentatious Chinese pressures according to fields occur in the context of globalisation, a globalisation historically marked by colonial influences and involving power relations with the outside world and self-compromise. Precisely today, we observe a feeling of resistance in the face of Westernisation, initially imposed by colonisation and secondly, by a liberal globalisation that has long touted, in an abrasive and pompous package, the merits of "market democracy"; Asian values believed had been shelved after the citizen protests following the 1997 crisis, were masterfully revived by Xi Jinping to explain the refusal to fall into the dictates of individual rights and political competition arbitrated by a manipulated electorate and to flatter conquering nationalism. The self-compromise takes the form of the defence of interests acquired on behalf of higher interests to defend and political cultures to defend. The famous universality of democratic values is in the spotlight; it is in the field of ideas and values that China now wants to make its mark.

This questioning feeds both of the crisis affecting Western countries and the supposed attractiveness of the Chinese model. For now, the telescoping bias of time is playing in favour of China. The persisting economic weakness of the European Union, the slowdown in the US and the geopolitical, migratory, and civilizational challenges faced by these regions have undermined the evidence that a political regime based on the guarantee of freedoms will necessarily favour growth and development, and ultimately increase a nation's power. The rise of populism in Europe, Brexit and Donald Trump's election as President of the United States are all events that questioned very deeply by South-East Asia with regard to the relevance, or even the merits, of democratic practice. Conversely, the growth experienced in China in the past 30 years, its ability to enforce stability and increase its power on the international stage reinforces the interest in decoupling political freedoms from economic freedoms. Furthermore, the presence of an elite united by converging and active interests, which controls and submits the rest of society, might become a necessary condition for power, given that this elite "corrects" any errors of public opinion in the name of the national interest. It is this new authoritarian balance that the Chinese authorities increasingly contrast with democratic shortfalls and risks; and South-East Asia is the proving ground of choice.

Thus, since the financial crisis 2008, we have observed a gradual but substantial authoritarian trend that takes different forms in different states but signals a distancing from democratic governance, or more simply the rule of law, to which incidentally, the leaders, or even corporations, have never fully subscribed. Between authoritarian temptation, democratic corruption, and the new requirements of citizens, it is difficult to clearly read the political developments in South-East Asian countries. Any comparison may turn out to be simplistic. However, three states appear to be more at risk than others and deserve particular attention: Malaysia, Thailand, and Philippines. These nations will now provide the illustrations to our hypotheses.

## Emergence of an attractive “Chinese model” in the eyes of the elites of South-East Asian nations

The tumultuous course of twentieth century history distanced the countries of South-East Asia and China. The turnaround introduced by Deng Xiaoping and the rediscovery by China of its own traditions have lifted this veil and the two regions have rediscovered the logics of proximity. When he took power, experts questioned the intentions of Xi Jinping and the possible evolution of the Chinese Communist regime; the scenario of authoritarian consolidation was not considered a likelihood. Today, however, the party-state has never concentrated so much power since Mao, and at its head, Xi Jinping has no qualms in tightening his grip on the eve of the 19<sup>th</sup> national congress. In addition to its “*historical and national pride*”, Xi’s China now asserts its authoritarian model.

### The Xi Jinping turnaround (2012-2013), for China and for the world

Xi Jinping came to power at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China. This came as a shock: since Jiang Zemin and especially Hu Jintao, the two previous presidents of the People’s Republic of China, observers had fallen into the habit of considering Chinese power as a collegiate power. The Communist Party, scalded by the traumatic experience Maoism, concerned about the consequences of the fall of the Berlin wall and the repercussions of Perestroika, took refuge in a rigid collegiality that reflected the regime’s overall sense of insecurity. This vision of an uneasy China that was unlikely to steal the limelight from Western leaders, flattered the narcissism of those in the West who imagined nothing other than a future of liberal democracy in China, driven by the emergence of the market economy.

With Xi Jinping, everything quickly changed. As from early 2013, the new Chinese leader’s grip was felt. The fight against the corruption endemic at all ranks of the country, gave him the chance to dispose of competitors and to impose himself alone at the nation’s helm. The strongman of China was symbolically taking into his own hands the Chinese population’s clamour for justice and revenge, repulsed by the excesses of the *nouveaux riches*. He thus enjoyed significant popular support, although this support remains difficult to estimate: the idea that the leaders of the Communist Party could be unpopular remains completely taboo in China.

This purge was accompanied by a new discourse, aimed at the international community: mankind was facing a “*common future*” and shared interests that China, not content with defining them, intended to defend, by firm action in favour of economic globalisation. At the same time, Western countries were weakened as consequence of the financial and monetary crises on both sides of the Atlantic. At geopolitical level, they were entangled in interventions in the Middle East, with the side-effect of feeding radical Islamic terrorism on an

unprecedented scope, in open warfare against the liberal system they embodied. This was compounded by their own populations' increasing doubts concerning the Western model based on openness and globalisation.

In a few years, a new world is beginning to emerge. The most obvious alliances are disintegrating and new convergences are being drafted. With Donald Trump in charge, the West is split and nobody, or almost nobody, speaks out against China for its human rights violations which until recently received international censure. The confidence of Western countries is evaporating like snow in the "red sun" rising not only in the East, but in the world as a whole. China's neighbours (barring India and Japan), drawn into its orbit, dare not express the fears raised by China's growing power. Furthermore, the Chinese model based on tight control of the local population and the clear affirmation of national interests to defend against foreign ones, seems more attractive to China's neighbouring countries, particularly in South-East Asia where the democratic systems transplanted from Western countries have undergone erratic evolutions. In addition, the figure of Xi Jinping, as an "enlightened" modern Emperor, emerges even as the West is experiencing a crisis of executive power. In a triumph of hyper-democracy, executive power must increasingly be exercised under the scrutiny of opposing critics and other fifth powers. In the US or in France, the President, and politicians in general, live under the tyranny of "transparency", imposed by public opinion and the media. China, on the other hand, offers the elites of third countries an attractive model based on a genuine executive power and the inherent opacity of its leaders. While in the West, the Prince performs his duties under the scrutiny of a surly and vindictive public opinion, the Prince in China can implement a comprehensive system to control and observe society with all impunity. In China, *Big Brother* and the Prince are one. In the West, a *Big Brother* formed by the public, judiciary and media keeps tabs its leaders and punishes them when necessary, or when it suits its own interests. In a highly revealing way, here and there, politically correct attitudes impose themselves according to contrasting standards and sacred symbols: in China, it is impossible to mock the Prince and national symbols, while in the West it becomes virtually impossible to mock anything other than the Prince. This contrast becomes even more apparent today, when *Trump-bashing* has become a national sport in the United States, while in China, Xi Jinping is beyond the reach of any public criticism.

## The Chinese model under Xi Jinping: contemporary and sophisticated authoritarianism

While Western democracy is steeped in a crisis of political representation reflected in a rise in voter abstention, the discrediting of parties and, more generally, the low level of identification of citizens with their representatives, Chinese power, on the other hand, seems to impose itself on its population with all the strength of an inevitable destiny that no one can legitimately challenge. The fragility of leaders' positions in the democratic political model contrasts sharply with the apparent solidity of leaders' positions in the Chinese political model.

The model imposed by China before our eyes is a blend of sacrificial archaism and authoritarian modernity. The defence of archaic harmony within a community that is constantly threatened by the violence of division has been a constant factor in contemporary Chinese political discourse ever since its leaders rediscovered the virtues of promoting conventional Chinese thinking, interpreted according to the needs of an authoritarian state. The punitive rhetoric of its leaders (1) is furthermore focussed on the belief in the virtue of exemplary sanctions for imposing political order and social harmony cherished by traditional Chinese thinking, or rather, a particular current strain of classic Chinese thinking – legalism (2).

To justify the attractiveness of its political model in South-East Asia, China plays on two fronts: on the one hand, it nourishes the doubts of the elites in many countries disrupted by Western hyper-democracy and who question the durability of the liberal system at local level and its appropriateness for the country's political culture; while on the other hand, it generously accompanies the movements that question western values, as in interested stakeholder in such a political shift. The key underlying political issue today in South-East Asia consists in measuring the true attachment of civil society to one political model or another and the prevailing support or resistance to political shift: where the result does not only depend on the will of the leaders.

For Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party still imbibed in totalitarian culture, the crucial aspect is to preserve political control and power. This purpose justifies that it relies on the state-of-the-art governance techniques: soon, China plans to issue "social credit" ratings to its citizens through the implementation of a widespread population control system. The social credit of each individual will be quantified in a rating to determine eligibility for different rights (rights to work in the administration, to travel abroad, etc.) (3).

Furthermore, the emergence of Xi Jinping is accompanied by a personality cult that is still far from what China experienced under Mao, involving the idolisation of the of the nation's attributes. Political discussions in China can only focus on certain topics with precautions more characteristic of religious rituals, in other contexts. An intense religiosity emerges from Chinese politics, not only in the multitudinous ritual party masses, but also, for example, in the political slogans whose presence in cities is almost as ubiquitous for someone who reads basic Chinese as the advertising of the brands of the hyper-capitalism that triumphs today in the Middle Kingdom.

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(1) Today, China executes substantially more death row inmates than all other countries together.

(2) See with regard to the legalism, Jean Lévi, *Les Fonctionnaires divins*, Le Seuil, 1989 and for its importance in the history of Chinese classical thought, *Le Tao du Prince*, Le Seuil, Point Sagesse, 1999 (Introduction) and for an application to current politics of Xi Jinping, Emmanuel Dubois de Prisque, "La Voie étroite du Prince", *Monde chinois* no. 48, pp.53-61.

(3) See "Josh Chin et Gillian Wong, « China's New Tool for Social Control: A Credit Rating for Everything », *Wall Street Journal*, 28 novembre 2016, "China invents the digital totalitarian state", *The Economist*, 17 décembre 2016 and Emmanuel Dubois de Prisque, « La République populaire note les Chinois », *Causeur.fr*, 29 avril 2015.

## What universalism best suits the Chinese model?

The Chinese elite often explained to their partners how, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, China has absorbed a vast Western influence; the West's science and technology, its economy and its thinking, from Marxism to liberalism, which have all reconfigured contemporary China. What is worth noting here, in contrast to the sense of having absorbed the Western model, is the extent to which today's Chinese leaders are now concerned with proposing their system as a model, and even exporting it. After being forced to adopt Westernisation for decades, the Chinese elites are eager for compensation: the "Chinafication" of other elites who, in the light of the crisis in the Western model, no longer know which way to turn. This is probably the more or less conscious rationale behind the "new silk roads" project (BRI, *Belt and Road Initiative*), which is, according to Chinese President Xi Jinping, speaking as part of a "global summit" organised in Beijing around this initiative in mid-May 2017, "*the project of the century*" and which will encourage the emergence of a "*new golden age*" of globalisation.

Certainly, the attractiveness of the Chinese model on populations remains to be seen because of its violence and the strong constraints it imposes on the general population of the country that might be tempted to adopt it. But its appeal and influence is undeniable on the elites of South-East Asian countries who listen with increasingly obvious impatience to the lessons of democracy that their NGOs and Western partners still dare to express. With the Silk Road project, China proposes its neighbours to join the winning system: that of a political and economic interventionism that is promising, but entailing a stagnation in social progress. A system that enables companies to embody the nation and its interests as a whole - a role that offers different rewards to those granted in the Western system-, and allows the elites to reap swift and palpable benefits in addition to being praised for their vision, while under the democratic system they must forever respond for their choices and actions in the face of an often ungrateful and fickle public opinion.

## The dissemination of the Chinese model in South-East Asian countries

To convince of the potential export capacity of its model and become an inspirational power, China needs to justify a successful transplant: South-East Asia is, of course, a prime space for this ambition. For objective reasons (geographical proximity and location along major trade routes, historical ties, presence of Chinese communities, economic potential) as well as geopolitical reasons (competition with the United States), Beijing cannot ignore South-East Asia. "*We are the only region in the world that is immediately welcoming and understanding to Chinese interests: this has value. Relations are simpler, easier and friendlier than between China and Japan for example*" (1). Beijing fosters a special historical relationship on which to capitalise.

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(1) Interview with Kavi Chongkittavorn, Bangkok, May 2016.

## The use of the Chinese benchmark in South-East Asia

Let us recall, before tackling the spread of the Chinese model, that China and India are the two tutelary powers of South-East Asia, whose civilisational elements have deeply irrigated the region: they are unlike any other partners and their cultural, religious, or political codes are deeply engraved in local attitudes. Lucian Pye has remarkably demonstrated how these two irradiating poles have influenced all the values and tactics related to how power is wielded (particularly power through nepotism and paternalism) (1). The current rapprochements therefore echo a secular history, which might be described as a "family" history. To a certain extent - and this is one of the arguments implicitly used by Beijing - democracy as exported by Western countries is more alien and removed from regional political practices than a deferential hierarchical system.

In its strategy of persuasion, Beijing is taking small steps: lifting reluctance and reservations, focusing on "*a good neighbor policy, peace, and prosperity*", implementing functional cooperation to build trust, allocating the necessary financial resources – in particular with regard to youth training (2) – and gradually modifying perceptions and references by systematically putting the West's contributions into perspective, particularly those of the United States. One of the arguments that triggered this approximation with regional leaders was the "*non-conditionality*" of the Chinese proposals: unlike the Western countries, the Chinese authorities imposed no initial political conditions for obtaining loans, aid, or other financing (3).

Another important trigger: the democratic mistakes of the countries mentioned. Initially, after the 1997 crisis, Western countries sold the idea that "market democracy" was going to be established mechanically, bringing with it reforms and growth. But local difficulties, hardships and resistance have shown how far, beyond the mechanisms, the very idea of democratic equality remains an exogenous notion that take time to become appropriated by societies; moreover, this appropriation can be hampered, even distorted, by a whole series of obstacles skilfully deployed by stakeholders who have no interest in this evolution. The turbulence induced, in particular in Thailand, by democratic trial and error, have generated ten years of chaos, alternating between democratic appearances (notably electoral ones) and the takeover of decision-making networks by corporatist players. The uncertainties generated by the monarchical succession, and in particular the need to restore order in the

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(1) Before colonial intervention, the region had a "tributary" relationship with the Middle Kingdom, based on three elements: recognition of China's centrality in the world, peace keeping at the borders of the Empire, and China's non-interference in internal affairs, Lucian Pye *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1985.

(2) By way of illustration, it should be remembered that the Chinese, whose learning is generously subsidised by the Chinese Embassy, became the second foreign language taught in Thailand.

(3) Although in August 2016 the Prime Minister of Thailand launched the first train made in China into service (115 coaches were purchased for USD 140 million), the discussions for the construction of North/South high-speed line were still in progress, given that China had imposed conditions (control of adjacent land and financing conditions) that were inconsistent with "Thailand's sovereignty". To expedite the decision, General Prayuth decided to grant himself full powers on 13 June 2017 (under Article 44 of the Constitution). Beijing is reassured: the project financed by China (EUR 4.8 billion) is due to resume forthwith.

life of the crown prince (1), had justified a crackdown judged by some to be excessive and with hints of a personal witch-hunt. During these years of strong political unrest, China did not move in the name of its famous principle of non-interference in internal affairs – a silence understood as amounting to implicit support. In the Philippines, the feudal nature of its society's organisation has facilitated a policy of patronage, effectively halting all progress (despite the fact that the Philippines was among the first developing countries to hold democratic elections) and weakening national institutions (2). In Malaysia, a highly discriminatory racial policy for non-Malays has voided the democratic process of meaning, in favour of a strong party, tasked with protecting the interests of the Bumiputras, or "sons of the land", to the detriment of other ethnic groups (notably Chinese and Indian). Meanwhile, the ruling coalition since independence (1957), Barisan Nasional is losing steam and losing ground, and is strengthening its hold on state structures to deny the opposition any possibility of victory; heralding the forceful return of repression, corruption and nepotism to this semi-democracy (3).

## Building trust: the vector of functional cooperation

Beginning with the pivotal crisis of 1997, Chinese involvement in South-East Asia has been multifaceted and constant. This long-term investment logic constitutes a structuring parameter of the Chinese approach which all started under the anodyne and friendly form of commercial exchange. Beijing understood that, weakened by the 1997 crisis, the countries of South-East Asia were entering a period of protracted vulnerability. The intelligence of China was to understand this crisis for what it really was; a systemic crisis that called for a systemic and not just economic response. Because the timing suited its purposes, (China was initiating its diplomatic emergence globally and sought to stimulate its southern provinces), because both partners needed stability and assurance, and finally, because Chinese-American rivalry was already emerging (including in the regulatory field), China, pragmatically, decided to invest with regional scope and launched a series of initiatives to "build confidence" and help its neighbours (4). China is projecting a distant horizon of around thirty years (the hundredth anniversary of the CCP's victory in 2049); there will be jolts, detours, and bypasses, but the direction is set: ultimately aiming to establish a "Community of Common Destiny" structured around the renaissance of the Chinese dream (5).

This project, which has justified the implementation of significant institutional and human supports, is currently deploying its effects: China is the largest trading partner in the region, an increasingly committed investor and an important donor of aid.

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(1) We recall that the repudiation and subsequent divorce from his third wife, Princess Srirasmi, led to a cleansing of his entourage, some of whom claim to have been blameless victims.

(2) Paul Hutchcroft & Joel Rocamora, "Strong Demands and Weak Institutions: The Origins and Evolution of the Democratic Deficit in the Philippines", *Journal of East Asian Studies* Vol. 3, no. 2 (May/August 2003), pp. 259-292.

(3) William Case « Malaysia, semi democracy with strain points » in *Politics in South-East Asia, democracy or less*, Routledge, London, 2012, chapter 4, p. 99.

(4) CAFTA (2002), China-ASEAN Partnership (2003), signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (2003).

(5) Jean-Pierre Cabestan "le rêve chinois de Xi Jinping" in *Le système politique chinois : un nouvel équilibre autoritaire*, Les Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, 2014.



The Chinese tactic is simple: by promoting innocuous and functional cooperation initiatives, it takes a foothold, multiplying contacts, identifying points of support and influence ("trust infrastructures"), and establishing its presence across the region; there is always a Chinese delegation somewhere in South-East Asia with the declared intentions of "*deepening relationships, enhancing friendship, or proving good intentions*". Chinese embassies are among the most densely staffed (1).

China's dynamism and its pulling force – the so-called "locomotive" effect – has therefore played a major role in regional recovery and has significantly changed the perception of this giant neighbour formerly associated with the excesses of communism; political rapprochement logically ensued. In order to convince its partners of the relevance of its model, in order to sway political decisions in its direction, China has deployed a whole series of instruments, of which the human supports mentioned above were essential: the Chinese transactional influence is underestimated but beyond the official representatives – and Beijing has close ties with the Thai monarchy (2) –, China has vectors of influence on the ground from all sectors, often including the leaders of Chinese communities (referred to as *bamboo networks*). In this situation, the Chinese diplomacy based on influence is not the sole prerogative of diplomats, or even the military, but increasingly integrates civil society (3) including the business community perceived as effective instruments for disseminating *soft power*; during his visit to Beijing in December 2014, General Prayuth travelled with a delegation of 400 businessmen.

This point is obviously not trivial when discussing Sino-Thai relations: the business communities are mainly composed of Sino-Thais who explain and even defend Xi Jinping's turnaround. Figures including Amorn Apithanakoon, chairman of Thailand's large Galaxy group and several Sino-Thai business associations, or Dhanin Chearavanont, chairman of the CP group, the first Thai multinational, who are valuable relays between Bangkok and Beijing, Henry Sy in the Philippines or Robert Kuok Hock Nien in Malaysia are emblematic spokesmen for making Beijing's point of view heard and upholding the interest in joining in the "*Chinese dream*". These agents of influence are effective vectors for inducing local stakeholders to take decisions that head in the expected direction (4).

Again, China does not operate in the field of coercion: it is adherence that creates sustainability. Beijing, therefore, promotes the means to ensure this adherence, and as a result, Hun Sen, the prime minister of Cambodia for 32 years, has fully adhered to Chinese

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(1) The quality of Chinese diplomats in the countries of South-East Asia is a key factor in this strategy. Everywhere, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has posted experienced and pragmatic diplomats who are often not on their first mission to the country and already know it, having built up highly valuable professional networks. They are also fluent in the language of the host country.

(2) Sophie Boisseau du Rocher, "Chine-Thaïlande : jeu de dupes ou convergences durables", *Monde Chinois*, no. 48, May 2016, pp. 104-111.

(3) In Thailand, we often disregard the fact that 70% of the deputies and 75% of the provincial assemblies are from the Chinese community... compared to 10% from the Thai population. See Arnaud Leveau, *Le Destin des fils du dragon. L'Influence de la communauté chinoise au Viêt Nam et en Thaïlande*, L'Harmattan, IRASEC, 2003.

(4) In this sense, Beijing applies a Weber's approach to power: understanding power as the ability to determine, guide or direct the conduct of others, those with whom we are in relation.

arguments by delivering his country to a risky dependency (1) ! Other "friendly" countries have also been privileged targets – Laos, Burma/Myanmar and to some extent Vietnam – having long benefited from the effects of Chinese *soft power* (2).

But these represent small targets for China and are not partners of choice. To mark its progress in the region, three countries have received Beijing's special attention: Malaysia, Thailand, and Philippines. That these three countries, traditional allies of the United States (3), could distance themselves from Washington would obviously be a resounding sign of the attractiveness of the Chinese model on which they draw their inspiration. Thailand and Malaysia are of fundamental concern: Malaysia, because the Prime Minister's outrageous methods and the UMNO's control of the political machinery are ultimately fuelling discontent that could be picked up by radical (religious) parties, and Thailand because the redefined rules of the game between the Armed Forces and the new sovereign could precipitate a cutback of individual freedoms and the end of the rule of law. Finally, the Philippines has repositioned itself in the configuration of the 1970s: an autocrat from the popular ranks who has imposed a regime of martial law in the name of the fight against a movement brought about by its own abuses and shortcomings: communism under Marcos, Islam under Duterte. In the end, none of these three configurations suggests any kind of "dream", Chinese or not.

## The establishment of "democratorships" in South-East Asia

After the arrival of Xi Jinping at the head of the Chinese state in 2012, as if by imitation, the turn of screw tightened in South-East Asia: the whole structure was there to allow this clampdown "*in the name of stability*". The fruit is ripe: democracy does not allow stability, alternation is perceived as a risk that induces disorder, economic growth is threatened, it is therefore legitimate to stop possible deviations by restoring "discipline" to "*fix the nation's problems*" (in the words of General Prayuth). The discourse and example Xi Jinping are welcomed by regimes that seek any possible arguments to justify holding on to or seizing power.

The Xi effect is expressed in a number of ways, but four characteristics of Chinese discipline have been echoed in South-East Asia in particular: a clampdown on the system through autocratic governance, controlling the opposition under various pretexts, controlling the

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(1) Phou Sambath, "Cambodia-China Relation: Past, Present and Future", Royal University of Cambodia, <http://www.ncku.edu.tw/cseas/98CSEAS/report%20SEA/CAM/cam11%20phou%20sambath.pdf> & John Ciocari "A Chinese model for patron-client relations? The Sino-Cambodian partnership", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 2015 (May), 2, pp. 245-278.

(2) Chinese attempts do not date from President Duterte's rule: at the time, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo had not resisted China's shroud of influence. In his documentary on the South China Sea, Bill Hayton recounts how the various Chinese players had sought to influence the negotiations process with China by richly rewarding the Philippine side. See Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea, the struggle for Power in Asia*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014, pp. 130-135.

(3) The defence treaty with the Philippines dates from 1952, and Thailand, which joined SEATO (1954-1977), signed a friendship treaty in 1966 and a statement for a common vision for the Thailand/United States defence alliance in 2012 (Thailand has been considered by Washington as a major non-NATO ally since 2003).

media and information, and authoritarian capitalism. Again, Beijing is not so worried about the method, as it is about the spirit: the threat comes from the very nature of democracy, from an egalitarianism that is considered to be dangerous, from a civil society that can turn against the state and its leaders or from an unstable and irresponsible electorate. The threat is therefore democracy, a utopia that endangers stability and established order!

## Stiffening of political systems

To avoid setbacks and peaks of crises (such as Tiananmen Square or repeated Red Yellow confrontations in Bangkok, the protests of the Bersih movement in Kuala Lumpur), the powers have instated safety valves. This systematic clampdown is evident in Thailand and Malaysia; while in the Philippines it is being established. The call for breathing room created by democratic procedures and the multi-party system has been dominated, even emptied of meaning. In Thailand, the 19<sup>th</sup> *coup d'État* by the armed forces on 22 May 2014 to establish the self-appointed National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) was given the mission "to bring back happiness" – General Prayuth, the leader of the NCPO, has written a song on this theme (1) – and to put an end to divisions. While the United States and the European Union denounced the seizure of power by force and attacks on democracy, China has refrained from making any statement and has activated its influence vectors on the ground. Well received by an isolated junta, China has reassured the military authorities and granted them unexpected resources (2). In December 2014 during Prime Minister Li Keqiang's visit, government spokesman Yongyuth Mayalarp recalled that the visit "*is an opportunity to demonstrate that our political problems are not an obstacle to better relations with China or to development of our trade ties*". He adds, and the terms borrowed are interesting: "*the situation here is normal and we are working on the establishment of a new Thai democracy*". For the time being, the government rules through decrees.

So, what would will this "*new democracy*", embodied by strong men, look like? What the experts observe is obviously not the establishment of democracy according to the Westminster model, but rather, a "*Chinese democracy*" where the state is in the hands of a small group of individuals who supposedly express the people's needs. There is therefore a dangerous shift: providential figures deviate from democratic institutions and procedures in the name of the good of the people.

In Thailand, this small enlightened group is constituted by the junta around General Prayuth, who first suspended the 2007 constitution that was deemed too liberal (but already far removed from the "people's constitution" passed in 1997), dissolved the Senate and, with the same opacity as in China, multiplied numbers of arbitrary arrests "*in the name of the protection of the monarchy*" and "*the security of the State*". Amnesty International is concerned about the

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(1) Mong Palatino "Thailand's Happy coup", *The Diplomat*, 16 June 2014.

(2) The sale of the submarines to Thailand in May 2017 was strongly contested, not only in the media but also within the armed forces itself. The speed with which General Prawit Wongsuwan, Minister of Defence, hurried to conclude the discussions, suggests, according to various experts interviewed, that he had a personal interest in this deal. Discussions are currently in progress for the installation and commissioning of a Chinese defence equipment repair plant in Thailand.

methods used and the victimisation of personalities who demand freedom of expression and the right to defend themselves in court (1). The members of the Pheu Thai Party (Yingluck Shinawatra's party) or the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) are particularly targeted; some like Prom Janara, defender of land rights, are released after a few days; others, like Nopporn Suppipat, a liberal businessman, are forced to flee; Yingluck Shinawatra, arrested by the army, is under surveillance and cannot leave the country. In January 2015, Daniel Russel, US Assistant Secretary of State, joined the protests and Glyn Davies, ambassador in Bangkok, openly criticised (November 2015) "long prison sentences" for those accused of *lèse-majesté* offences. A new constitution (the fourth draft) was approved by referendum following a muzzled campaign in August 2016 and enacted on 6 March 2017: this constitution enshrines the power of the military, grants special powers to the junta for five years, exempts the armed forces from rights violation since they took power and allows them to stifle any political developments "contrary to the interests of the people". A people that can no longer elect its representatives, the members of the Senate are henceforth appointed by the junta (with the Assembly being elected proportionally). A Committee is set up to establish the government's guidelines for a period of twenty years.

The same concentration of power has occurred in Malaysia, where the poor results of the 2013 elections led the government to an authoritarian clampdown (2). And it has worked: still shaken by his alleged involvement in the 1MDB scandal – 1Malaysia Development Berhad (3) –, Prime Minister Najib Razak and the UMNO party won by-elections in May and June 2016. Building on these results, he continued to strengthen his power by adopting new freedom-destroying laws.

In the Philippines, the election of Rodrigo Duterte as head of state in May 2016 is very good news for Beijing, which once again has been able to interpret the poll for its true value: voters were sick and tired of the democratic promises professed by pro-American candidates. American messianism has run its course in the Philippines, finally incapable of overthrowing feudalism, and worse still, strengthening it. The messages sent out by the newly-elected president also echoed statements heard in China; Rodrigo Duterte proposes a return to authoritarianism as a solution to problems that democracy "fails to solve": "drugs, crime and terrorism require strong methods". To implement them (and the fight against drug traffickers claimed over 8,000 victims in one year), the president does not bother with democratic procedures: after stating that human rights do not apply to drug addicts, his methods include extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detention, and torture, all of which are clearly unconstitutional violations (4). In January 2017, the President declared that "no-one, not even

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(1) Following the introduction of martial law in Thailand, anyone charged by the junta must appear before a military court. But trials are biased. Appeals procedures are non-existent and military judges are empowered to hear cases involving civilians. See Amnesty International *Attitude Adjustment: 100 days under Martial Law*, September 2014.

(2) A. Aeria & Tan Seng Keat, "Deepening Authoritarian Governance in Malaysia: The 2015 Asian Democracy Index", *Asian Democracy Review*, Vol. 4 (2015), pp. 49-63.

(3) Disclosed by the Wall Street Journal in July 2015, the scandal reveals that the Prime Minister had received the equivalent of USD 681 million in his personal accounts in March 2013, when he was facing re-election troubles. New information continues to overwhelm Najib Razak. See W. Case "Stress testing leadership in Malaysia: the 1MDB scandal and Najib Tun Razak", *The Pacific Review*, February 2017, pp. 1-22.

(4) M. Thompson "Bloodied Democracy: Duterte and the Death of Liberal Reformism in the Philippines", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2016, 35, 3, pp. 39-68.

*Congress or the Supreme Court*", could prevent him from declaring martial law "for the protection of his country". "I am not worried about the Supreme Court because of the right to preserve your lives and my nation", he told businessmen in Davao City on 14 January 2017. He even harks back to the memory of President Marcos. In May 2017, the Parliament, where he holds the majority, rejected a motion for impeachment brought against him by Gary Alejano, a member of the opposition. In June 2017, following the tragic events in Marawi, martial law was declared in Mindanao.

## Controlling the opposition

The second characteristic: control of the opposition, is understood in the broad sense. Critics of the regime are muzzled to the point where a "culture of fear" is established (1): thanks to a more or less sophisticated legislative arsenal (sometimes, as in Malaysia, inherited from the past and re-adapted to new circumstances), the opposition is constrained to silence, while demonstrations and other disputes prohibited or monitored and arrests are numerous. All political activity is discouraged: under these conditions, an emerging and often fragmented opposition cannot rise as a credible alternative. In April 2015, the Malaysian government amended the sedition law: anyone who is prosecuted for acts of uprising against the authorities risks up to 20 years' imprisonment compared to three years beforehand; and indeed, there has been a huge increase in arrests (91 trials for sedition in 2015 alone). On 9 April 2015, Prime Minister Najib Razak proclaimed that "the law on sedition will be maintained in order to achieve our goal of building a stable, peaceful and harmonious state", a vocabulary very similar to that used by Xi Jinping. He did not hesitate (before having him arrested for sodomy and sentenced to 5 years in prison in February 2015) to accuse his closest rival, Anwar Ibrahim, leader of the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition party, to be a dangerous radical Muslim with close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the Philippines, Senator Leila de Lima, who reported the abuses of the incumbent president, was arrested in February 2017 on the grounds that she had set up a drug-trafficking network while she was Minister of Justice in the Aquino government. At risk of being arbitrarily imprisoned, like Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia, Leila de Lima in the Philippines, Pongsak Sriboonpeng, Prawet Prapanukul or Jatupat Boonphattharaksa in Thailand – where arrests for *lèse-majesté* (Article 112 of the Penal Code) exceed 105 people –, critics of the regime are obliged to flee (2). Nopporn Suppipat, wanted for a *lèse-majesté* crime, among other offences, had to leave the kingdom and shelter in France which granted him protection by recognising his status as a political refugee; the junta also accuses him of involvement in an alleged corruption scandal, another common pretext – as in China – for pursuing political

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(1) "Deepening the culture of fear: the criminalisation of peaceful expression in Malaysia", Human Rights Watch, October 2015.

(2) Some, sheltering in Laos, fear for their safety, with the government asking this neighbouring country to extradite political opponents

opponents; his company is now controlled by a businessman close to the authorities (1). Thailand is not yet launching operations like "Sky Net" and "Fox Hunt", genuine worldwide manhunts (2), but the methods used may well convince the junta who are already collaborating with the Chinese police (3).

## Controlling the media and information

"From a legislative and police perspective, freedoms of expression have clearly declined in South-East Asia; the restrictions are increasingly numerous", observes Gayathry Venkiteswaren (4). Although this decline does not date back to Thailand's *coup d'État* in May 2014 (cybersurveillance has been very effective since 2011 and the *Computer Crime Act* dates from 2007 and Thaksin Shinawatra had, at that time monopolised the media via the family business, Shin Corp., entailing the de facto deprivation of critical investigation and analysis tools in the public space), it has been undeniably and coarsely reinforced: in April 2015, the Thai authorities suspended the broadcast of Peace TV and of TV 24, two satellite stations affiliated with the UDD party because the "channels broadcast information criticising the military authorities"; similarly, newspapers are urged not to express open criticism likely to undermine political stability and social peace.

Despite the fact that the famous "great internet wall" project (a single portal explicitly based on the Chinese model) was abandoned in 2015 (5), the government is currently working on a draft computer law enabling it to access any computer in case of "emergency": consisting of creating a "National Cybersecurity Committee" headed by General Prayut Chan-O-Cha himself and authorising him to access the computers of any company or individual with a simple court order (and in the event of a "national emergency", the authorities could even dispense with the court order and apply for it retroactively). Free expression on the internet is perceived as a threat to the authoritarian regimes of South-East Asia. Filtering information flows is also a target in Malaysia: in 2012, the amendment to Article 114A provided for the possibility of prosecuting internet hosting providers, service providers and users who broadcast "defamatory comments or criticisms against the authorities". It is not just blogs that are watched (6); the media are also in the government's sights. The choice is simple: newspapers and television either controlled by the state, or belonging to close relations of

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(1) Wind Energy Holding, estimated in 2014 at USD 1.9 billion, produces 92% of wind-generated electricity in the kingdom.

(2) Harold Thibault et Brice Pedroletti, "Quand la Chine vient récupérer ses fugitifs en France", *Le Monde*, 26 May 2017.

(3) In 2015, Thailand extradited close to one hundred Uighurs who sought refuge in its territory, and in October 2016, Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong was prevented by Thai immigration authorities from entering the kingdom.

(4) Gayathry Venkiteswaren, former director of the Press Alliance in South-East Asia, spoke at UNESCO (Paris) on 4 May 2017.

(5) In June 2015, Uttama Savanayna, Thai Minister of Information and Communication, acknowledged that the government was considering reducing the number of internet portals to just one, controlled by the government. The outcry was so vehement that the junta felt it was not in its best interest to violate the right of Thai citizens to internet access.

(6) Sites like Malaysiakini, aimed at "informing to liberate civic consciousness", are closely monitored and regularly subjected to intimidation by the authorities.

the ruling power and the UMNO party to pass on propaganda speeches and messages, or who must renew their license every year, requiring them to practice self-censorship and leading to an information stream that is politically watered-down.

## Authoritarian capitalism

Another characteristic found in China and in the region: the establishment of authoritarian capitalism (1), a more or less sophisticated mix of state-controlled development (or a group claiming to represent the state) and autocratic strategies tainted with a strong hint of nationalism. This authoritarian capitalism also weakens the foundations of democracy by validating the growth/authoritarian stability tandem (2). This model of development naturally fuels the practices of collusion and nepotism; it introduces an authoritarian management style that glosses over regulatory controls and standards. According to Brahma Chellaney, the most accomplished illustration of this authoritarian capitalism can be found in China, which uses it to control not only growth strategies – and thus access to prosperity – but also technological tools, and by extension, the movements of ideas and the vectors that favour them. Meaning that the stakes raised by the implementation of the silk roads (BRI, Belt and Road Initiative) will be decisive for the future, not only economic, but political and societal, of China's South-East Asian partners.

The resurgence of state capitalism can be explained by various means: the multiplication of "elected autocrats" who take advantage of their political position to strengthen their economic position with impunity (modelled on Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand); the strategy of self-promotion launched by states (China and Singapore, for example); the market crisis of capitalism of 2007-2008 which justified the massive bailouts granted by Western governments; the rise of sovereign wealth funds in emerging countries (Malaysia). Moreover, in a context of globalisation, cut-throat competition stimulates the creation of large government-controlled groups that manage any opportunities as closely as possible. This entails the risk that the state will circumvent even the most basic rules of law and prudence, including the use of shameless bribery and favours that it claims to combat.

The scandal that is embroiling and weakening the Malaysian Prime Minister is an illustration of these excesses at the highest level of the state where nepotism without any traceable governance lays bare the predatory and irresponsible behaviour of political elites. The Prime Minister, through 1MDB (*Malaysia Development Berhad*) a sovereign wealth fund he created, used his fellow citizens' money to invest in projects that were sometimes risky and diverted considerable sums (estimated at USD 3.5 billion) to enrich close associates (the famous Jho Low, of Chinese origin and based in Hong Kong) and his own family. Although the

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(1) According to the concept developed and presented by Brahma Chellaney, *Rencontres Economiques d'Aix-en-Provence*, 1 July, 2016.

(2) Joshua Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism. How the Return of Statism Is Transforming the World*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

investigation continues abroad – Switzerland, Singapore, United States (1) –, the process is suspended and blocked in Malaysia, as if the problem did not exist. This opacity and the stiffening of the regime with regard to the opposition, the media and civil society (see the anti-sedition law mentioned above) is precisely what seeds serious doubts. The Attorney General was dismissed in 2015 and his successor has refused to investigate the Prime Minister. The head of the National Anti-Corruption Commission, who had worked on the case, resigned prematurely in the summer of 2016. In the same period, Malaysia was forging links with China.

In Thailand, the argument used by the junta is precisely that ten years of chronic political instability have seriously hampered growth by undermining the trust of the partners. Moreover, the authorities, quoting Xi Jinping's discourse, proclaimed that corruption is a scourge that must be cleaned up at national level and whose eradication is, as in China, closely monitored by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice. The junta has therefore embarked on repeated campaigns with strong media coverage. In 2015, for example, the government issued more than 100 warrants and transferred officials involved in corruption cases. And if, indeed, personalities like the former chairman of the Krungthai bank, Viroj Nuankae, or the former Minister of Trade Boonsong Teriyaphirom are prosecuted and convicted for proven facts, other cases are deliberately forgotten or – in a third instance – others are prosecuted without the opportunity to defend their position; accusations that combine both financial and political events and instead suggest the settlement of personal accounts, such as the case of Bo Xilai. The army itself has a significant number of financial interests; it has every interest to maintain its positions and may avoid applying the anti-corruption decrees enacted by the Prime Minister; in this sense General Prawit, Minister of Defence, seems determined to profit with impunity from his status (he has a seniority advantage over General Prayuth). These two-speed and two-faced games do not seem to fluster Asian investors who for the time being are benefiting from conditions of reduced competition. But they explain why Thailand, among the world's champions in inequality (2), has plummeted from 76<sup>th</sup> to 101<sup>st</sup> place among countries according to the perceived corruption index of the NGO *Transparency International* (on a par, incidentally, with the Philippines).

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(1) The investigations undertaken by international press and experts resulted in strong recriminations of interference from Kuala Lumpur; Australian journalists were even arrested and detained for asking the Prime Minister questions about the case.

(2) 1% of the population shares 58% of the overall wealth of the kingdom according to the latest *Global Wealth Report 2016* issued by the Credit Suisse Research Institute (CSRI)



## Conclusion

In order to establish a sustainable sphere of influence in South-East Asia, China needs these political approximations and does not become encumbered by covering up autocratic shifts under the guise of non-interference and consensual cooperation. They enable it not only to validate its political choices but also to better control the evolutions under way to protect its interests.

This induced – and desirable – effect distances the United States and the American safety net from the region. At the same time, it signals the failure of a West which, by focusing on electoral practices, has failed to make a convincing case for the interest of democracy. The outcome and prospects are potentially catastrophic, both for Western values and for Western interests.



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