

*Politics in Asia*

# THREE FACES OF POPULISM IN ASIA

POPULISM AS A MULTIFACETED POLITICAL PRACTICE

Edited by Shiru Wang



# Three Faces of Populism in Asia

Drawing on evidence from eight case studies from across three Asian subregions, this volume highlights the distinctive features of Asian populism in comparison with Western experiences. In contrast to the latter, populist practices in Asia tend to exhibit an ambiguous nature, often characterized by ad hoc and mixed ideological add-ons.

The case studies shed light on the cultural dimension of populism, an aspect that has been largely overlooked in Western contexts. Empirical evidence shows that political culture and identity politics exert an influence on populist practices in Asia. In the meantime, populist attitudes towards the role of politicians, the popular will and the relationship between the elite and the people can serve as an explanatory variable for political outcomes. The relationship between populism and democracy in Asia is observed to be more intricate than that in Western contexts. Populism is not necessarily endogenous to democracy, and thus its emergence may not solely be a response to the crisis of democracy.

The book presents a valuable resource for scholars and students of Asian politics and those looking at the phenomenon of populism through a comparative lens.

**Shiru Wang** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Science at Hang Seng University, Hong Kong.

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Populism as a Multifaceted Political Practice

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# Contributors

**Srikrishna Ayyangar** is an associate professor at Azim Premji University, India. His articles have been published in various journals covering Indian politics and comparative populisms. His most recent article (with Ashutosh Varshney and Siddharth Swaminathan) was “Populism and Nationalism in India”, published in *Studies of Comparative International Development*.

**Sarah Eaton** is Professor of Transregional China Studies at Humboldt University Berlin, Germany. She is the author of *The Advance of the State in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, 2016), among other publications.

**Andreas Eder-Ramsauer** is a PhD candidate at the University of Vienna, Austria. He is the author of “Yamamoto Tarō and Reiwa Shinsengumi: Love, Populism, and Radical Democracy for a Neoliberal Japan” in the *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*.

**Sang-Jin Han** is a professor emeritus of sociology at Seoul National University. He is the author of *Confucianism and Reflexive Modernity* (Brill, 2020) and the editor of *Asian Tradition and Cosmopolitan Politics* (Lexington Books, 2018) and *Beyond Risk Society* (Seoul National University Press, 2017), among other books.

**Jason Kuo** is Associate Professor of political science at National Taiwan University. His fields of study include the political economy of international relations, comparative political institutions, political psychology, as well as applied survey and experimental methods for public and foreign policy evaluations.

**Mitsuru Matsutani** is a professor at Chukyo University, Japan. He is the author of *Popyurizumu no seiji shakaigaku [A Political Sociology of Populism]* (University of Tokyo Press, 2022).

**Armin Müller** is a postdoctoral researcher and principal investigator at Constructor University, Bremen, German. His research focuses on the political economy of social protection and skill formation in the People’s Republic of China. He is the author of “Public Services and Informal Profits: Governing Township Health Centres in a Context of Misfit Regulatory Institutions”, published in *China Quarterly*.

**Syaza Shukri** is an associate professor of political science at the International Islamic University Malaysia. She is the editor of *Pandemic, Politics and a Fairer Society in Southeast Asia: A Malaysian Perspective* (Emerald, 2023). Her other works include “In Limbo: Islamist Populism and Democratic Stagnation in Malaysia” in *Democratic Recession, Autocratization, and Democratic Backlash in Southeast Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

**Andreas Ufen** is a senior research fellow at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in Hamburg, Germany, and editor of the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*. He has published numerous articles in journals such as *Democratization*, *South East Asia Research*, *Pacific Affairs*, *Pacific Review*, *Asian Survey*, *Contemporary Politics* and *Critical Asian Studies*.

**Shiru Wang** is an assistant professor at the Social Science Department of the Hang Seng University of Hong Kong. Her current research interests include populism, nationalism and social media. She is the author of *Cyberdualism in China: The Political Implications of Internet Exposure of Educated Youth* (Routledge, 2017).



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# I Introduction

## Populism as a Multifaceted Political Practice

*Shiru Wang*

**Abstract:** The mainstream scholarly discussion of populism tends to neglect Asian experiences, and the limited studies of Asian populism simply replicate the existing conceptual frameworks primarily stemming from European and American experiences. This chapter begins by critiquing contested conceptualizations of populism and examines how Asian populism aligns with the existing theoretical frameworks. This chapter also examines distinct Asian contexts that have shaped the nature of populist practices in this region. Traditional cultural conditions have long been ingrained in Asian politics. Nationalism and identity politics that emerged during the decolonization period remain deeply entrenched in Asian political culture and governance. The substantial presence of authoritarian and hybrid regimes in Asia constitutes a unique non-democratic context for populist practices.

The chapter proposes a theoretical framework to capture not only the ideational and mobilizational dimensions of populist practices, but also the cultural dimension of such practices in Asian societies. Finally, this chapter introduces the structure of the book.

### Rising Populism

A new wave of populism has gained significant political and academic importance in recent years, particularly following the 2016 US presidential election and Brexit, as Britain's withdrawal from the European Union is popularly known. The current wave of neopopulism in Europe and North America is often compared to earlier movements in Latin America (Jansen 2011). However, scholars have yet to agree on how to conceptualize the phenomenon owing to the diversity of its manifestations and the ambiguous nature of populist language. The existing assertions about populism primarily draw from regional practices in Europe, North America and Latin America, largely overlooking Asian societies. Nevertheless, populism is not foreign to Asian people as elements such as nationalism, ethnocentrism, people power movements, "sovereignty of the people" rhetoric and mass line mobilization tactics have played significant roles in the Asian political landscapes. Yet, a systematic study of populism in Asia is currently lacking. This book aims to fill this research

gap by examining various populist practices in Asia and incorporating Asian perspectives into the theoretical understanding of populism.

This introductory chapter contains four parts. The first reviews the literature on the conceptualization of populism and illustrates how populism in Asia aligns with existing theoretical frameworks. While Asian populism shares certain characteristics with its Western counterparts, it also exhibits distinct features. The second part of this chapter examines some of the unique aspects of Asian politics and governance that can shape populist practices. However, it is important to note that populist manifestations in Asia are not uniform. Therefore, the third part proposes a theoretical framework for a comparative analysis of populism in Asian societies. Finally, the fourth part introduces the structure of the book.

### **Contested Conceptualizations**

The concept of populism has been a subject of extensive debate and contention in academic literature. Competing definitions of populism have primarily emerged from observations in two regions—Europe and the Americas. The debate surrounding the conceptualization of populism revolves around three interconnected questions: what populism is, how to approach it in research, and what accounts for its emergence and recurrence.

#### *Defining Populism*

Scholars have traced populist practices back to the 19th century. Over time, researchers have identified three distinct methodological strategies and theoretical focuses (Canovan 1981; Jansen 2011; Weyland 2001). Earlier studies in the 1960s and 1970s focused on the *who* question and examined the social basis of populism using a structuralist approach. Studies in the 1970s and 1980s shifted to the *why* question and adopted an interpretive approach to investigate populist discourse and the agency of populist followers. More recently, studies on neopopulism have emphasized the political perspective and analysed the political processes and consequences of populism (Jansen 2011).

Different theoretical focuses have led to varying conceptualizations of populism. These range from a “cumulative definition”, which identifies the socio-economic core of populism in diverse cases, to a “radial definition”, which expands the pool of populist cases by including “diminished subtypes” that lack one or more defining attributes, and a “classical definition”, which specifies a fixed set of necessary attributes based on previous understandings of populist practices (Weyland 2001).

However, even among scholars who adopt the classical concept of populism, there is disagreement regarding its defining attributes. Some scholars focus on populist discourses and ideas, and portray populism as a “thin” ideology that emphasizes the sovereignty of a presumed homogeneous people in conflict with a corrupt elite (Mudde 2004, 2017; Stanley 2008). Others, such as Laclau (2005), argue that populism is not an ideology but a political

logic, emphasizing its inclusionary nature. In this perspective, “the people” are constructed as a unified collective through “empty signifiers” such as rhetorical symbols or ideals (i.e., “freedom” or “justice”), bound by a “chain of equivalence” (Laclau 2005; Kohn 2006). Brubaker (2017a) defines populism as “discursive and stylistic repertoire” for comparative analysis, considering it a matter of degree rather than a dichotomy. Finally, Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014) focus on the cultural manifestation of populism among voters and measure the phenomenon through voters’ populist attitudes.

On the other hand, some scholars concentrate on the role of populist leaders and their mobilizational tactics. Weyland (2001, 2017) views populism as a political strategy characterized by a vertical political mobilization in a populist movement, where a personalistic leader mobilizes popular support by cultivating a “direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized” relationship with a group of unorganized followers to gain electoral success. Another group of scholars examine the political style or performance of populist leaders in their mobilization processes, exploring the set of manners and rhetoric these leaders intentionally adopt to build a political relationship with target audiences (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy 2017).

In addition, Jansen (2011) takes an integrative approach to the conceptual debate and proposes a definition that considers populism as a political practice. Rather than taking a stance on the various definitions of populism, he focuses on populist mobilization as the research area and defines it as the co-presence of mutually reinforcing discursive and mobilizational components. This perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding the dynamic relationship between the discursive and mobilizational aspects of populism and how they work together to shape political outcomes. By taking this approach, Jansen seeks to bridge the gap between the various conceptualizations of populism and provide a more comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon.

### *Approaching Populism*

Different definitions of populism entail various approaches in research. The ideational and discursive approaches focus on analysing the ideas and rhetoric expressed in populist discourse. The ideology argument presents populism as a relational frame between two homogeneous groups in antagonism: the people and the demoralized elite. This argument suggests that the “thinness” of the ideational approach allows for its application to a variety of contexts, encompassing both right-wing and left-wing tendencies of populism on both the supply and demand sides. However, despite Mudde’s assertion (2017) that populist leadership is not a necessary condition for populism, studies that adopt this approach tend to predominantly concentrate on a specific populist leader on the supply side.

In contrast, the demand side of populism has received relatively less attention in the literature. An exception to this is the research on political attitudes towards the key ideational components of populism. Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014) investigate the sociocultural manifestation of populist ideology from the



demand side and correlate voters' populist attitudes with their preferences for political parties. To measure populism on the demand side, they compose a populism scale using survey measures of people's attitudes, primarily towards the notion of the sovereignty of the people, the antagonism between the people and the elite, and the Manichaean division between "good" and "evil".

Laclau's work challenges the notion of finding a stable social basis for populism, which he argues is misleading (Laclau 2005; Kohn 2006). Populism, in his view, is a political logic and mobilizational rhetoric characterized by its fluidity and lack of association with any fixed social groups. The "incoherence of populism is its most salient characteristic", which hinders the establishment of a universal definition of populism (Kohn 2006, 166). Laclau's theory articulates the essential discursive logic of populism centred around "the people" and accommodates a variety of populist practices within its overarching framework. However, there is a trade-off in Laclau's approach. While it captures the discursive logic for inclusiveness, which is a central focus of left-wing populism, it may be less effective in capturing the logic of exclusiveness in right-wing populist practices.

In contrast to Laclau's approach, Brubaker (2017a) offers a more practical framework and typology for a comparative empirical analysis of populism. He defines populism as "a discursive and stylistic repertoire" that can be used to characterize all forms of populist practices, including "ideological commitments, substantive policies, organizational practices, bases of support, and so on" (see footnote 8 in Brubaker 2017a). Departing from the dichotomous conceptualization, Brubaker perceives populism as "a matter of degree, not a sharply bounded phenomenon that is either present or absent" (Brubaker 2017a, 362). From Brubaker's discursive and stylistic perspective, the typology of populism is constructed for comparative analysis based on the understanding of "the people". The people are measured by the intersection of vertical and horizontal oppositions in a two-dimensional vision of social space. The vertical opposition of the people includes the unrepresentative elite at the top and the privileged group that the elite represents, while the horizontal opposition is between the bounded collectivity and outsiders. A comparative study can be conducted by measuring the degree of opposition to these two dimensions in the discourse.

In contrast, the mobilization approach examines the political styles, organizational strategies and performative tactics employed by populist leaders to mobilize support. This approach places personalistic charismatic leadership at its core. Early studies by Roberts (1995) outlined various aspects of populist leadership, covering its personalistic nature, social basis, organizational features and policy orientation. This conceptualization created an ordinal measure capturing different "diminished subtypes" of populism (also discussed by Weyland 2001). However, owing to its lack of a minimal conceptual core, many scholars researching the current wave of neopopulism have abandoned this approach and turned to classical concepts (Jansen 2011; Weyland 2001).

Empirical evidence confirms that populist leaders often lack a strong commitment to specific policies. Therefore, the policy orientation of populist leaders becomes less relevant in conceptualizing populism in the current wave. Instead, populist mobilization can be observed through the organizational

strategies employed by populist leaders, such as elections, plebiscites, mass demonstrations and opinion polls, to establish a direct and unmediated relationship with the unorganized masses (Weyland 2001, 2017). The populist strategy is short-lived and purposeful. According to this approach, “the people” are recognized as a diverse and heterogeneous group, but they are collectively drawn to charismatic leadership.

Moffitt and Tormey (2014) focus on the political style of a populist leader in building a political relationship with the people. Populism as a political style is primarily characterized by the performances (manners and rhetoric) of a personalistic leader in political communication. According to this definition, populism goes beyond mere performance and is manifested through “a feedback loop whereby the performance can actually change or create the audience’s subjectivity and this in turn can change the context and efficacy of the performance” (p. 389). Unlike the ideational assumptions, the mobilization approach argues that the populist leader may not necessarily describe the elite as corrupt, and the people and elite may not always be in an antagonistic relationship. However, the two are portrayed as distinct groups, with the people often marginalized. The antagonism of the people may be directed towards other social groups, such as foreigners. Populist rhetoric provokes perceptions of crisis, breakdown and threat. Populist leaders employ “bad manners”, such as playfulness, directness and disrespect for social hierarchy and norms to appeal to ordinary people.

Ostiguy (2017) focuses on the intentional display of “bad manners” by populist leaders. He approaches populism from a relational perspective, based on a dichotomous understanding of the sociocultural and politico-cultural domains, capturing the antagonism between the “high” (institutionalized, dominant and cosmopolitan) and the “low” (unmediated, dominated and nativist). In this case, populism is conceptualized as an antagonistic appropriation of an “unpresentable Other” for political mobilization purposes, characterized by a series of acts by the populist leader that flaunt the “low” in order to build a political relationship by eliciting public affection for the leader.

The extant literature on populism generally aligns with either the discursive or mobilizational approach. Some studies, particularly those examining the rhetoric of populism, may encompass both discursive and performative elements in their discussion (Laclau 2005; Moffitt and Tormey 2014). However, there are limited attempts to integrate these two contesting conceptualizations into an overarching method. Jansen (2011) proposes an alternative perspective that focuses on populist mobilization as a means rather than an end. He describes populist mobilization as any sustained, large-scale political project combining popular mobilization with populist rhetoric and intends to move beyond conceptual disagreements. In this view, the discursive and mobilizational domains are conceptually distinct but mutually reinforcing, jointly constituting populist mobilization. Through populist mobilization with an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric, marginalized social sectors are transformed into visible and contentious political actors.

Table 1.1 provides a summary of the definitions, conceptualizations and concrete measures of populism in the various approaches. The ideational

Table 1.1 Conceptualizations of neopopulism

<i>Populism as</i>	<i>Representative Scholars</i>	<i>Conceptualizations of Populism</i>	<i>Approaches to Populism</i>	<i>Measures of Populism</i>
<i>Ideational/Discursive Approach</i>				
Ideology (ideational)	Mudde 2004	Pure homogeneous people vs. corrupt elite in moral antagonism; the sovereignty of the people	A relational frame in the discourse consisting of “the people” as a previously suppressed group and the demoralized and unrepresentative elite in moral antagonism	Dichotomous and one-dimensional
Ideology (ideational)	Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014	Pure homogeneous people vs. corrupt elite in moral antagonism; the sovereignty of the people	A set of survey instruments to measure populist attitudes on the three aspects—the sovereignty of the people, opposition to the elite, and the Manichaeian division between “good” and “evil”, from the demand side and construct populism scale	Continuous and one-dimensional
Political Logic (discursive)	Laclau 2005	The people as a unitary collective defined by an empty signifier, bonded by chains of equivalence	“Empty signifiers” and “chains of equivalence” such as “freedom”, “justice”, and “we are the people” function to construct “the people” in the discourse	N/A, not for identifying a social basis
Discursive and Stylistic Repertoire (discursive)	Brubaker 2017a	The people defined by the intersection of vertical and horizontal oppositions in a two-dimensional vision of social space	“The people” are vertically defined in opposition to economic, political and cultural elites and horizontally defined as a bounded collective (insiders) in opposition to outsiders	Ordinal and two-dimensional
<i>Mobilization Approach</i>				
Political Strategy (organizational)	Weyland 2001	A political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, un-institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers	A series of political strategies, such as elections, plebiscites, mass demonstrations and opinion polls, by a personalistic leader to build an unmediated linkage with largely unorganized masses	Nominal categorical and two-dimensional

Political Style (performative)	Moffitt and Tormey 2014	The repertoires of performance that are used to create a political relation between a populist leader and “the people”	The performances (manners and rhetoric) of a personalistic leader build a relationship with “the people” in a feedback loop whereby the performance can actually change or create the audience’s subjectivity and this in turn can change the context and efficacy of the performance	Nominal categorical and two-dimensional
Antagonistic Appropriation for political, mobilizational purposes of an “unpresentable Other” (cultural-relational)	Ostiguy 2017	The antagonistic, mobilizational “flaunting of ‘the low’”	The use of popular, coarse, accessible and sometimes vulgar language and dramatic, colourful and even politically incorrect acts to attract the public’s attention	Ordinal categorical and two-dimensional
Integrative Approach				
Political Practice (discursive + mobilizational)	Jansen 2011	Populist mobilization as a political project, a concerted and sustained set of political activities—a package of mobilizational and discursive practices	Any sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors for publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti- elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people	Nominal categorical and two-dimensional

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approach emphasizes a dichotomous, one-dimensional indicator of populism and highlights the contrast between populism and nonpopulism. On the other hand, other approaches tend to be multidimensional and nominal, incorporating more categories. Some approaches treat populism as a matter of degree in an ordinal measurement.

### *Accounting for the (Re)emergence of Populism*

In addition to the conceptual debate, there is a lack of consensus among researchers regarding the reasons for the emergence of populism. Early structuralists and Marxists attributed the rise of populism in Argentina and Brazil in the 1970s to socio-economic factors. However, since the 1990s, scholars have primarily explained the current wave of neopopulism in terms of the “populist conjuncture” and political opportunity structure (Jansen 2011; Weyland 2001). Dealignment theory suggests that the decline of traditional political party systems and democratic mediation is the structural reason behind the rise of unmediated and non-institutional mobilization led by personalistic political leaders seeking popular support and electoral victory (Brubaker 2017a). In Western Europe and North America, voter-party dealignment resulted from the “populist conjuncture”, which comprised a chain of crises, such as the 2008 economic and financial crisis, the refugee crisis and the crisis of terrorism. These crises generated a growing sense of insecurity and fostered populism.

Prior to the occurrence of contingencies that might have triggered populism, long-term structural transformations and sociocultural changes had already taken place and challenged the fundamental pillars of Western democracies—democratic institutions and neoliberalism. These changes created an opportunity structure for alternative practices. Meanwhile, increasing individualization challenged entrenched representative democracy, while the rise of protectionism as a conservative reaction to extensive globalization and the dominance of neoliberalism moulded identity politics (Brubaker 2017a).

Furthermore, some scholars highlight the role of technological changes and social media in facilitating the spread of populist messages and the formation of populist movements (Brubaker 2017a; Moffitt 2016). The advent of social media platforms has allowed populist leaders to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of information and directly communicate with their followers, amplify their populist messages and mobilize supporters. Additionally, supporters can disseminate populist messages through their personal social media networks, creating a snowball effect that enhances the credibility of the messages and sustains populist movements (Wanless and Berk 2022).

### *Conceptualizing Populist Practices in Asia*

The mainstream scholarly discussion of populism tends to overlook Asian experiences, and the limited number of Asia-focused studies often replicate the conceptual debate surrounding populism. The ideational approach identifies

a few prominent cases of populism in East Asia, such as the “movie hero” populism of former president Joseph Estrada in the Philippines, the agrarian populism of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, and the nationalist populism of the presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia (Hellmann 2017). While each of these cases possesses unique characteristics, they are considered close to the ideal type of populism in the ideational approach since all three populist leaders promoted a populist ideology based on an antagonistic relationship between “the people” and the “corrupt elite”. Populist strategies and performances were present in these cases, but they are regarded as less relevant and at most supplementary. Other documented populist leaders or scenarios, such as Joko Widodo (a.k.a. Jokowi) from Indonesia, Junichiro Koizumi from Japan, and Chen Shui-bian from Taiwan, are largely regarded as instances of conceptual stretch (Hellmann 2017). The case of Rodrigo Duterte’s violent populism in the Philippines is hardly considered according to this approach (Thompson 2022).

However, another group of scholars highlight the similarities between Latin American and Asian experiences and promote the mobilization approach, which defines populism as “the charismatic mobilization of a mass movement in pursuit of political power” in the Asian context (Kenny 2018, 1; Mizuno and Phongpaichit 2009). The mobilization approach differs from the ideational approach in the way scholars discuss Jokowi’s electoral mobilization. According to the ideational approach, Prabowo is considered populist, while Jokowi is not because the former makes “a moral distinction” between the people and the elite in his discourse, whereas the latter only performs populistically. In contrast, the mobilization approach argues that Jokowi is as populist as Prabowo, albeit in different ways, because he was able to bypass the political party and utilize his personal charisma to attract unmediated voters and win the election in a “pragmatic, moderate and inclusive” manner (Mietzner 2014, 115; also see Hellmann 2017; Kenny 2017).

While some studies of populism in Asia focus on the two competing conceptualizations, others omit conceptual discussion and directly move to discuss populist practices in prototypical cases, examining exclusionary versus inclusionary populism and left-wing versus right-wing populism (Kaul and Vajpeyi 2020; Pepinsky 2020). These studies highlight the importance of investigating the concrete ways in which populist practices manifest in different Asian contexts, rather than being bogged down by definitional debates.

A notable discrepancy arises between the European and American experiences of populism and those observed in Asia when one explores the reasons behind the rise and success of populist movements. Scholars have elucidated the emergence of neopopulism in Europe and the Americas by considering a combination of factors, including the populist conjuncture and a political opportunity structure that facilitates voter—party dealignment. Some research has attempted to apply a similar framework to explain populism in Asia and highlighted the 1997 Asian financial crisis as the contingent event nurturing populism in the region (Mizuno and Phongpaichit 2009). However, unlike

the concentrated outburst of populist practices witnessed across European countries within a short time frame, Asian populism emerged at different time points and cannot be attributed to a single crisis. Moreover, the ideological tension between social groups and political parties regarding economic policies and neoliberalism, which ultimately led to dealignment in Europe and the Americas, did not manifest to the same extent in Asian societies. In Asia, the connection between the electorate and political parties is generally rooted in patronage rather than ideology (Kenny 2017, 2018).

Furthermore, the chronic social transformations that contextualize populism in Europe, such as individualization and the erosion of social hierarchies, are not as prominent in Asia. Authoritarianism and social hierarchy still prevail in many Asian societies today, such as the enduring effects of the caste system in India, deep respect for authority in Japan, South Korea and Thailand, and the influence of Islam in Southeast Asia. Owing to the relatively underdeveloped or newly developed nature of most Asian societies, economic development and material interests remain primary concerns. Data from multiple waves of the World Values Survey conducted between 1999 and 2021 indicate that almost all Asian societies included in the survey displayed greater emphasis on survival concerns and less interest in advocacy for freedom of expression over time compared with Western Europe and North America. The only exception was Japan, which scored higher on the survival versus self-expression dimension, leaning more towards self-expression values than West Germany in Wave 4 of the survey between 1999 and 2004. Japan also exhibited a score similar to that of the United States on the same dimension in Wave 7 between 2017 and 2021, primarily due to the decline of self-expression values in the latter (Bomhoff and Gu 2012; Inglehart and Welzel 2005, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Asian societies, in general, prioritize economic growth over individual rights and view globalization as a necessary mechanism for economic development. Neoliberalism encountered fewer ideological barriers in Asia than in Latin America, and protectionism has not gained as much traction as an ideology in Asia as it has in Europe and North America today.

The next section will focus on the specific features of populist practices in Asia, along with the distinctive characteristics of politics and governance in the region. It will be followed by a discussion of a theoretical framework that better accommodates populism in Asia.

### **Asian Contexts for Populist Practices**

In comparison with the rapid expansion of populism in the Western context, populism in Asia appears to be less vigorous and has therefore received limited attention in scholarly research (Vickers 2017). However, from both discursive and mobilizational perspectives, populist practices are not foreign to students of Asian governance. Several unique features specific to Asia have, to some extent, shaped the nature of populist practices in this region. First, authoritarianism, charismatic leadership and patronage have traditionally been