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Debate: Advancing decolonization of public administration—Experiences and lessons from East Asia

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The call for decolonizing and globalizing the public administration (PA) field is hardly new (Gulrajani & Moloney, 2012; Moloney, 2018). Yet, it remains a challenging pursuit given the stereotypical assumption that:

Global = Western = Good = ModernPA

in PA scholarship and reforms (Drechsler, 2013; see also Cheung, 2013). This article focuses on the period after the Second World War until the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, during which East Asia's economic policies contributed significantly to rapid and inequality-reducing growth (World Bank, 1993; Campos & Root, 1996) and the improvement of material wellbeing of its people (Henderson, 2011). As such, it can be viewed as a not-so-distant episode of PA that delivered performance with equity (Drechsler, 2013, p. 320).

Good PA in East Asia?

Classical economics is fundamentally premised on the unquestioned supremacy of the market for attaining economic prosperity, with policy implication that the state should have a reactive role in correcting market failures (for example Mazzucato & Ryan-Collins, 2022). Any further exercise of government power is considered problematic (Cheung, 2012). With the end of the Second World War, the liberal economic order again gained global prominence through post-war international economic institutions largely led by the USA. Not surprisingly, post-Second World War influence by the USA was on the rise in much of East Asia (with mainland China as a rare exception), following prior external colonial influences of the UK, Germany and regional powers like Japan.

However, economic policies adopted in East Asia during this period were very different from those of the previous colonial masters. East Asian governments were no longer just passive correctors of market failures—instead, the state supported the market through financial incentives, co-ordinative networks, and information. Whether labelled a 'market-friendly' model (World Bank, 1993) or a 'governed-market' model (Wade, 1990), this approach was valuable at a time when domestic businesses were still too weak for international competition (Evans, 1998, p. 78). Whereas the relationship between the government and the market was much closer than what was typical for industrialized economies in the West, East Asian governments managed to stay independent from business capture.

Why and how such transcendence of the Western orthodoxy happened in East Asia deserves closer scrutiny.

Cheng et al. (1998) noted that the competent bureaucracies in East Asia cannot be taken for granted as 'some kind of natural resource immediately available' in the post-war era. Instead, they were shaped by 'intense, prolonged struggles for reform and endless experimentation' (Evans, 1998, p. 71) and—especially in South Korea and Taiwan—by the interests and incentives of their political leaders.

Nevertheless, historical legacies cannot be disregarded altogether. Notably, Berman (2010) highlighted how the common experience of suffering under colonial occupation led people in East Asia to put trust in civil servants and a strong central government to protect them from socioeconomic and political turbulence. This is in stark contrast with the prevalent American belief in less interference by government beyond correcting market failures. It is in this sense that the economic policy choices made by the East Asian and Western governments were shaped by, and in turn reflected, their respective administrative philosophies and beliefs (Cheung, 2013, p. 257).

While this may help explain the region's *strong* government, why bureaucracies were *competent* enough to steer this non-orthodox approach needs further exploration. Confucian meritocracy may provide some clues. The historical record of conducting official civil service exams was understandably uneven between China (where the practice originated), Japan, and Korea (Berman, 2010; Kim, 2017). But the practice still helped bring the brightest of their respective societies into the public service, thanks to the high prestige of civil service jobs and decent remuneration. During the post-Second World War years, it was the bureaucrats recruited on merit who managed to gather information on the needs and interests of business, to solve co-ordination problems among firms, and to ultimately make East Asia's non-orthodox economic policies work. The emphasis on performance, a hallmark of Confucian PA (Drechsler, 2013), resumed and was made explicit in post-war East Asia. Not least, performance in the format of economic development was perceived as vital for regime survival (Campos & Root, 1996); a logic that was later applied to mainland China since its 1970s economic reforms (for example see Jiang, 2018).

Lessons for the ongoing decolonization quest

This example of East Asia's economic policy-making serves as a timely reminder that the region managed to achieve good PA, but in a distinctively non-Western manner. In

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other words, instead of being an epitome of 'good governance' along Western-set standards, this experience is closer to what Grindle (2004) labelled as 'good enough governance' that delivered reasonable results (see also Cheung, 2013).

It is even more remarkable that this happened *before* decolonization was yet to be firmly put on the agenda of PA research and practice. Nor was the pre-colonial experience of South-to-North policy learning (as recently exemplified in the influence of China on the introduction of UK's civil service exam system—see Kim & Massey, 2024) extensively explored. By then, it was largely taken for granted that developing countries should adopt PA prescriptions from their Western counterparts under the name of 'development' administration. Yet, challenging the consolidated and amplified Western intellectual hegemony remains difficult, notwithstanding recent improvements (for example Zhang et al., 2022). East Asian PA scholars continue to confront various hurdles pertaining to journal and association leadership, education and training, language, method and concept relevancy (Moloney, 2018; Salazar Morales et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2022). To truly decolonize the field into a global, diverse, and inclusive one, overcoming these hurdles is imperative. Otherwise, decolonization risks being reduced to a bandwagon (Moosavi, 2020) in which 'the disciplinary colonial logic of the division of labour between the empire and its periphery' only gets reinforced (Nisar, 2023, p. 147).

As such, compared with concrete policy actions to be taken, it is the broader lessons generated from this East Asian example of 'originality and inventiveness [which] outperform[ed] the original' (Evans, 1998, p. 83) that are worth paying more attention to. Not least, it suggests that transcending Western orthodoxy does not necessarily mean disregarding it altogether. Rather, such innovative 'amalgams of national and Western practice' (Moloney, 2018, p. 275) reflect an *autonomous* and *deliberate* choice of the best of different PA worlds suited to the needs of their contexts. This, in turn, brings hope that 'drawing lessons and inspirations from Western experiences and at the same time building upon indigenous thoughts and values' may become the order of the day for non-Western PA (NWP) contexts in pursuit of modernity (Cheung, 2013, p. 255).

Equally notable is that the East Asian success was built on 'imperfect government machinery' where competent bureaucracies co-existed with 'pockets of conspicuous inefficiency' (Evans, 1998). Following the recent revival of positive PA scholarship (Compton & 't Hart, 2019), future research should exert more effort to understand and unpack such incremental or even imperfect success from NWP contexts. Finally, future research is also encouraged to investigate carefully the state and policy capacities (Wu et al., 2015; Yan et al., *Forthcoming*) required on this decolonization quest, and how such capacities can be furnished.

To conclude, this article makes the case for advancing the decolonization quest in PA research and practice by revisiting the example of post-Second World War economic policy-making in East Asia. A not-so-distant epitome of good PA that clearly delivered performance (in this case, economic growth and poverty reduction) with equity (reduction of inequality), but also deviated from Western orthodoxy. More specifically, the proactive role played by a strong and

competent government in support of the market is substantially influenced by the region's own administrative philosophy.

As the various challenges to counter Western-centric stereotypes regarding good PA are yet to be fully overcome, this debate article offers historical lessons and joins recent scholarship (for example on Islamic PA, see Drechsler et al., 2025) in highlighting the value of reconsidering, rather than disregarding, indigenous thoughts and values. More space should thus be opened to foreground these lessons on equal terms with those from the Global North, to inspire and facilitate more scholarship from NWP in exploring 'the best of both worlds' for better performance in specific contexts.

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