General Reflections on Informal Politics in East Asia

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"Informal politics" is an appropriate term for what it refers to because it is elusive while not appearing obscure. It is the sort of term that seems familiar until one tries to define it. Moreover, it is a seductive term; it clearly shares some conceptual world with "formal politics," but who would not assume that, of the two, "informal politics" would not be more interesting and more tangible? If students were given a choice between "Formal Politics 101" and "Informal Politics 101," it would be easy to predict which would be more popular. It is also universal; even in such a seemingly enlightened and rational place as a university, "office politics" forms the ubiquitous shadow side of deliberations.

As these papers illustrate, informal politics in East Asia is as attractive, familiar, and yet elusive as its label. It covers everything from Korean bureaucrats to Chinese gerontocrats, and from Japanese sewers to China's future. The task of this concluding essay is to reflect in general on the study of informal politics and how it relates to Asia. We begin with a general analysis of informal politics in East Asia based on the papers included in this issue as well as other research in the field. We then proceed to some theoretical musings on the nature of informal politics and on the methodological problems that are specific to its study.

The East Asian Spectrum of Informal Politics

What strikes us most in comparing the dynamics of East Asian informal politics is the contrast between the Japanese and Chinese ways of practicing it.
In both cases, informal politics may be equally vibrant and ubiquitous but we find it enduring, structural, and expressive in Japan while elusive, situational, and nebulous in China. Indeed in terms of transparency, legitimacy, and functionality of informal politics, these two cases are polar types, making a continuum along which South Korea and Taiwan are arrayed, both seemingly moving from the Chinese end to the Japanese end thanks to their recent democratic change. In Japan informal politics is relatively visible, very civil, and largely tolerated, if not acquiesced, while in China it is barely recognizable, often unruly, even violent, and always ideologically denounced. And yet, as Fehs and Fukui and Fukai cogently show, informal politics does provide a flexibility and vitality to policy-making in China, while it mainly serves as a mechanism for pork barrel politics and power-sharing in Japan.

The distinction between China and Japan is perhaps most obvious in the forms and shapes of factions, the primary vehicle of informal politics. Factional rosters of Japanese Diet members are listed in parliamentary gazettes and factional ties are ritually reaffirmed, as for example, when bosses ceremonially distribute “rice cakes” to their followers on New Year’s Day. Factional strength can be objectively measured after each election or realignment. The supreme leader is conspicuous by his absence, and major factions of the ruling party or coalition closely adhere to uncodified rules for cabinet formation: allocation of positions in proportion to factional electoral strength; fair representation, so that even the smallest faction receives some position of secondary importance; and seniority. In China, factional struggle is intertwined with ideological line struggle, and has periodically erupted into vicious political conflicts, including the notorious Cultural Revolution. But the size and structure of factions are in flux and difficult to identify, not to mention measure, even in the wake of major factional battles that produce casualties but do not expose remaining members. Membership in a faction or informal grouping is never acknowledged. Personal ties are forged but kept private. Prudential rules are followed. But if factions are hidden, the supreme leader who stands above them is pristinely clear. The supreme leader, who has a public image of benevolence and infallibility, arbitrates ideological disputes and maintains a high degree of freedom to recompose the leadership group without fear of being accused of factionalization.

Transparency is predicated on permissiveness as well as risk. Assiduously practiced by the elite, factionalism and indeed other aspects of informal politics in Japan such as money politics or even corruption are lamented but often tolerated by the people. The binary epistemology of *tatemae* and *honne*, that

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is, appearance and reality, is a face-saving device,\textsuperscript{3} not a Manichean view of good politics versus bad politics. Public outcry does break out periodically upon the exposure of corruption, egregious money politics, and Mafia-politician ties, but as long as the bureaucrats were clean, the public in Japan put up with the seamy side of politics.\textsuperscript{4} Indeed, factional competition in pre-1993 Japan could even be justified as a surrogate for interparty competition, giving the Japanese political system a semblance of checks and balances. It is simply impossible ideologically to proscribe factions, as they can bolt from any party to form their own new parties. Moreover, prior to 1993, factionalism was also attributable to Japan’s unusual electoral system under which party label itself was not very useful in campaigning and factional affiliations helped re-election battles.

Permeating palace politics in the Han, Tang, Sung, and Ming dynasties and mostly triggered by political successions, factionalism in traditional China was emphatically disapproved by all imperial historiographers.\textsuperscript{5} Factions were never regarded as quasiparties but rather as cliques, a pejorative term connoting disloyalty and deviance in a polity best described as virtuocracy. Forever deplored as divisive forces pernicious to revolutionary goals, factionalism remains a potent political factor in post-1949 China. Informal politics, Fewsmithe postulates, dominates the top of the Chinese political system, where leaders turn to someone they know and trust when major decisions are being made rather than someone they should be working with under formal rules and institutions, especially in crisis situations.\textsuperscript{6} Personal ties are crucial for career advancement but factional alignment, perceived or real, can be a liability and even purge-inviting.\textsuperscript{7} Even during the Dengist reformist period, intraparty dissent smacks of antiparty clique. As Teiwes states, “party norms still do not accept competition for power as legitimate . . . [there] is not only no approved process by which a leader can campaign for high office, but the ban on factions means efforts to undermine those of opposing views are highly suspect.”\textsuperscript{8} Deng Xiaoping himself instructs that one person, that is, the supreme leader, must stand at the “core” of the Chinese political system


\textsuperscript{6} Joseph Fewsmithe, p. 233.


\textsuperscript{8} Frederick C. Teiwes, “The Paradoxical Post-Mao Transition: From Obeying the Leader to
to preserve political order.\textsuperscript{9} And the game of winning all or losing all for that supreme leadership or its faction or its line is entrenched in Chinese politics,\textsuperscript{10} a mirror image of Japanese power-sharing in a culture of civility. Thus, both the reward and risk in Chinese informal politics can be very high, precluding ever-vigilant players from giving it any structure or visibility.

Informal politics in Japan is thus less condemned and more observable than that in China. This alleviates informational problems facing analysts of Japanese politics. To be sure, information is still part of the insider game, especially when it comes to the flow of political money, not to say sheer corruption. But at least the cast of political players are known and the pattern of their alliances is verifiable, if not fathomable \textit{ex ante}. Moreover, for electoral purposes, Japanese politicians have incentives to reveal, even highlight information regarding the extent of their networking within the government and the utility of their factional affiliations in a party.\textsuperscript{11} In addition, with the assistance of countless journalists in fierce pursuit of inside dope, informational problems in the study of Japanese informal politics are not as daunting as in the case of China. Ironically, this sort of "informational asymmetry" makes informal politics in Japan less exciting than in China, in the sense of unpredictability and unexpectedness to outsiders. As Curtis, Fukui and Fukai underscore, informal politics in Japan is perennially riveted to two major activities, pork barrel and power distribution, or put another way, resource transfer to one's constituency and queuing for one's turn for a cabinet position in an overall context of re-election battles.\textsuperscript{12} New policy debates rarely weigh in this recurrent distributive game, and the law of inertia governs major policy areas. Whether politicians abdicate from policy-making or delegate the task to incrementally minded bureaucrats is a subject of hot debate.\textsuperscript{13} But it is true that at least until recently the nature and role of informal politics have remained much the same in postwar Japan.

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Not so in China. Akin to the underground sector in an over-regulated economy, informal politics in China can breathe fresh air (ideas, information, alternative proposals) into its highly rigid formal structure of power. While painstakingly difficult to trace, it is now clear that several major policy reforms—most notably rural reform—germinated and developed in the lower terrain of informal politics before reaching the high leadership again via personal ties.\footnote{Fewsmith, supra; Carol Lee Hamrin and Suisheng Zhao, eds., Decision-Making in Deng’s China (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharp, 1995).} Policy shifts, program innovation, and swift decisions are not hallmarks of the formal structure of power, which in China means a gigantic bureaucratized party state, arguably the most complex and fragmented institution on earth. Informal politics can perform a surprisingly beneficial function in policy changes; it introduces new perspectives, provides information not filtered upward via bureaucratic channels or media, incubates new proposals, and most important, allows the core leader at the center to credibly inject new issues into the political arena.

**Authoritarian South Korea and Taiwan**

Before their recent democratic transitions, South Korea and Taiwan displayed more Chinese than Japanese features of informal politics. In both cases the supreme leaders cast long shadows over the entire political landscape, but they selected different domains to organize and utilized informal groupings for whatever projects they prioritized. The expansion of unsanctioned personal networking was carefully monitored and, whenever necessary, amputated. In South Korea the supreme leader was most attentive to the management of the government-business nexus, deemed the fulcrum of accelerated economic development and, due to most recent accusations, personal enrichment. In Taiwan the leadership was most concerned with political stability in an alienated society without which economic progress would have been hindered and the ambition of “returning to the mainland” could not have been entertained. It is no wonder that Hwang and Kau in this volume have chosen different perspectives from which to shed light on Korean and Taiwanese informal politics.

Coming to power via coup d’etat, the military junta under the leadership of Park Chung Hee organized the bureaucracy, centralized policy-making, and initially planned to purge but soon recruited leading business firms into a state-led developmental coalition. Thus began a 25-year economic transformation under authoritarianism. Behind an utterly hierarchical organizational chart of economic management were myriad small groups that were instrumental to major policy shifts. As Hwang narrates, the “iron triangle”—the ruling military-bureaucracy-big-business elite—in South Korea was recast
several times, each in tandem with a rebalancing of power among them and within them, as well as with a significant reorientation of economic policy. The point, however, is not how many mutations or, in Hwang’s word, images we can identify, but how each change came about.

Several recent studies show that each major recreation of the South Korean political economy revealed a scheme by the supreme leader to shuffle the informal team for the most urgent economic task, a process analogous to, but much speedier than the rural reforms in China that Fewsmith depicts. In the early 1970s, an obscure economic secretary in the Blue House cemented an alliance with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MCI) to undermine the formal authority of the more liberal-oriented Economic Planning Board. Thus, an “informal coup” laid the groundwork for Park single-handedly to direct the well-known heavy and chemical industrialization (HCI). Park also handpicked a subset of big business—including upstarts such as Daewoo and those not heavily tainted by rent-seeking in the 1950s, such as Hyundai—for specific tasks. In 1979 and 1980, the course of bureaucratic politicking was reversed. Park and then his successor, Chun Do Hwan, heeded the leading voices (mostly young economists) of the Korea Development Institute, a think tank that was critical of MCI’s decade-old mercantilist policy. The KDI echoed the call for liberalization from South Korea’s economic partners abroad, and it championed the cause of the much overlooked small business sector. Before MCI and big business were able to defend their stand or formally organize a Japanese-style deliberative council to review the decision, Chun had already executed a wholesale replacement of economic policymakers and advisers and ordered an industrial restructuring plan.

While the supreme leader was meticulous about orchestrating intimate ties in the economic domain, he was less mindful of the political domain. Even though the supreme leader had to run in the presidential election, he was not personally involved in partisan or factional competition—though he kept a watchful eye over it as this was seen to be distracting and wasteful. Park delegated political management to his deputy, Kim Jong-pil, who initially attempted to build the party organization but was quickly absorbed in extending the net of internal intelligence and allowed opposition parties to grow. Micromanaging economic development programs as analyzed above allowed the supreme leader to claim credit and, if necessary, extract financial contributions from business captains, both powerful resources for election-

eering. When intra- and inter-party politics appeared to be out of control, Park as the supreme leader simply yielded political space, opening up some innocuous elections, a measure that his successor inherited. Thus, Korean military rulers coped with both formal and informal politics by compressing the stages, relying on the military-intelligence network to prevent dissidents from emerging. Informal politics, however, was submerged rather than uprooted, with consequences that shocked the supreme leadership. For example, the head of the ICCIA took Park’s life, and the opposition party, permitted to run on short notice, scored an astounding electoral victory in the early 1980s thanks to its ability to assemble numerous informal dissident groups throughout the society.

Informal politics was also a game mastered by the supreme leader in authoritarian Taiwan. As Kau recounts, with the civil war on the mainland spreading, the Kuomintang (KMT) regime under Chiang Kai-shek finessed the Constitution, consolidated executive power, and upon retreating to Taiwan, suspended national elections and banned new parties. However, under KMT domination (the two opposition parties were minor and subdued), the politics of “supervision” by the party’s own “second-order political groups” (euphemism for factions) was kept alive in all three national representative organs. Rampant factionalism was fatal to the KMT regime on the mainland, but those factions migrating to Taiwan were not disbanded, only streamlined and regulated. Basically there were two: the incumbent or “mainstream” faction whose members had assorted social ties with Premier Chen Chen, who was deputy and likely successor to the supreme leader, and the out-of-power or “non-mainstream” faction, whose members were mostly associated with now-deposed and self-exiled Chen Li-fu. Naturally, the latter acquired a liberal bent, spurning side payments and frequently critical of the government. The party leadership also permitted free-floating members to form their own associations but they all eventually aligned with the two big ones.

The KMT’s factional competition should not be likened to intraparty competition, as in the case of pre-1993 Japan. Its factional frictions were limited to question periods, not the intraparty elections at which party discipline was enforced. Factions in the legislative branch might claim some committee convenorships, but had no say on cabinet appointments. Moreover, KMT factions were not allowed to be aligned with local elites or coalesce across


three representative bodies. Any dissident group violating these unwritten rules invited political purge, as illustrated by the case of Lei Chen and his cohorts in the Legislative Yuan. As soon as Chen Cheng died, and Chiang Ching-kuo (CCK) became the heir apparent, factional strife ceased and the game of adjustment—forging ties with CCK’s informal groups—started.

While political networking at the national level was tolerated, it was encouraged at the local level. Local factionalism in Taiwan was deceptively similar to Japanese factionalism in that power and pork—notably, local construction projects and the monopoly in local public transportation—were shared and factional ties were utterly essential to nomination and electoral campaigning. However, the parameters were different; local factions were nurtured, if not created, by the ruling party to minimize the cost of governance in Taiwan, and they could, at most, affect the results of the Provincial Assembly election. Entry to national-level politics, such as portfolios in the party and cabinet, was initiated from above rather than pushed from below. Local factionalism was a device for co-optation, not participation. As Kau shows numerically, the Taiwanese, who account for 85% of the population, were drastically underrepresented in the central standing committee of the party and the cabinet.

But if the KMT leadership micromanaged informal politics among political elites at all levels, it was not really engaged in government-business relations. As Kau documents, Taiwanese were prominent in business but rarely with political clout, and personal ties between the mainlander-controlled economic bureaucracy and the Taiwanese-dominated private sector were discouraged and well-monitored. Money politics was abhorred. Political fund raising was never a problem for the KMT, given its intimate ties with local political elites and its ability to keep factions at all levels transparent, regulated, and moored inside the party. In addition, the party had its own private sector—numerous party-owned enterprises with special tax advantages—to count on.

**Institutional Changes and Informal Politics**

The empirically grounded paired comparisons above suggest that one needs to figure out the unwritten rules in order to interpret politics satisfactorily. Reading constitutions, laws, and regulations does not get us very far: indeed these may even conceal more than reveal when informality overrides formal rules. This is by no means an invitation to write off organizational flow charts and focus only on the cobweb of personal ties. Formal politics and informal politics are interdependent rather than unrelated, like bones and muscles. All the papers show that. In China, Deng’s real power is coupled

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with his formal positions in the party and, after his retirement, a resolution that all major issues be referred to him. Informal groups all acquired bureaucratic standing before they were able to push through the reform agenda. In Japan, factional networks are designed to get a share of formal power. In South Korea, the supreme leader took pains to remodel legally the formal structure of power before exercising it. In Taiwan, when CCK was premier, all major decisions were made in the Executive Yuan; when he became president, the presidential house was the locus of power. But this was also because Taiwan has a semi-presidential form of government, a formal institution that allows the real power to be lodged in either president or premier.

Exactly how formal and informal politics are linked remains largely unexplored, however,\(^\text{19}\) and it is a question that requires a full-length study. Three capitalist countries covered herein enable us to speculate a bit about the relationship between these two spheres of politics, as they have recently witnessed major formal institutional changes. Both South Korea and Taiwan began to democratize in 1986. Japan, aside from ending its 38-year domination by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), recently replaced its unique electoral system that was initially adopted in 1925, a critical institutional change that had been debated for a quarter century. Each of these three cases affords an excellent comparative study holding as many factors constant as possible, by which to compare behavioral patterns before and after the shock of institutional change.

Of the three articles, Fukui and Fukai’s is most explicit in trying to capture the impact of institutional change—the replacement of a single-nontransferable-vote (SNTV) multiple-seat system by a combination of a single-member district and proportional representation (PR) system—on the behavior of political actors. Focusing on rural or suburban Japan, they identify four cardinal rules—not found in any party handbook or government ordinance—that LDP Diet members have followed in pursuit of their careers in the past. First, become a \textit{zoku} member in the Diet and an effective intermediary between the grant-giving national government and revenue-hungry localities; in other words, play pork barrel politics.\(^\text{20}\) Second, establish an electoral \textit{keiretsu} or electoral coalition vertically connecting a Diet member with various layers of local politicians for mutual assistance in elections. Third, build and maintain a \textit{koenkai} (support association) based on neighborhood alumni, and many other sorts of personal connections. Keeping a \textit{koenkai} is time- and resource-consuming; it probably means attending every wedding and funeral in one’s constituency. Fourth, affiliate with a faction—and, in post-

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19. For a prominent exception, see Lowell Dittmer, “Conclusion,” in ibid.

20. This is no different from other democracies, especially ones with federalism. What separates Japan from other democracies are three additional features that give Japanese pork barrel a special flavor and make it more dependent on personal ties and informality.
1993 Japan, the ruling coalition—so that bureaucrats will be more forthcoming in assisting a politician’s pork barrel efforts.

One reason for following these four rules is resource disparity between the central government and localities. But another reason was the peculiar electoral system under which a voter cast only one vote, a candidate competed with fellow party members in the same district, and each party had to nominate an optimal number of candidates to avoid being spread too thin.\(^{21}\) The SNTV system also pitted the party’s interest against individual interests: the former wanted to equalize votes among its candidates while each candidate attempts to increase one’s vote to ensure victory. From an individual Diet member’s perspective, it is a very expensive and volatile process; losing a small number of votes for whatever reason, including vote-buying, can mean electoral defeat, especially if there is a very popular candidate in the district. Aligning with a faction was one way to get renominated and get political funding. The party label, line, and policy stands did not help, personal attributes and networks did. Electoral *keiretsu* and *koenkai* are all individual Diet members’ personal organizations, not the party’s, as they are intended to glue supporters to a specific candidate rather than party candidates in general.

As long as the central-local resource disparity continues, the first and fourth behavioral patterns will not go away. Under the new electoral system enacted in 1994, Fukui and Fukai predict that the *koenkai* and electoral *keiretsu* will lose their functions and that money politics will also decline. Fractions, already on the wane after the collapse of LDP domination, will further weaken.\(^{22}\) Many scholars also foresee the rise of issue or policy politics, party-centered versus candidate-centered campaigning, and the development and strengthening of party organizations at the expense of personal electoral networks.\(^{23}\) By definition, single member electoral districts signify interparty competition, a condition conducive to party organization building. The PR list will empower the party, which can use its ranking order of candidates to tighten party discipline. Following the same logic, one may also expect a new pattern of candidate recruitment; as senior politicians settle for secure PR seats, parties can enlist Young Turks to fight partisan and issue-oriented electoral battles in single-member districts.

The first election under the new electoral system is yet to be held. But from the way elites are preparing themselves for it, the presumed impact of

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formal institutional change on informal politics is not in sight at all.24 If anything, politicians are expanding pre-existing personal networks to ensure their renomination, striving to attract the support of the majority of voters in a district rather than simply a fraction of it, and indeed, working to jumpstart the political careers of their offspring.25 Other factors may be neutralizing the potential effects of the new electoral system so it does not appear to be making any significant dent in pre-existing patterns of electoral politics. For example, the absence of class cleavage and the ebbing of Cold War political conflicts are leading major parties to blur their policy differences as they all move to the center.26

But the paraphernalia of informal politics, contrived in the past to cope with the uncertainty under the SNTV system, may prove to be resilient and adaptive under new electoral institutions. *Koenkai*, for example, presumed to be giving way to local party organizations, may become even more entrenched and essential to politicians. The party will depend on the politician who runs a personal local support base, and the politician who abandons the *koenkai* and the chance of running in a single-member district, opting instead for an at-large seat, will be at the mercy of his/her party. It is little wonder that no senior LDP Diet members are taking the lead in forsaking their district seats or surrendering their *koenkai*—an inheritable private good—for the purpose of party building—a public good. Factions, electoral *keiretsu*. *koenkai*, and other political machines rather than policy continue, at least for now, to shape the political contours even after major electoral reform.

If informal politics is “sticky,” not showing high elasticity to the changes of electoral rules in Japan, it is responding vigorously to the advent of democratic institutions in South Korea and Taiwan. Zero-sum relations between informal and formal politics are evident here. Informal groups and activities—except for a sanctioned few—languished when the supreme leader exercised his formal power thoroughly, but they are resurging and proliferating in the newly democratized polities. In Taiwan, as Kau well documents, with the opening up of political markets we see the rise of money politics, vicious factionalism at all levels, and the encroachment of organized crime in local politics. In South Korea, political parties are mainly coalitions of factions, and constant factional realignment continually resketches the appearance of the party system. In both countries, campaign spending is way beyond what the law permits, and the murky nexus between business groups and factions

24. This is from an excellent posting by Gerald L. Curtis in the electronic University of Tokyo-based *Social Science Japan Forum*, June 13, 1995.


is dense. Informal politics in newly democratized Taiwan and South Korea is becoming as blatant, widespread, and pork barrel-driven as in Japan.

Informal politics, however, does not seem to be lubricating the power struggle in democratic Taiwan and South Korea as it did for more than three decades in pre-1993 Japan. The Kuomintang and Democratic Liberal Party, now renamed the New Korea Party, the ruling parties in Taiwan and South Korea, respectively, have attempted to emulate pre-1993 Japan, creating one-party dominant systems under which factions within the ruling parties would perpetuate the system but share power informally, while fragmented and internally factionalized opposition parties would not be credible alternatives. But unwritten rules for power sharing have never emerged in the KMT and have worked poorly for the DLP. This can be attributed to subethnic cleavages in Taiwan and regional cleavages in South Korea, as the bonds of loyalty and trust—ingredients for credible commitment to informal agreement—are difficult to forge and easy to undermine between mainlander and Taiwanese elites or between elites from different regions in South Korea. Institutional arrangements, however, also aggravate the problem. Unlike Japan, South Korea has a presidential system and Taiwan has a mixed form of government but with a very strong presidency. The presidential winner-take-all system with fixed tenure for the chief executive is not very conducive to factional consortia, unlike the parliamentary system under which a prime minister depends on majority support for holding onto power, hence is more willing to share power with factions within the same party. Informal politics and formal politics do not always fit.

The Green and Viney Life of Politics

In his well-known article on Chinese factionalism, Andrew Nathan describes the institutions and authority relations of formal politics as the trellis upon which factional activities hang. If, as many commentators have suggested, we broaden our perspective to include other aspects of informal politics, then the metaphor of the trellis suggests that informal politics would be the greenery, the vines, and the leaves. And while the greenery clearly depends on the trellis for its structure and overall shape, it is the live and growing part of the ensemble. The greenery can be distinguished from the trellis, but it cannot be separated from it. Since political action only occurs in contexts, informal

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politics might be called the existential reality of politics. Since politics is always going to be the activities of particular individuals in given (but constantly changing) circumstances, informal politics can be studied at the elite level, the mass or citizen level, or any level in between.

The definition of informal politics implicit in the above discussion is considerably broader than notions that identify it with factions, guanxi, corruption, and so forth. But if we accept such a broad definition of "informal politics," then the problem of differentiating it from formal politics appears insurmountable. Lowell Dittmer has recently proposed a differentiation between value-rational and purpose-rational relationships but scholars as diverse as Lucian Pye and Tang Tsou have found the distinction unsatisfactory.\footnote{29} Pye points out that in any political system there is no neat distinction between the two but then proceeds, somewhat illogically, to say that "the fact that it is so hard to make any meaningful distinctions between 'formal' and 'informal' shows that China lacks an institutionalized administrative system that is based on either a moral or a legal order."\footnote{30} Without joining Pye's dismissal of formal politics in China, Tsou agrees that a virtue of Dittmer's approach is its breadth, but then proceeds to supply two very general definitions in the spirit of Dittmer's approach but which do not use his terminology. Tsou is quite tentative about his definitions. The first is a reformulation of Dittmer: "Informal politics is, in the final analysis, politics in which personal relationships with others or a set of such relationships constitute an end in themselves." Tsou then moves beyond the criterion of motivation in his second, "provisional" definition: "Informal politics consists of political interactions among persons with different types of informal relationships and their networks, which play an important part and sometimes even serve as a nucleus of 'political actions groups' in the struggle, conflict, or contestation over significant policy issues or personnel changes."\footnote{31}

The focus of the Dittmer-Pye-Tsou discussion is on politics among the top few dozen leaders in China, but it can, we think, be used generally. The problem with the discussion does not lie in its adaption to unique features in China, but rather in the continuing implicit assumption that formal and informal politics are essentially two different categories of politics, even if they do overlap. We would suggest, rather, that they are two different descriptive/analytic perspectives on politics, each with a distinct empirical foundation but not with a disjunctive object. Informal politics without formal structuring

\footnote{29. See very stimulating discussion of Chinese informal politics by Dittmer, Pye, Tsou, Tiewes, and Nathan in China Quarterly, no. 34 (July 1995).}

\footnote{30. Lucien W. Pye, "Factions and the Politics of Guanxi: Paradoxes in Chinese Administrative and Political Behavior," in ibid., p. 39.}

\footnote{31. Tang Tsou, "Chinese Politics at the Top: Factionalism or Informal Politics? Balance-of-Power Politics or a Game to Win All?" ibid., pp. 101-02.}
would not be politics, but simply societal or individual interaction. It would be a general scheming of each with and against the other with no structure and no communal residuum. Formal politics without informal politics, by contrast, would be politics without people.

To consider a more appropriate biological metaphor than the trellis (since plants do not move much), physical movement can be analyzed in terms of either the physiology of bones and muscles or the biochemistry of cells. Each presumes the other, and yet the study of cellular biochemistry and of structural anatomy are quite different. Perhaps this is the insight that led Dittmer to his Weberian distinction between value and purpose; it is a decision made by the researcher whether to bracket the structural dimension and concentrate on the dimension of the embedded actor, or to bracket the embedded actor and study the structure. Dittmer reifies this decision by attributing it to the nature of the relational networks, and therefore he is criticized for claiming an ephemeral distinction. But, as both Pye and Tsou concede, the important contribution of his attempt is to establish a concept of sufficient breadth.

The point is that there is an informal dimension to politics that requires analysis in its own terms and attention to its own methodological problems. Informal politics is not simply the dirty secret of formal politics, or everyday business as distinct from important affairs. It is not a cultural peculiarity of Chinese or Asian politics, though it can, as the papers here demonstrate, exhibit political-cultural characteristics.

Before entering the realm of methodology, we should discuss briefly the advantages of focusing on informal politics. Clearly, the study of why people actually do what they do embedded in their concrete context will be more appealing than a more abstract approach, especially since the natural form of such analysis is the narrative. But another important attraction is that the study of informal politics is essentially the study of embedded rational actors. Since real rational actors are, in fact, swimming in a thick soup of history, such a study is more plausible, at least empathetically, than abstract models of rational choice or game theory. The generality of formal models of rational action is created by awesome acts of simplification, and in kharmonic revenge, the application of formal models often involves either a simplistic stereotyping of real relations or a post-hoc, tautological definition of variables. To use another set of famous Weberian terms, the study of embedded actors is a task of Verstehen, understanding, while the task of rational models is that of Erklaeren, explanation. Of the two, understanding is the more accessible, though it has the very serious methodological difficulties described below.
Methodological Difficulties of the Study of Informal Politics

The best scholars are not those who overcome methodological difficulties but those who are painfully aware of them. In the study of informal Chinese politics at the center, Fred Teiwes is certainly a model, and he begins a recent article with excellent advice:

"Any valid overview of elite CCP politics must be based on a painstaking gathering of detailed information concerning events, and ideally a careful weighing of the reliability of each discrete piece of evidence before a general interpretation is put forward."

To someone habituated to statistical methodology this advice might seem as vague as the advice Polonius gave to his son in *Hamlet*. However, methodological sophistication should be judged by its appropriateness to a given area of study, and Polonius, it might be pointedly observed, was all too close an observer of informal politics. Teiwes gives a methodological recommendation that, if followed, would lead to a more reliable study, and if not, would lead to a less reliable one. In the study of informal politics, the alternative is not a more formal methodology, but the epistemological despair echoed by one of Teiwes’s informants: "Chinese politics is too complicated to understand; some things can never be made clear."

Here, we will not give advice on how to study informal politics, but instead will describe three basic problems that must be coped with in such studies. The first deals with the quality of information available to outside observers; the second is the question of the narrative mode of understanding embedded rationality; and the third is the problem of generalization.

*Insiders and Outsiders*

One problem suggested by Teiwes’s dictum is that of the quality of information. The researcher is on the outside of a very particularistic and intimate world but it is not simply a “black box” problem. The action environment of informal politics can be so sensitive that information, including information to outsiders, can play a distorting role in the ongoing process. If Heisenberg was uncertain about measuring electrons because of the interactive effect of the act of measurement and the object to be measured, he would despair of measuring informal politics. The situation is not resolved by the existence of insider informants, such as Mao’s doctor Li Zhisui’s recent accounts of the chairman’s private life. Indeed, the more delectable and private the information, the more cautious one must be about private motives for distortion. Teiwes’s suggestion that each item of information must be verified is ex-

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remely important here, because even a willful distorter rarely attempts a whole-cloth invention.

But even a completely sincere informant discussing historical cases of informal politics is not capable of simply presenting "the truth." Much insider information consists of judgments of motives, potential developments, and so forth that are inherently influenced by one's vantage point and by personal, unique experience. Possibly, for instance, the informant (or someone else) was naïve about certain possibilities that became reality. It would be difficult after that educational experience to recreate the original naïveté, and yet it was the original (mistaken) attitude, not the later informed one, that was active at the time.

For instance, many insider reminiscences about the Cultural Revolution now describe it as a power struggle initiated by Mao Zedong. But the ideological context of that period is long dead, and the informants have learned lessons that were unavailable to them (or to Mao) at the time. With the ideology deflated and torn away, a power struggle might be left. But the power struggle self-interpretation is not necessarily an accurate picture of dynamics at the time or even an analysis of deeper, darker, more real motivation.

External observers are also prey to perspectival distortions. The angle from which an external observer observes is influenced by his or her vantage point and by the professional expectations of expert advice. The national dimension of vantage point is clear enough: the concerns of an American analyst of China will be different from those of a Vietnamese analyst, and the general pool of opinion within which each must swim his or her own course will also be different. If the pool is large enough a researcher might be lulled into assuming that its concerns and currents are universal, and therefore that the apparent movement of the polity under study is due solely to changes in that external system and not in part to the fact that the observer is also in a moving boat. There is the additional problem that the observer is an expert within his or her own system, and therefore expected to be knowledgeable about the politics of another country and yet not an apologist for it. The expectation of expertise often leads to an undue attitude of decisiveness and certainty in interpretation; the audience is rarely interested to hear that things are very complex and uncertain. Unfortunately, it appears that many students of informal politics establish their personal distance from the politics under study by taking an unduly disdainful or disparaging attitude toward the people and activities involved, as if an empathetic attitude, instead of being the natural starting point for intercultural understanding, were the sign of having been pulled in and duped.

**Narrative Understanding**

The natural form for a structural analysis of formal politics is systemic because the basic logic is to relate all parts to a coherent whole. Hence, the
organizational chart as analytic archetype. The logic of understanding embedded rational action in informal politics is similar in that various actions must be turned into a coherent pattern, but because of the particularistic focus of informal politics, the pattern tends to be narrative rather than systemic. The best evidence for the understanding of any particular action is what the actor did before and after. More complex situations can be addressed through multiple narratives, and Joseph Fewsmith's article is an excellent example of such interweaving. Narrative analysis has its advantages and limitations. The fundamental technique is to produce a plausible stringing together of the available information. But there can be many plausible narratives of the same facts that are contradictory in their interpretation and prediction, and to tell one story is not to tell many other possible versions. The grand background assumption of a narrative is that the story presented is the only reasonable interrelationship of the information, an assumption comparable to the grand background assumption of statistical methodology of the randomness of the world beyond the correlation under consideration.

Ultimately, the formulation of a narrative is a judgment call, as is its acceptance, and that is why the advice from Teiwes quoted above is so basic. Which narratives to trust, and how to understand the salience of factors and persons influencing a particular outcome are not questions with preemptive methodological answers, or even simplifying rules. Yet, the research can be done better or worse, results can be enlightening or misleading, and it is possible to dispute interpretations on the basis of evidence.

Generalizing the Particular
The best generalization of the realm of informal politics was perhaps done by Mao Zedong. In his essay, "On Contradiction," he claims that the particularity of contradiction is universal, by which he means that reality is ultimately practical reality and cannot be derived from theory. Mao admits that there are higher truths than the concrete world of particulars, but there are no truer truths. The problem with this approach to informal politics is that there is no natural uplink to more general political interpretations. If the problem of embedded political action is taken seriously as a problem, then addressing it in one case may illustrate or disprove a general interpretation but it does not make transparent other cases of embedded politics. The Fukui and Fukai article is a model of sensitivity to this problem. It pays careful attention to the details of two localities and remains quite sensitive to the inferential leap involved in generalization. The act of generalization about informal politics should not displace the careful study of concrete situations.

Nevertheless, assuming that one can gain knowledge about informal politics, its results do require several dimensions of generalization. The first concerns typologies of situations and elements of informal politics, the second
concerns patterns of interaction, and the third concerns relations to formal politics. There are many significant situational typologies that can be applied to informal politics. We would suggest a preliminary overall categorization of these into typologies of relation, of level, and of occasion. Typologies of relation include guanxi as well as various models of clientelism and factionalism. Typologies of level are more often assumed than delineated, though Kelley Hwang’s paper is an excellent example of sensitivity to this dimension. Clearly, informal politics will be different at the elite, bureaucratic, and mass/citizen levels. The last typological dimension is that of occasion, and here a very important distinction should be drawn between routine patterns and crisis patterns. For instance, informal patterns influenced by regular patterns of corruption will be quite different from the bonds created by the need to survive in tempestuous times. It should be anticipated, therefore, that informal politics in the Cultural Revolution would be quite different from before or after, and that informal elite politics in an occasion of crisis may differ from routine patterns.

The second dimension of generalization concerns patterns of informal interaction. In the study of Chinese politics, pride of place deservedly belongs to Teiwes’s description of the “rules of the game” of elite politics, and this phrase is especially appropriate to the kind of noninstitutionalized expectations that become established as informal politics becomes routinized or the actors become familiar with one another. The progression of Teiwes’s own research away from listing the rules of the game and toward intensive analyses of specific situations serves as a reminder that external observers are tempted to take such rules as more solid than they might actually be. As Kau illustrates with the rough-and-tumble of current Taiwanese politics, the novelty of new opportunities can weaken previously accepted rules. Besides “rules of the game,” an inviting area in established systems would be political-linguistic analysis of the terminology of informal interaction. A stimulating example of this approach is Yang’s work on the terminology of loyalty and sincerity in China.33

The last dimension of generalization is the relationship of informal to formal politics. Without attempting an exhaustive list of factors that influence the relationship, they clearly include political culture, the salience of institutional structures and sanctions, and the stability of small group situations. The ubiquity of informal politics does not imply that structure is derivative and epiphenomenal. It is clear that many different relationships can and do exist, and that they influence the articulation and content of informal politics. This is clearly the most difficult and most interesting dimension.