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Geographically uneven landscapes of Asian corruption

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ABSTRACT

Corruption plagues all Asian countries to one extent or another. Rather than the universal one-size-fits-all models, corruption must be understood within national and local contexts, that is, as geographically variable. This paper explores this issue in three steps. First it offers a discussion of corruption's origins and consequences, noting the catalyzing role played by anti-democratic governments, censorship, poverty, illiteracy, and cultural norms. Second, it maps Asian corruption using data from Transparency International and correlates it with several economic and political measures, including national income, the Gini index, literacy, a Freedom House score, and the World Bank measure of government effectiveness. The third part consists of an extended discussion of national variations in corruption throughout the region, focusing on China and other highly corrupt states. The conclusion criticizes the role of anti-corruption campaigns and points to other, more substantive strategies to reduce it.

Corruption is a scourge that plagues most governments in the world to one degree or another. Defined loosely as the use of public office for private gain, corruption takes many forms, ranging from bribe-taking among police officers and customs officials to wholesale, organized keptocracies, as found in many African and Middle Eastern states. Corruption ranges in severity from mild inconvenience to debilitating, wholesale theft, such as when tyrants bankrupt their countries to fatten foreign bank accounts. An enormous body of literature in economics, political science, and sociology has described the causes and consequences in considerable detail (Jain 2001; Aidt 2003; Bardhan 2006; Rose-Ackerman 2006).

Surprisingly, geographers have dedicated relatively little effort to the study of corruption. A minute handful of case studies examined India (Robbins 2000; Corbridge and Kumar 2002; Jeffrey 2002) and South Africa (Brown and Cloke 2004). This inattention is regretful given that corruption is deeply spatial in nature, varying widely among countries and cultures. Ironically, outside of geography, a vibrant literature has explored the spatiality of corruption in diverse contexts. Treisman (2000) argues that corruption is inversely related to a legacy of British rule and Protestantism, economic development, high levels of imports, and democratic political systems. Márquez, Salinas-Jiménez, and del Mar

Salinas-Jiménez (2011) note that corruption may diffuse from highly corrupt governments to their neighbors. Similarly, Goel and Saunoris (2014) found significant geographic spillovers and contagion effects in corruption, and that its severity reflected the size of the informal economy. Billger and Goel (2009) assert that corruption resists easy measurement but appears to decline in the face of democratic political environments. Unfortunately this literature is not well informed geographically and tends to consign spatiality to a secondary analytical moment.

This paper explores the spatiality of corruption in Asia (here defined to exclude the Middle East) from several perspectives. It argues that corruption must be understood geographically, for local context is of decisive importance. It seeks to comprehend the uneven spatiality of corruption in Asia – Where is it worst? Where is it least prevalent? – by explicating its geographic distribution, correlates to several socio-economic variables, and through a series of case studies. Although corruption also occurs in the private sector, the focus here is on the public sector, where corruption is more widely measured and more easily combatted. First, it discusses the definition, causes, and consequences of government malfeasance. Second, it delves into an empirical overview, including the distribution of Asia's population by level of severity of corruption, its spatial organization, and correlations with several economic and political variables. Third, it fleshes this discussion out with a case-by-case discussion of corruption in the region, paying particular attention to China. The conclusion summarizes the major themes, offers a critique of anti-corruption campaigns, and points toward more substantive steps to alleviate the problem.

The point of this analysis is to highlight the spatially uneven extent, nature, and consequences of corruption rather than to offer an in-depth analysis, which is beyond its scope and intent. Levels of corruption and their effects reflect complex multi-scalar dynamics that include global forces (e.g. foreign investment and international watchdog agencies), national dynamics (e.g. the media, government anti-corruption laws and groups, and varying attitudes and cultures toward the phenomenon), and local contexts (e.g. municipal government officials). Obviously in a region as huge and diverse as Asia, any such overview must necessarily sacrifice considerable detail in order to highlight the broad contours of corruption there, a topography that reflects, *inter alia*, varying levels of national income and modes of governance.

The nature, causes, and consequences of corruption

Corruption is a form of rent-seeking behavior that assumes varying forms in time and space. At the most general level, it entails the misuse of public office for private gains and dishonest and illegal conduct. The primary practitioners and beneficiaries are politicians, legislators, bureaucrats, civil service employees, police officers, and military officials. Although corruption is by definition illegal, in different cultural contexts its legality and moral acceptability range considerably. Corruption is thus inherently both political and economic in nature; sometimes, public policies that serve privileged elites may be corrupt in principle but not illegal, as in the case of post-retirement offers of employment to high-ranking civil servants.

Corruption takes a wide variety of forms, all of which involve the transfer of assets from public to private hands. It ranges from individual acts such as accepting kickbacks to grand

larceny on an organized, institutional scale, in which elites highjack an entire government to serve themselves. It may involve the diversion of public funds to private purposes, including foreign bank accounts, leading officials to enrich themselves at public expense. The most common forms are bribery, graft, and extortion. In many countries, "fees" or "tea money" are euphemisms for getting public officials to do their jobs, easing business transactions, awarding contracts, or not reporting crimes. Other forms of corruption include graft, embezzlement, blackmail, and extortion. Nepotism and political favoritism in public employment are others, as are the sale of military commissions and siphoning of funds from inflated payrolls, overinvoicing, and selling of licenses and permits, allocations of government contracts, and mining and land concessions to the well connected. Corrupt judiciaries undermine the rule of law, refusing to punish corrupt officials and minimizing penalties. The purchase of votes among elected officials constitutes yet another form. All of these exemplify the abuse of state power for private gain.

Corruption occurs when the benefits significantly exceed the costs (i.e. the likelihood of being apprehended and the associated penalties) (Klitgaard 1998). The incidence and severity of corruption therefore reflect the expected gains, local cultural and political mores, the probability of being caught, and the ensuing punishments. It is closely associated with the discretionary power of public officials over the allocation of state resources; the greater the power, the stronger is the temptation to abuse it. Tyrannical and despotic governments are thus much more likely to be corrupt than are democracies. Jain (2001, 78) argues therefore that "we would expect to find larger discretionary powers, and hence more corruption, in regulated and controlled economies as opposed to market economies." Corruption flourishes in governments where power is highly centralized and decisions are made out of view of the public, those that lack an independent media, and states with a judiciary highly amenable to the influence of power-holders. Rather than meritocracies, nepotism, favoritism, and political connections take the place of market-based criteria (Fisman 2001). Corruption thus tends to be most severe in highly centralized political systems. Bardhan (2006) distinguishes between political corruption, in which extra-legal means are used to gain power, and administrative or bureaucratic corruption, in which control over state resources is used for private gains. In countries where there is essentially no difference between the ruling political party and the state, however, such as Vietnam, North Korea, or China, this distinction is trivial.

Corruption flourishes when there insufficient transparency. When it is mutually beneficial for public officials and those bribing them, neither has an incentive to report the practice. Thus, political scientists conclude that democratic societies tend to have lower levels of corruption because they create mechanisms for accountability and the enforcement of laws (Moreno 2002; Sung 2004). Indeed, many of the most notoriously corrupt governments today are profoundly anti-democratic. Illiteracy also contributes: uninformed populations have few means to learn about government corruption. Countries with a relatively unfettered media, in which the press can publicize public sector misbehavior, have lower levels of corruption (Brunetti and Weder 2003).

Another common cause of corruption is underpaid public employees, notably police officers and customs officials. Goel and Nelson (1989) found that higher salaries were associated with reduced bribe-taking, although van Rijckeghent and Weder (2001)

discovered empirically that large salary increases are needed to eliminate corruption. In Asia low salaries for public workers are an especially severe problem: Quah (2006, 176) notes that:

> In Indonesia, the monthly salaries of civil servants usually last for only 10 to 12 days. In Mongolia, judges' monthly salaries range from $33 to $51; a third of the judges in the countryside are homeless. In the Philippines, civil servants supplement low wages by selling goods and services out of their offices and holding second jobs – or resorting to petty corruption.

Corruption's linkages to globalization are complicated and vary among countries. Lalountas, Manolas, and Vavouras (2011), using cross-section data for 127 countries, found that FDI and import penetration reduced corruption in relatively developed countries but had no impact on corruption in poorer ones. Corruption flourishes in the context of the informal economy, such as smuggling or black market money exchanges when official exchange rates are too high. Corrupt countries tend to have porous borders through which drugs, weapons, or slaves may be moved easily.

Spatial variations in corruption also reflect cultural differences in social norms. In many cases, bribery is seen simply as the "cost of doing business," that is, a normalized part of economic functioning. Bardhan (1997, 1330) states succinctly "What is regarded in one culture as corrupt may be considered a part of routine transaction in another." Gift exchanges are often considered to be a normal part of conducting business in many developing countries. Gender roles also play a role: corruption may be mitigated when women occupy large shares of political office and high level administrative positions, although this effect may be spurious as women's representation politically rises with national income and lower levels of corruption (Swamy, Knack, and Azfar 2001; Goetz 2007).

Entrenched and pervasive corruption has numerous negative social and economic consequences. Notably, it engenders despair and resignation, saps the morale of the public, and leads to widespread cynicism and distrust of the government. Corruption undermines the credibility of the state and erodes public confidence. Ironically, at times, when the machinery of government moves too slowly, bribery or "speed money" may actually accelerate the functioning of the state, cutting through bureaucratic red tape and reducing waiting times for government licenses and contracts (Bose 2004).

Corruption is highly detrimental to government policies, undermining the public's trust and the effectiveness of laws and regulations and the judiciary. The effects of this can be deadly. For example, bribes to contractors may lead to the shoddy construction of buildings and infrastructure, which greatly increases the risk from earthquake damage, resulting in unnecessary fatalities, as the 2008 quake in Sichuan revealed. Corruption also inhibits the efficiency and effectiveness of government policies, including the appropriate delivery of public monies to their intended ends. Circumvention of legitimate channels of government business reduces tax collections (Friedman et al. 2000), and corruption is associated with the size of shadow economies in low-income countries (Dreher and Schneider 2010). Corruption distorts the allocation of public resources, such as when public funds for construction are used to build luxury homes for government officials. Foreign aid funneled through corrupt officials often ends up being sold on the black market, never reaching those it was intended to help. Nepotistic hiring practices lead to overstaffing of government offices and unqualified personnel, annihilating the benefits of meritocracies and misallocating human capital.

There is an enormous body of literature in economics that demonstrates conclusively that widespread corruption alarms investors and diminishes economic growth (Shleifer and Vishny 1993; Mauro 1995; Bardhan 1997; Aidt 2003; Rose-Ackerman 2006). High levels of corruption are associated with reduced foreign direct investment (Wei 2000; Habib and Zurawicki 2002). By raising transactions costs, it increases the cost of doing business, notably production and transportation costs, and reduces profits. Corruption raises the barriers to entry for non-privileged groups, notably those lacking in political connections. Because its benefits fall only to the well-connected, corruption is closely tied to economic inequality (Gupta, Davoodi, and Alonso-Terme 2002). Corruption raises levels of uncertainty and transactions costs, and is therefore associated with reduced investment and productivity (Wei 2000; Habib and Zurawicki 2002). Mo (2001) found that a one percent increase in the level of corruption reduces economic growth by 0.72%. By diminishing the quality of governance, corruption functions essentially as a tax (Jain 2001), raising production and transportation costs and lowering standards of living.

Notably, corruption varies widely among countries, which have different historical trajectories, cultures, and systems of governance. Because it is so spatially variable, corruption is highly amenable to geographic analysis. The following section seeks to highlight the spatiality of Asian corruption by noting its unevenness, its relations to economic development, and correlations with measures of political and economic freedom. It is followed by narratives of national corruption that flesh out this preliminary investigation.

An empirical overview of Asian corruption

Large numbers of Asians are concerned about government corruption. A poll by the Pew Charitable Trust in 2015 of numerous countries, including nine in Asia, noted that the majority of people in all of them rated it a "very serious problem" that affected elections, government policies, and economic growth (Table 1). In some countries only crime was rated as a worse concern.

Similarly, many firms were concerned about frequent requests for bribes and expectations of gifts for public officials. As Table 2 illustrates, in many countries firms face frequent requests for bribes; in Cambodia, almost 70% do so. Gifts are frequently expected when dealing with public officials. Firms often knew that they must give gifts to tax officials, particularly in Cambodia, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, and Afghanistan. Similarly, to procure government contracts, gift-giving was expected over half the time in Kyrgyzstan, Indonesia, Nepal, Vietnam, and Laos, and roughly 88% of the time in Pakistan, where they

Table 1. Percent of respondents reporting corruption is a "very serious problem" in 2014.

Bangladesh	65
China	54
India	72
Indonesia	82
Malaysia	63
Pakistan	59
Philippines	81
Thailand	83
Vietnam	75

Source: Pew Charitable Trust (2014).

Table 2. Frequency and severity of bribe and gift requests among firms, 2014.

	% Firms experiencing bribe request	% Public transactions where gift was expected	% Firms expected to give gifts to tax officials	% Firms giving gifts to secure government contracts	Gifts as % of expenses to procure government contracts	% Firms giving gifts to procure government license
Afghanistan	46.80	34.60	34.00	46.90	4.40	31.60
Cambodia	69.40	61.80	58.20	7.00	0.10	100.00
China	11.60	9.90	10.90	42.20	0.20	7.80
India	22.70	19.60	15.30	39.80	0.10	25.80
Indonesia	26.90	23.00	14.00	53.00	1.80	25.90
Kazakhstan	26.70	22.00	22.30	19.10	0.80	15.80
Rep. of Korea,			21.30	25.80	0.20	
Kyrgyzstan	59.80	53.60	54.80	55.10	2.40	59.60
Laos	37.30	23.00	23.50	55.10	3.30	19.00
Mongolia	33.40	25.80	19.50	25.90	1.50	29.70
Myanmar	42.90	35.40	37.10	32.50	1.00	38.90
Nepal	14.40	10.90	10.40	64.50	4.40	18.90
Pakistan	30.80	28.50	28.80	88.20	8.20	31.00
Philippines	25.60	16.40	21.80	60.30	16.40	10.60
Sri Lanka	10.00	9.20	7.70	29.80	0.40	12.00
Tajikistan	36.30	29.60	31.90	33.60	2.00	28.70
Timor-Leste	16.10	8.40	2.60	22.50	3.10	5.00
Uzbekistan	7.00	4.60	2.40	8.00	0.00	11.30
Vanuatu	11.90	7.90	4.60	13.00	1.50	6.50
Vietnam	38.30	27.30	33.70	53.70	2.50	15.20

Source: World Bank Group (2015a).

consumed 16% of the necessary expenses to procure the contract. Finally, giving gifts to procure a government operating license was inevitable in Cambodia, and rampant in Kyrgyzstan, and common in several other countries.

Corruption is a notoriously difficult phenomenon to measure. Here, data on the relative levels of government corruption in 2014 were obtained from Transparency International (TI 2015), a global non-governmental organization dedicated to monitoring and combatting corruption in its various forms. TI confronts corruption in several ways, including exposing particularly egregious cases, offering advice on how to minimize vulnerability to extortion and bribery, and developing tools such as integrity packs to reduce it. Its best known product is the annual Corrupt Perceptions Index (CPI) of government malfeasance, which it issues annually and is the most widely used measure of corruption in the world. It combines data and input derived from surveys and interviews with public and private sector officials in each country and expert assessments by 13 sources, including the World Bank, Transparency International's Bribe Payers Survey, African Development Bank, the World Justice Project, the Bertelsmann Foundation, Freedom House, Political Risk Services International, and *The Economist* Intelligence Unit. CPI scores are normalized on a scale of 0 (most corrupt) to 100 (least corrupt). Clearly any measure of corruption is partial and incomplete. The CPI, therefore, should not be regarded as a precise, absolute measure, but judged in relative terms. As the best known and most commonly used indication of government malfeasance, it suffices. In this analysis, grouping countries into categories of severity of corruption is a step to avoid giving the impression of an overly precise level of measurement.

Table 3 is an overview of the distribution of Asia's population by the level of severity of government corruption. There is a small group of "Least Corrupt" countries (TI scores 50–

Table 3. Asian population distribution by degree of state corruption, 2014.

	Corruption index	Population (millions)	% of Asia populations.
Least corrupt	50–84	243.0	6.1
Moderately corrupt	35–49	2792.3	70.2
Very corrupt	20–35	851.3	21.4
Extremely corrupt	≤20	90.8	2.3
Total		3977.7	100.0

Source: Calculated by author.

84), including Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Bhutan. Singapore, Asia's least corrupt government (TI score of 84), is comparable to the model governments of Scandinavia in this respect, arguably the least corrupt in the world. The second group, or "Moderately Corrupt" nations (TI scores 35–49), includes the bulk of the region's population (almost 2.8 billion people, or 70.2%); in this category fall China, India, Thailand, and the Philippines. A third tier of "Very Corrupt" governments (TI scores 20–30), which subsumes roughly one in five Asians, includes Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and parts of Central Asia. Finally, the unfortunate category of "Extremely Corrupt" states (TI scores less than 20) includes North Korea, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, but collectively consists of only 2.3% of Asia's population.

Figure 1 displays Asia's CPI in 2014 cartographically. As noted, the least corrupt countries are found in the eastern periphery, that is, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. China, Mongolia, and India form the core of the "Moderately Corrupt Group." A wide swath of countries in Central and Southeast Asia comprise the "Very Corrupt" category. Finally, "Extremely Corrupt" states include North Korea and several Central Asian republics.
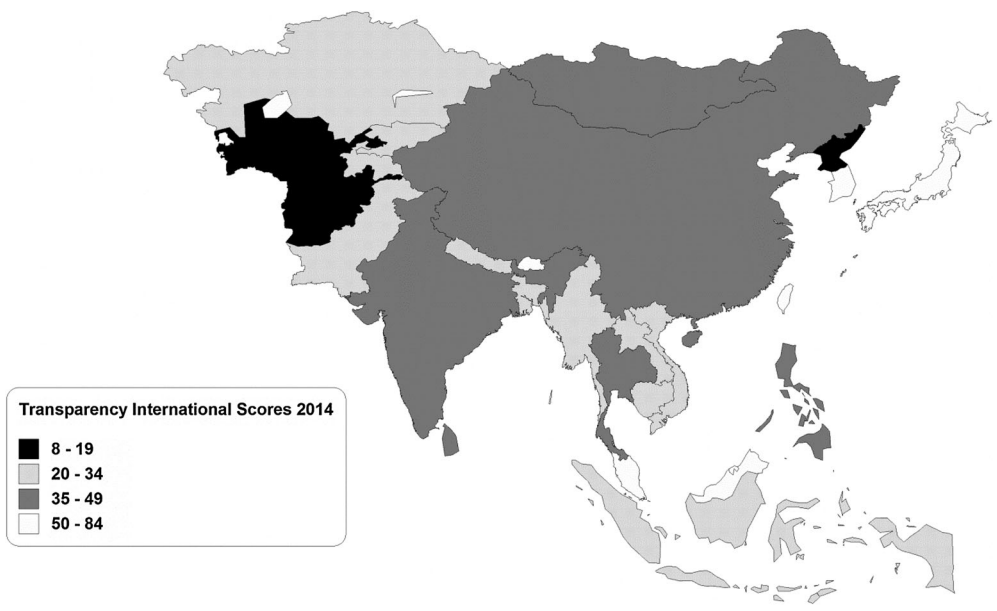

Figure 1. Distribution of transparency international corruption scores, 2014.
Source: Author, using TI CPI index.

The analysis proceeds to correlate Transparency International CPIs with several variables that are hypothesized to have a causal relationship based on the relevant literature. Recall that the higher the CPI, the lower the degree of corruption. Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (measured on purchasing power parity basis) is theorized to have a positive relation with the CPI on the grounds that wealthier countries are thought to have less corruption, as indicated by a large body of literature. The CPI was hypothesized to be correlated with annual change in GDP given that corruption is widely believed to raise transaction costs and diminish productive economic activity. The Gini index of inequality was included given the hypothesis that corruption flourishes in countries with highly uneven income distributions, in which elites are free to engage in rent-seeking behavior relatively unfettered; thus, the CPI and Gini should be inversely correlated. Literacy rates were correlated with CPI on the assumption that countries with low levels of literacy, and thus uninformed citizens, tend to be more corrupt. Another variable used was the Freedom House index of political freedom (www.freedomhouse.org). A non-governmental organization, Freedom House, assesses countries on the basis of electoral freedoms, political pluralism, and civil liberties, including the number of political parties, degree of corruption, human rights abuses, autonomy of minorities, media censorship, and tolerance of political discussion. The working hypothesis here is that relatively free societies tend to be less corrupt.

To assess the common assertion that globalization is inversely related to corruption, two relevant variables, both derived from World Bank (2105b) data, were included: foreign investment (FDI) as a percent of GDP and exports as a percent of GDP (World Bank 2015c).

Finally, a variable assessing government attempts to reign in corruption, the World Bank's (2015) Indicator for Control of Corruption in 2014, which ranges between −2.5 and 2.5. It combines information from several diverse sources, including surveys and expert opinions. The working hypothesis is that countries with strong and effective controls over corruption should have lower levels. A map of the World Bank index (Figure 2) indicates that Japan, Singapore, and Bhutan are Asia's governments that have been most effective in combatting corruption (scores over 1.0), followed by a second tier that includes Malaysia, Taiwan, and South Korea (scores of zero to 1.0). Next follows a large group of countries that are relatively ineffective (scores between 0 and −.5), such as China, Mongolia, India, Thailand, and Vietnam. Finally, the least effective governments in slowing corruption are found in North Korea, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan (scores less than −1.0).

The correlation results are consistent but not terribly surprising (Table 4). The correlation between corruption and GDP per capita is .81, confirming that national wealth tends to moderate corruption: the most corrupt countries are typically poorer ones. Thus, the least corrupt countries (Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) are Asia's wealthiest, while some of the most severely corrupt states are to be found in Central Asia. The corruption index is also inversely and significantly related to change in per capita GDP in 2014, indicating that less corrupt countries experienced higher rates of growth than did more corrupt ones; whether this relation indicates that corruption inhibits growth or that growth inhibits corruption remains unclear. Both indicators of the degree to which a country's economy is globalized, FDI and exports as a percent of GDP, are significant. Clearly, the stronger the foreign ties and international flows of capital, the
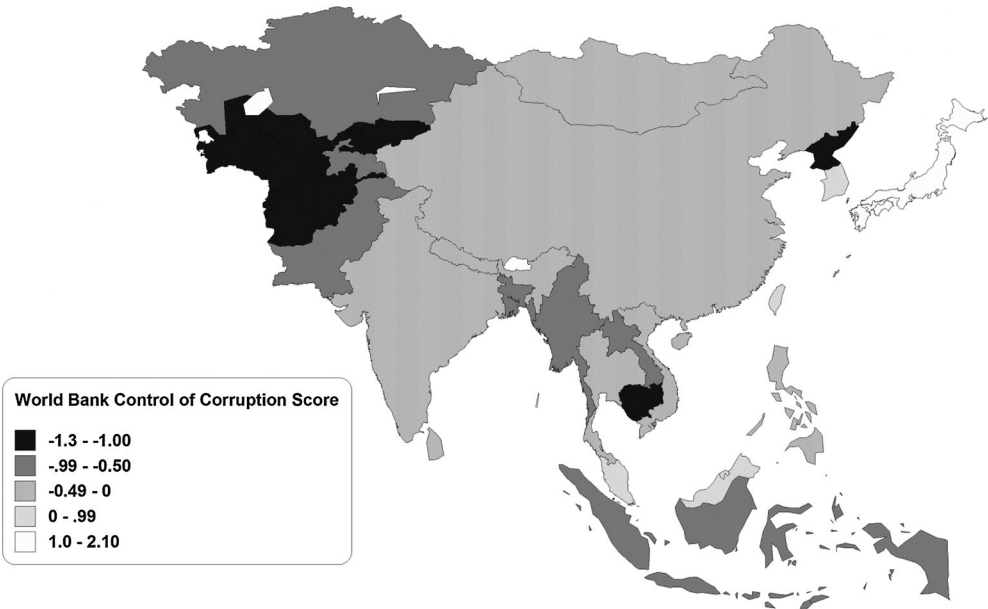
Figure 2. World Bank control of corruption scores, 2014.
Source: Author, using World Bank data. (http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#reports).

lower the degree of corruption. Such a finding is in keeping with other works that point to foreign investors and financial flows as mitigators of the abuse of public office (Mauro 1995; Bardhan 1997; Aidt 2003; Rose-Ackerman 2006).

The corruption score is also inversely related to the Gini index, hinting that more severely skewed national distributions of income tend to foster more corrupt environments; as Jain (2001) notes, centralized power structures are more conducive to corruption than ones with a multiplicity of power centers. This relation is likely to be simultaneously determinant: corruption may both reflect and contribute to inequality. This observation reflects the relative size of a country's middle class, which is a significant force in the preservation of transparency and demands for good government. Surprisingly, the CPI is not significantly associated with literacy, perhaps because relatively high levels of literacy are encountered in corrupt and relatively uncorrupted states alike throughout Asia. Neither was corruption associated with the widely used Freedom House index of political

Table 4. Transparency international corruption score correlations, 2014.

GDP per capita*	**.81**
% change GDP	**−.37**
Exports % GDP	**.59**
FDI % of GDP	**.47**
Gini coefficient	**.40**
Literacy rate	.26
Freedom House score	−.31
World Bank index**	**.98**

Note: Significant correlations in bold.
Source: Calculated by author.
[a]Purchasing power parity.
[b]World Bank Control of Corruption Index.

freedom; while the correlation was negative, as expected, it was not statistically significant, undermining the thesis that political freedom and corruption are strongly but inversely related. Finally, the World Bank index was very strongly correlated with the CPI, indicating that countries with strong government policies to combat corruption have lower rates of it, although this relationship may reflect the influence of wealth and political openness as much as anything else.

National variations in Asian corruption

Because aspatial interpretations of corruption fail to take into account its embeddedness in local political and cultural contexts, and overlook geographic variations in its nature and severity, it is imperative to understand Asian corruption in light of the varying government policies and opportunities for graft found throughout the region. There can be no "one-size-fits-all" model of corruption because it is highly sensitive to local institutional structures and political climates. Thus, this section offer vignettes of some of the most severe cases.

According to Transparency International, North Korea has the dubious distinction of being the world's most corrupt state. A perfect storm of highly centralized power, lack of any political opposition, international isolation, and the rampant nepotism of the communist party created ideal conditions for private gain at the expense of the impoverished population. The Kim dynasty has resorted to a variety of tools to retain authoritarian control (Byman and Lind 2010), effectively eliminating meritocracy and sowing the seeds for a political system highly susceptible to cronyism. Many North Koreans see corruption as the only way to get ahead, given the lack of formal opportunities (Haggard and Noland 2010). Refugees from the country report that bribery is found everywhere in North Korea, and is often the only means of obtaining travel documents, becoming a party member, acquiring a good job, and getting a child into a university (Chae, Sohn, and Kim 2006).

China has a long and colorful history of corruption that continues today (Sun 2004). Under the Ch'ing dynasty, magistrates were granted an allowance called *yang-lien yin* ("money to nourish honesty"). China's Transparency International score was 36, indicating widespread and severe corruption; however, Hong Kong earned a respectable 74. Whereas Hong Kong has noticeably reduced corruption from its maximum levels reached in the 1960s, China has witnessed an explosion of fraud and bribery (Manion 2004). A sizeable literature on corruption in China indicates that it is systemic and institutionalized, reaches the highest echelons of government, and has flourished over time, propelled in part by the country's enormous economic growth (Johnston and Hao 1995; He 2000; Wedeman 2012; Kwong 2015). Guo (2008), in an empirical analysis of 594 instances of corruption, documents the steady rise in number new cases. Chinese corruption takes numerous forms, including:

> graft (*tanwu*), bribery (*xinghui*), and misappropriation of public property (*nuoyong gong-kuan wu*), along with seeking illicit benefits for relatives and friends; neglecting official duties; nepotism and favouritism; shirking; retaliation; making false accusations; filing false reports; boasting and exaggerating; banqueting at public expense; running unauthorized businesses; profiteering; housing irregularities; living lavishly; engaging in improper sexual relations; forming cliques; gambling; whoring; excessive spending on marriages and funerals;

engaging in superstitious activities; smuggling; selling state secrets; engaging in insider stock trading, engaging in real estate speculation and fraud; evading taxes; engaging in financial fraud; making illegal and irregular bank loans; and diverting and selling disaster relief goods. (Wedeman 2004, 897)

Ko and Weng (2012) argue that several factors have led to structural changes in Chinese corruption, including an emphasis on a merit-based civil service system and better monitoring of government expenditures, transforming the practice from an administrative issue to a transactional problem between the public and private spheres. This issue has been exacerbated by the widespread privatization of state-owned companies that has been underway in China for the last two decades. Moreover, like every other segment of Chinese society, corruption there has become globalized, as when bribes take the form of foreign trips, houses, and bank accounts (Li and Wu 2007).

Notably, corruption varies geographically within China. The incomplete devolution of power from Beijing to the local level has put many regional governments in a bind, having to act as agents of the state on the one hand and as engines of economic development on the other (Gong 2002), a process that places discretionary powers in the hands of local officials while it simultaneously offers significant rewards for malfeasance. This phenomenon helps to explain the illegal land grabs that have been common in China and have fueled much popular dissent. Provinces that are relatively less corrupt and better governed have succeeded more often in attracting foreign direct investment (Cole, Elliott, and Zhang 2009). Counties with active anti-corruption campaigns tend to have higher rates of GDP growth (Wu and Zhu 2011).

Chinese corruption extends well beyond the state to permeate business relations as well. *Guanxi* ("connections") is a famous and long-standing Chinese practice that refers to reliance upon interpersonal ties to facilitate actions, resolve problems, and improve access to resources, including friendships and extended family relations that may last a lifetime, blurring the boundaries between the personal and professional worlds (Gold, Guthrie, and Wank 2002). *Guanxi* and corruption tend to be deeply intertwined (Luo 2008). Using a series of case studies, Li (2011) notes that far from being a series of haphazard acts, *guanxi* instead forms a methodically organized informal institutional mechanism for facilitating corrupt exchanges. Because China has a weak legal system, business-to-government *guanxi* undermines corporate governance there (Braendle and Gasser 2005), leading to private gains at social cost (Fan 2002). Luo (2002) argues that *guanxi* is a supplement to established corporate law. Chinese corruption has led, among other things, to corrupt real estate practices (Zhu 2012), shoddy construction of schools, a thriving opium trade in the south, and mismanagement of public revenues. Frequently, business must pay bribes for procurements; parties in court cases bribe judges for favorable opinions; local government officials illegally confiscate land from peasants and benefit from the resale for development.

One might suspect that endemic corruption would act to the detriment of China's famously rapid economic growth. However, as Li and Wu (2007) argue, given the hidebound nature of the Chinese bureaucracy, corruption there may be "efficiency-enhancing" as opposed to predatory. Corruption here is seen as a form of investment that reaps future rewards, perhaps when the official being bribed retires. In this reading, China flourishes *because* it is corrupt, not despite it.

Episodic crusades to stop corruption, which included occasional executions of Communist Party officials, have failed to stem the tide (Ma 2008; Wedeman 2015). In 2001, Li Jizhou, Vice Minister of Public Security, was sentenced to death for accepting tens of millions of yuan in bribes. The latest attempt, launched by Xi Jinping in 2012 to catch "tigers and flies" (high- and low-level officials), included regional inspection teams in various provinces. For example, the vice mayor of Beijing and supervisor of the construction of buildings for the Olympic games was fired for taking bribes; Politburo member Zhou Yongkang was implicated in a vast influence-peddling scheme; the Communist party head of Shanghai was sentenced to 18 years in prison for loaning retirement funds to real estate speculators; the head of the China Food and Drug Administration was executed for kickbacks; the national chief statistician, Qiu Xiaohua, was fired after a pension fund scandal; the chief executive of China Petroleum was dismissed; and the official in charge of the national rail system was fired after a corruption investigation. In part, these efforts stem from the threat that corruption poses to the legitimacy of the Communist Party and its autocratic rule. Heineman (2011) maintains that anti-corruption campaigns may deter low-level bribes and kickbacks, but do little to reduce that among high-ranking officials, and may even increase the size of bribes. He notes that the People's Bank of China estimated that "17,000 Communist Party members and state functionaries had illicitly obtained and then smuggled out of China an astonishing $124 billion from the mid-90s until 2008."

Tyrannical governments, kleptocratic elites, extensive censorship, the lack of political opposition, and deeply entrenched cultures of graft have combined to exacerbate Central Asian corruption (Critchlow 1988; Gleason 1995). Oil revenues have transformed some of these into rentier states plagued by the famous "resource curse" found widely in Africa. In Turkmenistan, corrupt officials prosper from the blossoming Central Asian trade in opium and heroin (Peyrouse 2012). Regional patronage networks undermine the efficiency of the region's public administration (Collins 2006). However, Western perceptions of Central Asian bribery must take into account the important role of gift-giving as a medium of resource redistribution, such as at elaborate wedding celebrations (Werner 2000; Urinboyev and Svensson 2013). Nonetheless, graft, nepotism, and kickbacks can be debilitating: *The New York Times*, for example, documented in detail the cesspool of corruption in Afghanistan, leading to insecure borders, armed forces that sell weapons to the Taliban, widespread graft, and abuse of foreign aid (Shane, Mazzetti, and Filkins 2010; Rosenburg and Bowley 2012; Walsh 2014).

India, too, suffers from severe corruption (Guhan and Paul 1997). Quah (2008) notes that while anti-corruption campaigns there extended back to the period of British colonial rule, its Central Bureau of Investigation has been so ineffective that he deems eradicating corruption to be an "impossible dream." Sun and Johnston (2009) note that while democracy is often upheld as an antidote to corruption, India's severity in this regard is roughly equal to that in decidedly undemocratic China. Elections there are routinely plagued by accusations of corruption, such as stuffed ballot boxes. In a study of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), which entitles every rural household to up to 100 days of paid employment per year, Niehaus and Sukhtankar (2013) discovered an almost 100% "marginal corruption rate," that is, almost none of the additional funds from a wage increase reached those to whom it was intended. Throughout India the "mafia raj" of politicians, real estate developers, and law enforcement officials acquire

and develop land in illegal ways (Abdulraheem 2009). Even the mundane act of obtaining a driver's license involves extensive negotiations with corrupt officials (Bertrand et al. 2007). Anjaria (2011), however, in an ethnographic study holds that what is viewed as low-level corruption among street vendors' dealings with municipal officials may be discursively recast as an "ordinary space of negotiation," normalizing the practice as routine and accepted rather than unusual or criminal. Although Indian corporate governance is improving, weak enforcement has often undermined investor confidence (Chakrabarti, Megginso, and Yadav 2008).

Attempts to stem Indian corruption have generally failed when undermined by inadequate enforcement, lack of political will, and a cultural context that emphasizes tolerance and forgiveness (Tummala 2009). Whereas transparency laws (e.g. the Right to Information Act of 2005) can be almost as useful as anti-corruption strategies in aiding the poor (e.g. to obtain ration cards) (Peisakhin and Pinto 2010), Peisakhin (2012) asserts that transparency can be ineffectual when the gap between privileged bureaucrats and the poor is great. Thus, Shah (2009) concludes that Indian corruption is part of a broader moral economy, not simply the political economy, and that the rural poor often eschew the state as hopelessly corrupt. Heston and Kumar (2008) hold that India's robust economic growth has mitigated pressure on top government officials to rein in corruption, and that corruption hampers the country from realizing its potential rate of increase in economic wellbeing.

India is one of the few countries in which corruption has been studied by geographers. Robbins (2000) investigated corruption in Indian forest management, Jeffrey (2002) studied popular protests against corrupt sugarcane marketing in India and its role in the reproduction of caste and material inequality, and Corbridge and Kumar (2002) examined jackfruit trees as a means of exploring how corrupt linkages transcended the state-civil society divide.

Similarly, Pakistan has experienced deeply entrenched and debilitating corruption that has rendered the government inordinately ineffective in providing services, maintaining law and order, or combating Islamist militants, to the point that it is sometimes regarded as a failed state (Khan 2007). Thus, corruption has increased water stress in the country (Kugelman and Hathaway 2009), rendered the police illegitimate in the public's eyes (Jackson et al. 2014), and crippled the public health program (Khan and Van den Heuvel 2007). Large amounts of American military aid have likely exacerbated the problem. Islam (2004) attributes Pakistani corruption to its collectivist administrative culture and masculinist adherence to hierarchy. These observations underscore the point that corruption is not simply an economic phenomenon, but deeply embedded in moral and cultural values as well. Not surprisingly, the country's high level of corruption has impeded its economic progress (Farooq et al. 2013).

Similarly, impoverished Bangladesh has witnessed its share of corruption. Thus, corrupt practices have contaminated public procurements (Mahmood 2010), health and education services (Knox 2009), and cyclone preparedness (Mahmud and Prowse 2012). As a result, citizen distrust of the state is high and the country's economic growth has been impaired. Typically, it is the poor who suffer the most. Oddly, e-government – the use of the internet to deliver some government services and dispense funds – has been widely touted as a solution to Bangladesh's corruption (Hossan and Bartram

2010; Bhuiyan 2011), a dubious strategy given the country's internet penetration rate in 2014 was only 24.5%.

In Indonesia, graft and bribery became deeply institutionalized under Suharto's New Order regime (1965–1998), in which elaborate patronage networks were used to reward supporters. Suharto's successor, Abdurrahman Wahid, was himself implicated in three corruption scandals. This centralized system of cronyism gradually became more decentralized over time as administrative autonomy was shifted to local districts. More recently, President Joko Widodo launched a weak, ineffectual corruption campaign. The official Corruption Eradication Commission targeted relatively low-level officials who were less able to conceal their crimes. Corruption remains therefore largely undisturbed, making the president seem impotent. As The Economist (2015) notes, "Indonesians of all stripes gripe about sticky-fingered officials." For example, 66% of Indonesians report having bribed a member of the judiciary. Indeed, popular protests in Indonesia often include the chant "KKN," which stands for corruption (korupsi), collusion (kolusi), and nepotism (nepotisme). Corruption has undermined environmental protection laws and fostered illegal logging in Kalimantan (Smith, Obidzinski, and Suramengala 2003), increased the uncertainty of doing business (Kuncoro 2006), suppressed dissent (Robertson-Snape 1999), and hampered economic development (Collins 2007). Micro-economic evidence suggests that corruption leads to missing government expenditures, a practice that can be reduced through enhanced auditing (Olken 2007).

Despite multiple government campaigns against it, corruption in Malaysia remains stubbornly entrenched (Siddiquee 2010). Although the government appointed the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), it has had relatively little effect. Prime minister Najib Razak has been embroiled in a mushrooming scandal in which more than US $700 million was deposited into his personal bank account, funds, the MACC concluded, which were donated by unidentified private donors and did not come from the state development fund, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB). However, foreign sources, including the Wall Street Journal, insisted otherwise, and linked the funds to the debt-laden agency. Upon investigating the scandal, attorney general Abdul Gani Patail was removed from office. These events illustrate how intractable corruption can be even in relatively modern, wealthy, and globalized Asian societies.

Other examples of corruption abound. In Thailand, vote-buying casts doubt on the validity of the electoral process (Callahan 2005; Mutebi 2008). Petty corruption is endemic in Myanmar, as well as bribes of tax collectors and customs officials; monies intended for NGOs are often siphoned off (Saw 2015). In Vietnam, corruption has hampered the growth of the private sector but not that of the state (Nguyen and van Dijk 2012). Filipino elections are marred by fraud and vote-buying (Quimpo 2007); corruption has seriously impaired the country's public health system, including delays in vaccinations and increased waiting times at clinics, all of which affect poor and rural areas the most (Azfar and Gurgur 2008).

This depressing litany could go on, with innumerable additional examples. But by now the central point is abundantly clear: corruption is endemic in Asian societies, to one extent or another, and generates serious economic, political, and social costs. While the type and severity may vary, the broad contours are familiar: autocratic governments; media censorship; low rates of literacy; underpaid public employees; and cultural norms that accept petty corruption as legitimate and normal. This constellation of factors

points to the spatially uneven nature of corruption: if its causes and effects vary geographically, so too must attempts to rein it in.

Concluding thoughts

Corruption is rampant throughout most of Asia. Its origins lie in dictatorial governments that inhibit the rise of meritocracies and a watchdog opposition, a censored press, underpaid public servants, and cultures that accept it as a normal part of doing business. Corruption undermines the efficiency of Asia's governments, erodes public confidence and trust (Chang and Chu 2006), reduces tax revenues, elevates inequality, and retards economic growth. Inevitably it is the poor who bear the greatest costs.

The severity of corruption varies enormously among Asian countries, and sometimes within them. The most severe levels of corruption tend to be in countries with highly centralized political systems and lack an effective independent media, such as North Korea and China. Conversely, the lowest levels are invariably found in rich, democratic societies with high rates of literacy and a free press, notably Japan and South Korea. Relatively globalized economies tend to be less corrupt than those less reliant on foreign markets or sources of capital. The nature and impacts of corruption also vary as well: it means quite different things to an Indian business executive and a Javanese peasant. Such observations should refute simplistic "one-size-fits-all" models of corruption that ignore geographic contexts.

Many Asian countries have undertaken periodic anti-corruption campaigns. In China, they occur with great regularity but have largely failed to curb this pathology (Ma 2008; Wedeman 2015). Mongolia, where public commitment to combat corruption has been strong, initiated a series of measures, including an Anti-corruption Law in 2006, the Independent Authority Against Corruption (IAAC) in 2007, and the Law on Conflict of Interest in 2012 (Asia Foundation 2015). Although Pakistan launched its National Anti-Corruption Strategy in 2002, a co-opted judiciary and lack of political will have rendered it toothless. Several announce with fanfare their attempts to reduce it using e-government, as in Bangladesh (Hossan and Bartram 2010) and South Korea, giving draconian powers to anti-corruption agencies, such as in Singapore (Quah 2010), or establishing special anti-corruption courts, as in Indonesia (Butt 2011). Such efforts are often funded and applauded by foreign investors, NGOs, and the World Bank. Yet there is scant evidence that they have had much substantive effects, at best amounting to window dressing and at worst as platforms to attack domestic political opponents (Bukanovsky 2006). In most cases curbing corruption remains an "impossible dream" (Quah 2008).

Combatting Asian corruption necessitates more than occasional government programs. Rather, long-term structural and institutional changes are needed. Encouraging democracies and an unfettered media is one step. Economic growth, rising incomes and literacy, and an expanded middle class is another. A higher income for low-level public officials, including police and customs officials, is a third step. The geography of Asian corruption mimics the region's uneven spatial development; as the region's poorer countries take tentative steps toward economic prosperity, there is hope that corruption will be gradually mitigated. Japan, South Korea, and Singapore are model nations in this regard, beacons for others to follow.

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