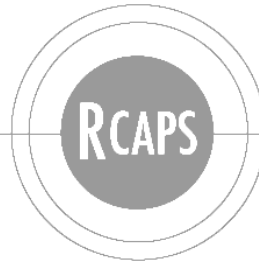


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*Meanings, Norms, and Social Constitution: Revisiting
ASEAN Centrality in East Asian Regionalism*

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Abstract: This article examines the implications of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) centrality in East Asian regionalism by elucidating ASEAN's power in relations to other states and in the process of institution-building in East Asia. The article seeks to address following questions. How has ASEAN created and maintained its central position in developing regional institutions in East Asia? More concretely, how has ASEAN fostered and utilised specific ideational factors in consolidating its regional position in the process of regional cooperation? And how has ASEAN created specific social constitution in which it managed the relationship with China and Japan, the two regional powers? This article argues that ASEAN has exerted productive power to maintain its central position in regionalism in East Asia by developing specific meanings and norms in the process of regional cooperation. Moreover, ASEAN has maintained its centrality in complicated Sino-Japanese relations by embedding them into constitutive social relations and coordinating their policy stances.

Keywords: ASEAN centrality, regionalism, East Asia, China, Japan, productive power

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a unique international organisation with a nearly 50-year history. Despite sporadic disagreements and conflicts among the members, the association has successfully maintained and enhanced internal cohesion to the extent to create a regional community. The association has also forged closer political linkages with neighbouring states that have far greater material capabilities, and embedded them into its initiated multilateral institutions. ASEAN's presence as a major actor of regionalism constitutes a key characteristic of international relations and provides regional stability in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific.

In the new millennium, ASEAN began to express its aspiration to be the centre in external political and economic relations. The aspiration for remaining the centre of regional affairs is linked to the evolution of the environments surrounding Southeast Asia. China's growing economic might has been transformed into its assertive diplomacy in preserving its core interests. China's political leverage and economic

weight invite Japan's strategic reactions including its renewed linkages with the United States, which has made regional political relations more complicated. Given these regional evolutions, how to maintain ASEAN's pivotal position in East Asia is a significant challenge for political leaders in Southeast Asia.

This article seeks to examine the implications of ASEAN centrality in East Asian regionalism. It elucidates ASEAN's position and power in relations to other states and in the process of institution-building in East Asia. The article seeks to address following questions. How has ASEAN created and maintained its central position in East Asia by managing regional affairs in general and institution-building in particular? More concretely, how has ASEAN fostered and utilised specific ideational factors in consolidating its position in the process of regional cooperation? And how has ASEAN created specific social constitution in which it managed the relationship with China and Japan, the two regional powers?

This article makes three arguments. First, ASEAN has exerted power to maintain its central position by developing systems of meanings and norms as well as social constitution. Second, ASEAN has developed and employed specific meanings and norms in the process of regional cooperation, which constituted the foundation for its centrality in regionalism in East Asia. Third, ASEAN has maintained its centrality in complicated Sino-Japanese relations by embedding them into constitutive social relations and avoiding exclusive formal linkages with each of the two states.

This article is organised as follows. The following section provides an analytical framework for examining the position of ASEAN centrality for regionalism in East Asia. The third and fourth sections explore implications of shared meanings and norms for ASEAN centrality. The fifth section investigates ASEAN's attempts to create and develop specific social constitution in Sino-Japanese rivalry.

Productive Power and ASEAN in East Asian Regionalism

ASEAN has been regarded as the core entity of regionalism in East Asia. Major regional institutions such as the ASEAN Plus Three (ASEAN+3), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) have developed with ASEAN's initiative and prominent involvement, and

consequently major institutions in East Asia have the ‘ASEAN plus’ format. Given these empirical facts, ASEAN’s position and role in regionalism of East Asia have been intensively discussed among scholars specialising in international relations of East Asia and Southeast Asia.¹ Significantly, ASEAN purposely pushed forward the word of ‘centrality’ after it was first used in the joint statement of ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) meeting in 2006 in the context of ASEAN’s external economic relationship (Fukunaga 2015: 106). The word was then used in important ASEAN documents including the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint and the ASEAN Charter. This phenomenon contributed to producing research that explicitly examined the implications of ASEAN centrality.

Several scholars have explained underpinning factors that enable ASEAN centrality in regional politics in East Asia. Acharya (2015) and Kuroyanagi (2015) examine ASEAN’s intrinsic factors pertinent to historical records to manage its intra-mural disputes and produce stability and peace in Southeast Asia and external conditions where great powers ‘cancel each other out’, accepting ASEAN’s lead in forming mechanisms for broad consultation as contributing to mutual checking and constraint. Others have explored the functions and implications of ASEAN centrality in regionalism in East Asia. Ho (2012) holds that the concept of ASEAN centrality is mostly exercised with economic dealings and is less applicable when decisions involving security affairs are concerned. Accordingly, ASEAN’s central position in managing regional institutions is highly circumscribed by big power incursions, making ASEAN centrality ‘a concept that is, at best, a useful political slogan’ (Ho 2012: 8). Ba (2012) investigates the implications of ASEAN’s institutional centrality to regularise more region-regarding attention and policies from major powers. She argues that while major powers regularly participate in the ‘ASEAN plus’ arrangements, ASEAN still faces significant challenges in response to the western members’ dissatisfaction with its specific institutional approaches and achieving specific functional ends. An additional set of scholars have identified various challenges towards ASEAN centrality in East Asian politics. Beeson (2013) admits that ASEAN has exerted an ideational and political influence in forming regional institutional architectures, but the association is facing major new challenges in retaining its centrality in regional affairs because of its

large neighbouring countries' entering into growing competition and other regional organisations' emergence. Hermawan (2015) holds that ASEAN's credibility and centrality are at stake with China's commitments to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and military-backed oil exploration and land reclamation in the disputed waters in the South China Sea. Given these serious challenges, he recommends, ASEAN members need to unite their positions towards China and other major powers, and strengthen ASEAN's institutional frameworks to advance a more closely-knit community.

The past studies correctly grasp the implications of ASEAN centrality in regional settings of East Asia and elucidate the association's limitations and challenges in managing the interests and policies of great powers. Most of the research pay much attention to the extent to which ASEAN centrality is effective and appropriated in the material domain formed by interest-based power politics.² Given that Southeast Asian states' primary concern has been the avoidance of an external condition where one great power dominates the region, implications of ASEAN centrality should be examined in the material domain first. At the same time, it is a crucial fact that ASEAN has been deeply involved in regional affairs – the building of regional institutions in particular –, and such an involvement cannot be explained by material power politics alone. Given that ASEAN centrality is a phenomenon that is socially constructed and hence politically contested, it is necessary and appropriate to understand and explain the social context in which ASEAN has managed its external relations and regional affairs and thereby consolidated its key position in regional settings. The exploration of ASEAN's manoeuvring of developing specific social constitution where the association assumes the central position in East Asia contributes to articulating the substance of centrality going beyond the degree of centrality.

This article seeks to deepen the understanding of ASEAN centrality in East Asian regionalism by relying on the concept of productive power. Productive power implies 'the socially diffuse production of subjectivity in systems of meaning and signification' (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 3). Productive power resides in political subjects, not in sovereign's authority, and is exercised through discursive means – language, habitus, cognition, and social construction (Lipschutz 2005: 750-53). Productive power works,

not through behavioural relations or interactions of specific actors, but through constitutive social relations ‘that precede the social or subject positions of actors and that constitute them as social beings with their respective capacities and interests’ (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 9). Moreover, productive power works in generalised and diffuse social processes not through an immediate, direct, and specific relationship. The actors with productive power can create and advance systems of knowledge and discursive practices that (re)produce subjectivities through indirect, socially diffuse, and temporally distant social relations.

A crucial question is how a specific actor wields productive power to construct social conditions among members of a group. Three elements are drawn from the essence of productive power. The first is the creation of shared meanings among members of a social group. Productive power is distinctive that it concerns ‘the social processes and the systems of knowledge through which meaning is produced, fixed, lived, experienced and transformed’ (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 20). For creating an order and building a community among a particular group of actors, the actors need to foster a common perception of the real world and such a perception is expressed as shared meanings. The meanings become the basis of a community because ‘intersubjective meaning gives a people a common language to talk about social reality and a common understanding of certain norms, but only with common meanings does this common reference world contain significant common actions, celebrations, and feelings’ (Taylor 1977: 22). An actor with productive power creates and fixes shared meanings that a certain kind of actors take into account in joining a community, and produces, on the basis of the shared meanings, a set of ideas, values, norms, and even identities that confirm and advance stable social relations among the community members.

One of the major regional characteristics in East Asia is diversity in terms of political systems, economic development, and cultural traditions including religion. This diversity is often cited as one of major impediments to regional cooperation in comparison with the European Union (EU) whose members show significant commonalities in democratic political systems, capitalist economic systems, the history of the Roman Empire, and the Christianity. Given significant diversities that work

against regional cooperation in East Asia, it is crucial to set up shared meanings in key social behaviour for developing subjectivities among the states in East Asia.

This research examines specific meanings of ‘participation’, a fundamental key action for members of a group in initiating cooperation. The participation basically implies states’ action to join an institution to pursue specific policy objectives, but a group of states can attach diverse values to this action. It explores what ideational and practical meanings of participation in institutions ASEAN has produced, fixed, and lived in the process of regional cooperation, and how such meanings are different from those that other regions or regional organisations have imparted in the processes of regional cooperation.

Second, the members of a social group that hold shared meanings often produce a set of norms that are referred to as ‘standards of behaviour defined in terms of rights and obligations’ (Kratochwil 1989: 59). Not only do norms prescribe and regulate an actor’s behaviour by specifying standards of proper behaviour, but they also define and constitute an actor’s identities by specifying actions that cause other actors to recognise a particular identity (Katzenstein 1996: 5). Norms can ‘establish inter-subjective meanings that allow the actors to direct their actions towards each other, communicate with each other, appraise the quality of their actions, criticize claims and justify choices’ (Kratochwil 1993: 75-76). Put another way, norms provide actors with specific meanings that guide their behaviour that confirm with expectations within a given community.

Quite a few scholars have paid attention to shared norms in Southeast Asia – the ASEAN Way – as variables that constitute the basic configuration of diplomatic relations among Southeast Asian countries (Acharya 1997, 2014, Haacke 2003). Indeed, the ASEAN Way includes sovereignty-protective norms such as respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in domestic affairs, which have surely constrained ASEAN’s capabilities to shift from dialogue-based to rule-based organisation (Breslin and Wilson 2015: 136). The sovereignty-protective norms have much to do with regional elites’ purposeful intention of establishing a framework to mediate estrangement and insecurity given fragile domestic sovereignty (Haacke 2003: 51).

This study examines the position and influence of the norms that ASEAN has developed with slightly different interests and angles. It locates pragmatic flexibility and equitable treatment, two specific norms advocated by ASEAN, in historically contingent understandings that reside in the broader regional space involving both Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia. This study investigates how ASEAN has employed these two norms as key principles for regional cooperation in Southeast Asia and how they have been used in the process of building regional institutions in East Asia. It also examines whether these key norms that ASEAN has employed for regional cooperation have the broader spatial base in East Asia.

The third is the production of specific social constitution for a group of actors. The specific social constitution is (re)created by intersubjective understandings of self and others. In such intersubjective relationships, expectations and roles within a group constitute an actor's identity. The social constitution does not envision hierarchical and binary relations of dominance between materially stronger states and weaker ones. It is generally admitted that one or two states in a group hold preponderant material capabilities, which are transformed into their structural power and leadership within the group (Kindleberger 1981, Gilpin 1987: 72-80). However, it is also predictable that leadership could be provided through other forms. A small state or a collective group of such states is able to exert leadership when it creates specific social constitution in which all members of a group admit its special position, role and expectation within the group. In other words, its presence and associated practices are able to create and maintain regionally accepted order under specific social constitution.

This study pays attention to specific social constitution in relation to 'legitimacy' in leading the process of regional cooperation.³ In East Asia, there exist China and Japan, two of the world's eminent states, which have far greater political and economic capabilities than any of ASEAN members. However, ASEAN holds the legitimacy to gain widespread acceptance for new initiative in regional institutions (Stubbs 2014: 530). The association has accumulated expertise and knowledge for managing multilateral political affairs with a long history of a regional organisation since 1967, playing a key role in building intergovernmental institutions in East Asia. ASEAN has raised capabilities to define problems in inter-state relationships, prepare for particular

options to resolve them, and persuade other states to accept them. Such legitimacy in leading regional cooperation enables ASEAN to create special social constitution into which China and Japan are embedded.

The special social constitution provides the milieu where ASEAN shapes the basic configurations of and processes for regional cooperation in East Asia. This study explores how ASEAN has created specific social constitution with its legitimacy to lead the process of regional cooperation, and how such social constitution is accepted by other states in East Asia. It also examines concrete methods that ASEAN has employed in order to integrate China and Japan into constitutive social relations.

In a nutshell, this article examines the implication of ASEAN centrality for regionalism in East Asia in terms of meanings, norms, and social constitution. It posits that ASEAN's power is formed and exercised by the creation of shared meanings, the diffusion of common norms, and the production of specific social constitution involving states in Northeast Asia.

ASEAN and Shared Meanings

ASEAN has advanced social processes and systems of knowledge regarding regional cooperation since its foundation in 1967. In its development, the association has developed specific meanings of 'participation' in institution. The participation is the starting point to make all relevant parties gather in one setting and enable them to forge and maintain continuous communications. The participation provides the foundation for the process to deepen social relationality that is fostered by personal networks in the steady process of consultation. Through this process, participants socialise themselves to learn how to develop mutual respect and an ethic of self-restraint, and create a comfort atmosphere to discuss common challenges and find solutions to them in a non-adversarial posturing. The self-discipline and self-transformation are achieved in a group through the process of inter-activity with other members. Thus, participation in multilateral institution is important for 'creating a conducive socio-psychological setting for intra-mural solving' (Acharya 2014: 67).

ASEAN's institutions are characterised by 'holistic participation and flexible management'. ASEAN encourages the members to participate in every institution, and

the nature of soft institution with little legalistic element facilitates the willing participation of the members. The association pursues institutional thickening rather than institutional strength, adhering to soft regionalism that puts stress on form over function (Acharya and Layug 2012: 31). ASEAN expects that its members take advantage of various opportunities for consultation in institutions, ranging from ministerial and senior officials' meetings to committees, councils, and working groups. Such opportunities enable the members to deepen personal networks to manage tensions and seek solutions to regional problems (Stubbs 2014: 531), and develop social relationality in which they pursue self-discipline to play an expected role within the association. The strong degree of social relationality allows ASEAN to pursue 'unity in diversity', and participation in institution is a prerequisite for this objective. When one member raises a complaint on the management of an institution, all members deliberate on the ways in which the member can stay in the institution. In other words, ASEAN changes the management of institutions flexibly in accordance with practical conditions, which block the separation of a member.

ASEAN's stress on participation is revealed in a great number of meeting. The number of ASEAN-sponsored meetings attended by politicians, bureaucrats, and quasi- or non-governmental representatives grew from around 300 in 2000 to over 700 in 2007 although the mandate and power of the ASEAN Secretariat remained almost unchanged during the time. ASEAN has provided many opportunities for consultation and confidence-building by organising institutions under the so-called conference diplomacy.

ASEAN's understanding of specific value attached to participation is revealed in its development. In the 1990s, ASEAN accepted Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia as new members. Given differences in political system and gaps in economic development, there were concerns among the existing ASEAN members that the inclusion of the new members would undermine ASEAN's cohesion and unity (Oba 2014: 183). However, the old ASEAN members finally accepted the participation of these members with an informal condition that they would sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). The existing ASEAN members expected that participation in the association encourage the new members to socialise themselves to stabilise political

linkages with other states and enhance the unity of the region. Moreover, ASEAN's meaning of participation underpinned Myanmar's drastic political reforms that began with a transition to civilian rule in 2011.⁴ The western countries criticised ASEAN's policy to accept and maintain Myanmar's participation in the association despite its government's suppression on democratic movements and the serious violation of human rights. ASEAN members found the values in maintaining Myanmar's participation in the association. Myanmar's position in ASEAN allowed it to benefit from the range of resources made available to and accessed by ASEAN, and helped it to widen the space for and quicken the pace of political reforms (Caballero-Anthony 2014: 577).

ASEAN's emphasis on participation is based on a different understanding of what participation in institutions means from that in the western world. In the western approach, an institution is created to attain a particular mission, and is managed in effective ways in which non-participation of an expected member produces no or little problem. The western countries have a clear preference for mission-oriented, ad hoc multilateralism aiming at a specific task or objective and composed of a 'coalition of the willing' (Cossa 2009: 43). Put another way, the western approach stresses 'function' rather than 'form' to collect qualified members to join an institution (Feigenbaum and Manning 2009). Participation is just an outcome that members gather to meet specific functional needs. The western approach does not find crucial values in participation *per se*, and an important is the 'result' that is produced through negotiations and bargaining among participating members.

In reality, ASEAN's understanding of meaning in participation makes a sharp contrast to that of the EU. The EU's institutions are characterised by 'selective participation and strict management'. The union allows the members to be selective in participating in specific institutions according to their functional needs. However, once a country hopes to join an institution, it has to meet high hurdles. This is explicitly shown in the requirement of the Copenhagen criteria to join the EU or numerical criteria for joining the Euro zone. The EU pursues institutional strength with legally-binding nature that directs participating members to attain specific functional objectives. For this purpose, 'the EU has an elaborate codification system that allows for the accommodation of states' differences by providing them with the possibility for

constructive abstention, opt-out, and institutional mechanisms such as enhanced cooperation for those states that want to go further in a certain policy domain or issue area' (Hofmann and Merand 2012: 145). The strong degree of institutional codification and formalisation enables the EU to maintain 'unity in diversity', and participation in institution is not given important values.

ASEAN's stress on participation has had significant impacts on the formation and function of intergovernmental institutions in East Asia. Since participation itself has been regarded as holding independent values, ASEAN-led institutions in East Asia – the ARF, ASEAN+3, EAS, and ADMM+ – have been formed with ASEAN as the core. Despite the fact that the majority of the members in these institutions are the same, strict division of labour among the institutions for performing specific functions has not been pursued. For instance, EAS leaders identified, at the first meeting in December 2005, five priority areas of functional cooperation – energy, education, finance, avian influenza, and disaster management –, and energy and finance had been major targets of ASEAN+3 cooperation. Despite initial ambiguity in pursuing functional performance, it was expected that frank talks and personal networks among participants will gradually deepen recognition for more effective use of institutions. In fact, the members gradually made clear the relationship between the EAS and ASEAN+3: the EAS is regarded as a leaders-led forum for dialogue and cooperation on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common concerns, while ASEAN+3 functions as a regional forum to promote practical and concrete cooperation in specific policy areas. Thus, ASEAN added special meanings to participation in diffuse social processes in which institutions that all relevant parties joined would develop in an incremental manner.

Some observers cast doubt to ASEAN-centred multilateralism in East Asia, regarding ASEAN as no more than an 'imitation community' with time-consuming processes and meagre outcomes from consultation (Jones and Smith 2006). Such an evaluation makes a point from a standpoint that institutions are created with an objective to produce functional outcomes. However, multilateral institutions in East Asia reflect ASEAN's meaning of participation that pays respect to the gradual deepening of participants' relationality and continuous dialogues that help them to generate regional social capital.

ASEAN Centrality and Shared Norms

On the basis of specific meaning of participation in institution, ASEAN has taken advantage of a set of norms for promoting regional cooperation. Equitable treatment and pragmatic flexibility are two examples of such norms. While the former has been an important behavioural norm that has been incorporated into institutions for regional cooperation, the latter has been used as a crucial procedural norm in the process of building institutions.

ASEAN has had strong interests in maintaining equitable treatment, paying due consideration to the different level of development among members. This is typically shown in ASEAN's approach to market liberalisation. The association adopted special and differential treatment to its new members in achieving market liberalisation. This differential treatment became a core principle in advancing regional economic cooperation, being included in the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and other market liberalisation agreements. The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint, an action plan for reaching the AEC in 2008-2015, stipulates four strategic pillars: single market and production base; competitive economic region; *equitable economic development*; and integration into the global economy. The equitable economic development was presented as one of the four pillars that provide the foundation for the regional economic community. ASEAN emphasised the importance of equitable treatment further by formulating the ASEAN Framework for Equitable Economic Development in 2011.

Importantly, ASEAN made equitable treatment a standard norm embedded into trade liberalisation agreements in East Asia. The association completed the formation of free trade networks by 2010 by concluding free trade agreements (FTAs) with Australia/New Zealand, China, Japan, South Korea, and India. All framework agreements for FTAs that ASEAN concluded with these countries included phrases regarding the provision of special and differential treatment and additional flexibility to new ASEAN members or consideration to the different level of development among participating members.

The equitable treatment was incorporated into the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), an East Asia-wide free trade framework, in

comprehensive manners. The document for the RCEP's guiding principles and objectives explicitly stipulates that negotiations for the RCEP recognise interests in supporting equitable economic development among the members, and refers to 'taking into consideration the different levels of development of the participating countries'. Consideration to equitable treatment is incorporated into the scope of negotiations: economic and technical cooperation that 'will aim at narrowing development gaps among the parties'; and the promotion of competition with a recognition of 'significant differences in the capacity and national regimes of RCEP participating countries in the area of competition'.⁵

The above principles and objectives in the RCEP make a significant contrast to the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), a US-led free trade framework in the Asia-Pacific. The TPP puts stress on cooperation with developing members as making 'cooperation' as one field of negotiations. The main objective of cooperation is capacity-building of developing members to help them to meet the TPP's high standards, not necessarily providing overall support for rectifying an economic gap between developed and developing members. The TPP has not taken into consideration special and differential treatment that pays consideration to existing economic conditions of developing members. Significantly, the TPP members began to take note of equitable treatment after Japan's participation in the TPP talks in July 2013. The leaders' statement that came out in October 2013 contained a phrase that a comprehensive and balanced regional agreement 'takes into account the diversity of or levels of development'.

Equitable treatment is a behavioural norm, which is closely linked to the 'Asian values' construct, stressing the importance of a communitarian ethic (Acharya 2002: 28). The members of a social group tend to pay attention to harmony in the group and the wellbeing of all members including weak ones. The equitable treatment, which is linked to a communitarian ethic, constituted a key policy idea for statist development in East Asia. In Malaysia and Vietnam, institutionalised, pragmatic parties and cohesive, interventionist states created organisational power to represent collective goals rather than personalistic ones, and advanced policies to balance pro-poor measures with economic growth and stability (Kuhonta 2011). This is also the case in Japan, South

Korea, and Taiwan that achieved economic growth with equality. In the industrial development process in Northeast Asia, the states sought to avoid the production of ‘losers’ in the market by making a strong actor in the market assume responsibility for the sound development of the market. For instance, a major objective of Japan’s state intervention and industrial policy was to balance two demands between the minimisation of costs of bankruptcy and unemployment resulting from the competition process on the one hand, and the maintenance of incentives for competition among market actors on the other (Murakami 1996: 185). The various institutions including subcontracting relations between large and small enterprises as well as public corporations for small enterprises constituted the embedded bases for preventing bankruptcy and unemployment.

The second norm that ASEAN has paid respect to in promoting regional cooperation is pragmatic flexibility. The pragmatic flexibility implies that formally determined rules are modified according to pragmatic needs or practical conditions. Such flexibility has significant influences on institutional management in Southeast Asia. A typical example is found in the process of AFTA formation. In the AFTA formation, original commitments to market liberalisation were sometimes breached as Malaysia and Indonesia required the revision of commitments from those previously agreed (Nesadurai 2003; Jones and Smith 2007: 176). Such revisions surely implied the member governments’ limited capacities to deal with domestic opposition to the AFTA. At the same time, an adoption of flexible revisions enabled ASEAN members to find pragmatic ways by maintaining overall frameworks for trade liberalisation (Stubbs 2000, pp. 312-4). In the long run, such flexibility produced fruit by leading to the AFTA formation in 2010, and intra-ASEAN trade expanded by 7.2 times from US\$82.7 billion in 2001 to US\$598.4 billion in 2011 (ASEAN 2005: 59, ASEAN 2014: 56). The practice of pragmatic flexibility was also seen in the management of ASEAN’s chair system. The ASEAN Charter changed the chair system, which had been adopted as an informal practice, into a formal rule, stipulating that ‘ASEAN shall have, in a calendar year, a single Chairmanship’, which ‘shall rotate annually, based on the alphabetical order of the English names of Member States’ (ASEAN Charter, Article 31). However, the chair system has been flexibly implemented even after the adoption of this formal

rule. For instance, the chair in 2011 changed from Brunei to Indonesia. While Brunei should be the chair in the rule, Indonesia who would be the chair in 2013 asked to exchange on the grounds that it would assume the APEC chair that year.

The pragmatic flexibility in institutional management reflected in regional cooperation in East Asia. The above-mentioned RCEP principles contain a phrase that ‘the RCEP will include appropriate forms of flexibility including provision for special and differential treatment, plus additional flexibility to the least-developed ASEAN Member States, consistent with the existing ASEAN+1 FTAs, as applicable’. The phrase indicates a recognition that while it is necessary to improve the level of liberalisation from the existing ASEAN+1 FTAs, it still needs special and differentiated treatment to the less-developed ASEAN members, and flexibility is a key to meet such needs. The pragmatic flexibility has contributed to the successful launching of new architecture in financial cooperation in East Asia. In launching the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) multilateralisation, coordination on contribution quotas among China, Japan, and South Korea was the most difficult barrier. Japan adhered to its highest weighting while China insisted on a weighting equal to Japan. A flexible compromise was that Japan and China contributed 32 per cent each but China’s share included 3.5 per cent from Hong Kong, which was specially added to membership of the CMI. This flexible settlement allowed China to claim co-equality with Japan while allowing Japan to claim the largest individual contribution (Rathus 2011: 114). Similar flexibility was seen in the appointment of the first director of the ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office (AMRO) who would serve in a three-year term. Both Japan and China applied for the post of the first director. A flexible compromise was that the three-year term would be divided into the first one year and the next two years, and the Chinese candidate Wei Benhua and the Japanese candidate Yoichi Nemoto would assume the term, respectively (Sussangkarn 2011: 213). Such flexible compromises were often suggested by ASEAN members. The members encouraged China and Japan to go halves in order not to prolong consultations on the quota system (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2009).

The pragmatic flexibility has strong resonance with the Chinese tradition of pragmatism, which is a mode of human behaviour that gives respect to value-neutral, non-deterministic, goal-oriented action.⁶ The central tenet of pragmatism is that ‘the

truth content of an idea is determined by its correspondence with reality, which is determined by its real-world consequences' (Suter and Comier 2012: 181). The actors that adopt the pragmatic approach pursue realistic and concrete consequences through a process of continual practice and transformations. In solving problems they adopt flexible means by avoiding deterministic rigour, which derive from repeated trial-and-error. Future action is guided by workable experiences and hypothetical experimentation. Furthermore, the states that favour the pragmatic approach generally seek to avoid deterministic political tensions that derive from abstract values and principles. They look for flexible policy options, reconsidering their principles and rules in terms of realistic situations and decisions required to take positive action.

Pragmatism has been used to account for some aspects in Chinese foreign policy. While China successfully advanced the formation of an FTA with ASEAN by offering practical and concrete benefits to ASEAN members (Yoshimatsu 2010), it has adopted a pragmatic strategy in engaging in regional institutions by changing its role from a passive receiver of policy to an active agenda setter (Tsai and Liu 2015). Importantly, pragmatism has been employed as a factor to explain rapid economic development in Singapore, Japan, and South Korea. The Japanese policymakers adopted pragmatic economic policy, which enabled the Japanese economy to cope with uncertainties and changes in the domestic and international economic environment (Schmiegelow and Schmiegelow 1989: 175-77). Pragmatism was shown in more accurately in the economic development strategy in Singapore. The Singaporean government was supposed to implement a host of pragmatic policies with no ideological commitments to any particular economic systems (Chua 1995). What these policies aimed at were realistic outcomes to ensure continuous economic growth and improve living conditions of the nation.

As already explained, ASEAN's prominent position as a provider of norms has been examined intensively by scholars who have interests in the ASEAN Way. This study stresses that ASEAN has exerted power by utilising specific norms that hold the foundation in the broader regional space. Equitable treatment and pragmatic flexibility are two representatives of such norms that spring from systems of knowledge and practice that are broadly embedded into political and social life in Northeast Asia and

Southeast Asia. Because of the broad foundation in which these norms are diffuse, ASEAN's usage of them was accepted by Northeast Asian states, and these norms have contributed to the strength of constitutive social relations.

Sino-Japanese Relations in the ASEAN-Centred Social Constitution

In the 1990s, ASEAN gradually extended its geographical reach to the entire Southeast Asia by accepting Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia as new members. The association then consolidated internal integration from the ASEAN Vision 2020 in 1997 to the ASEAN Community in 2015. ASEAN has expanded the scope of regional cooperation from traditional to non-traditional security fields, gradually putting stress on the people-oriented policy initiative. The association has developed a wide range of institutions including rules of implementation and operational guidelines through multilateral consultations. Through steady progress of internal integration, ASEAN has raised its capacity to manage and promote regional cooperation by accumulating knowledge and experience. Such capacity then provides ASEAN with legitimacy to lead the process of regional cooperation in East Asia.

As confirmed in the previous sections, ASEAN has established specific systems of knowledge and practice in East Asia. The association has employed specific meanings and procedural norms that were conducive to the fostering of collective identities, and embedded behavioural norms in regional institutions. Through such systems of knowledge and practice, ASEAN created constitutive social relations in which it maintains legitimacy to lead East Asian regionalism and grips the ownership of institution-building in the region. Both China and Japan have been embedded into this social constitution and committed to initiatives and projects for regional cooperation.

The ASEAN-centred constitutive social relations have been referred to in formal documents issued by Northeast Asian states. Both China and Japan have kept making the point that it is ASEAN that is 'in the drivers' seat' in showing the direction and conditions of regionalism in East Asia. This point is also confirmed at the trilateral settings involving South Korea. For instance, the Joint Declaration on the Enhancement of Trilateral Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership issued at the trilateral summit in 2012 contains a phrase that 'regarding ASEAN as an important partner in regional

cooperation, we reaffirmed our support for ASEAN's leading role in East Asia cooperation'. While such a statement could be easily regarded as rhetoric, China and Japan surely paid attention to sensitivity to ASEAN centrality. For instance, the three Northeast Asian states took note of ASEAN's concern that the trilateral FTA would become a regional agreement to which ASEAN made no commitments, and tried to announce the launch of the FTA at an ASEAN-initiated meeting with sharing information about its content with ASEAN (JETRO 2012: 14).

Indeed, China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea intensified confrontation with several ASEAN members and undermined ASEAN's capabilities to manage regional affairs. However, the South China Sea is relevant to China's 'core interests' in parallel to Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, which prohibited China from making easy compromise. Even under the heightening tensions over maritime territorial disputes, China paid due attention to the presence of ASEAN in promoting its own diplomatic initiative. For instance, China's concept of the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), a pillar of the 'One Belt, One Road Initiative' in parallel to the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), was based on close economic linkages formed through the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (ACFTA), and the Chinese government suggested to ASEAN to advance maritime partnership in a joint effort to build the MSR of the 21st century.

Under ASEAN-centred constitutive social relations, China and Japan have made efforts to attract ASEAN by launching regional initiatives in competitive manners. There are several examples that Japan followed China's initiatives in forming closer linkages with ASEAN and its members. A critical momentum for the FTA network in East Asia was given by the formation of ASEAN+1 FTA networks. China took the lead in the networks, signing the Framework Agreement on China-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Cooperation in 2002, which became a legal foundation to establish the ACFTA. Japan quickly responded to this initiative. The leaders of Japan and ASEAN issued the Joint Declaration on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership on 5 November 2002, just one day after the signing of the Framework Agreement. China proposed organising a network of think-tanks, and the first meeting of the Network of East Asian Think-tanks (NEAT) was held in Beijing in 2003. Japan reacted to China's initiative in regional research cooperation, and proposed the foundation of the Economic

Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) in 2007. Japan's proposal explicitly focused on ASEAN, and the ERIA has undertaken research on the development of the ASEAN economies and ASEAN's economic integration. These are examples that China's positive initiatives drew Japan's counter policies to promote linkages with ASEAN.

In contrast, China followed Japan's initiatives in some cases. Japan was the main advocacy to establish a regional rice reserve system in preparation for food shortage due to natural disasters mainly in Southeast Asia, and a pilot project for the East Asian emergency rice reserve system began with Japan's initiative and financial support in 2004. China pledged to contribute the largest amount of reserved rice to the system as one of several initiatives to support ASEAN's development and stability (Yoshimatsu 2014: 107-9). After China's positive contribution, ASEAN+3 members successfully launched the regional rice reserve system by signing the agreement on the ASEAN+3 Emergency Rice Reserve (APTERR) in October 2011. At the seventeenth summit in October 2010, ASEAN leaders adopted the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC). The ERIA, which was founded under the Japanese initiative, suggested three connectivity dimensions of physical, institutional, and people-to-people as a basic concept for the MPAC. After the announcement of the MPAC, China strengthened support for ASEAN Connectivity, proposing to provide US\$10 billion credit including US\$4 billion preferential loan and US\$6 billion commercial loan. Moreover, the three dimensions of physical, institutional, and people-to-people became a key approach embedded into China-initiated Silk Road Fund.

Rivalry sentiments urged China and Japan to launch initiatives and projects to attract ASEAN and expand influence in East Asia. In the mid-term span, however, such commitments resulting from rivalry have often contributed to sustaining ASEAN integration and increasing institutional depth for regional cooperation in East Asia. The initiatives and projects in which China or Japan took the lead had mutually reinforcing effects, contributing to the promotion of deeper cooperation in East Asia. The social constitution in East Asia where ASEAN exists as the key node in the cluster of networks encouraged China and Japan to take an independent initiative to attract ASEAN or adopt counter-actions towards the other's policy (Caballero-Anthony 2014).

ASEAN has made passive and positive efforts to maintain and develop special social constitution into which China and Japan were embedded. As passive efforts, ASEAN has carefully avoided a situation when Japan or China creates special legal linkages with it. When the Japan-ASEAN Commemorative Summit took place in Tokyo in December 2003, Japan proposed concluding the Japan-ASEAN Charter that would indicate, on the basis of the past 30-year bilateral relationship, the direction of their future relationship. However, ASEAN members declined to accept the proposal because they were reluctant to conclude a special agreement with legally-binding power with Japan alone among various dialogue partners (Oba 2014: 205). ASEAN has also sought to make China's unilateral initiatives embedded into broader frameworks. At the ASEAN-China summit in October 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the conclusion of a treaty on good-neighbourliness and friendly cooperation. The ASEAN side responded to this proposal, stating that 'we noted with appreciation China's proposed treaty on good-neighbourliness and friendly cooperation. We acknowledged Indonesia's idea in having a treaty of friendship and cooperation that includes a wider Indo-Pacific region, *beyond ASEAN and China* (Italic added)'.⁷

Given China and Japan's political power and economic weight, ASEAN can easily be manoeuvred by the two great powers that 'use the rhetoric of regionalist solidarity to preserve their self-interested competition for regional hegemony' (Jones and Smith 2007: 181). In reality, the above cases indicate that both China and Japan attempted to establish an exclusive sphere of influence by concluding a bilateral treaty with ASEAN. Indeed, ASEAN responded to such attempts in a manner of specific action in interaction processes, but it paid due attention to preserving the overall social constitution in East Asia by avoiding the development of exclusive legal settings.

As positive efforts, ASEAN has entangled China and Japan into specific institutional systems to guarantee its pivotal position. The ASEAN-related meetings are held in the sidelines of ASEAN meetings such as the ASEAN summit, AMM, AEM, and so on. Accordingly, these meetings are held in the country that assumes the chair of ASEAN. Moreover, the ASEAN chair becomes the chair of ASEAN-expanded gatherings of ASEAN+3, EAS, and so on. This practice constitutes a core of conference diplomacy, serving to maintain ASEAN's privilege and power to set agendas for the

meetings and coordinate phrases of formal statements after the meetings. The ASEAN Charter extends such ASEAN-privileged mechanisms to the working level by adopting the dialogue coordinator system, which allows ASEAN to appoint one member as a coordinator to coordinate and promote ‘the interests of ASEAN in its relations with the relevant dialogue partners’ (Article 42). All ten members are allocated one of the dialogue partners and assume the coordinator role for three years (2012-15, 2015-18, 2018-21).⁸ This system makes it difficult for a great power such as China or Japan to take an initiative directly to exert influence towards the entire ASEAN.

ASEAN has taken advantage of such institutional systems to maintain its initiative *vis-à-vis* China and Japan, which was shown at a critical moment to produce a final format for an East Asia-wide FTA. Rivalry between China and Japan led to the co-existence of the East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA) and Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement in East Asia (CEPEA). In August 2011, China and Japan jointly proposed the formation of a regional FTA in East Asia at the ASEAN+3 and EAS economic ministers’ meetings. ASEAN treated the joint proposal seriously and made it an agenda at its own summit meeting. The ASEAN members integrated the proposal into the ASEAN Framework on Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which was agreed among ASEAN leaders at the 19th summit in November 2011. ASEAN’s initiative was maintained in the RCEP’s institutions. The Trade Negotiation Committee, seven RCEP working groups, as well as four sub-working groups were all chaired by ASEAN members (Fukunaga 2015: 105).

In brief, ASEAN-centred social constitution has been formed in East Asia with its legitimacy to manage regional affairs. Both China and Japan acknowledged the constitution and sought to develop closer linkages with the association. ASEAN has exerted power to maintain the social constitution by drawing China and Japan’s positive commitments to regional cooperation as the key node of regional social networks, avoiding exclusive legal linkages with each of the two great powers, and developing institutional systems to maintain its initiative.

Conclusions

In this article, I examined ASEAN's position in East Asian regionalism and its means to maintain such a position. It sought to elucidate the implications of ASEAN centrality by relying on the concept of productive power. It regarded shared meanings, common norms, and specific social constitution as key elements with which ASEAN has exerted productive power in managing regional affairs and developing regional institutions in East Asia.

ASEAN has developed specific meanings of participation in institution and incorporated particular common norms in regional institutions. ASEAN attached distinctive meanings to participation as the foundation for social relationality, and encouraged all relevant parties to join the process of institution-building and confidence-building. ASEAN reflected such meanings in multilateral institutions that were established and developed under its initiative in East Asia. ASEAN paid respect to equitable treatment and pragmatic flexibility as common norms used in promoting regional cooperation including institution-building. Not only did these norms derive from common practices and customs seen in the East Asian societies but they are also embedded into regional institutions in the region. While these meanings and norms have contributed to slow progress in institutional strength, they consolidated the foundation for cooperation in the long process of institution-building. ASEAN has served as the key source of meanings and norms, and in this sense ASEAN centrality constituted a critical pillar of development in regionalism and regional institutions in East Asia.

ASEAN has developed specific social constitution with its legitimacy to lead regionalism in East Asia by holding the ownership of institution-building in the region. While China and Japan hold far stronger material capabilities than any of ASEAN members, they admit ASEAN's special position in deciding on the pace and direction of regional cooperation. Moreover, ASEAN has developed constitutive social relations into which China and Japan were interwoven. Whereas ASEAN sought to avoid forming exclusive legal linkages with each of the two great powers, it successfully drew their positive engagements in promoting cooperative projects in East Asia.

The regional environments in the Asia-Pacific show significant evolutions. China's extending economic and political reach to the Mekong countries raises the

possibility of the divide between the continental and maritime zones in East Asia. ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Connectivity project could mitigate the emergence of the divide by sustaining economic development of the Mekong region under its grip. With Sino-U.S. confrontation on rise, the material power structure is intensifying in the Asia-Pacific. ASEAN's efforts to maintain constitutive social relations and embed the two great powers into them become increasingly crucial for maintaining regional stability in the region.

Notes

¹ There are numerous studies of ASEAN's role and influence on regionalism in East Asia. For representative works, see Ba (2009), Emmers (ed.) (2012) and Ba, Kuik, and Sudo (eds) (2016).

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³ Legitimacy is defined as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (Suchman 1995: 574).

⁴ After this change in political regime, the new government implemented a series of political reforms that included the release of political prisoners, relaxation of press and internet censorships, and the adoption of new labour laws that allow unions and strikes (Sun 2012, pp. 52-53).

⁵ 'Guiding Principles and Objectives for Negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership'. Available from: <http://www10.iadb.org/intal/intalcdi/PE/CM 2013/11581.pdf>.

⁶ Pragmatism is regarded as a philosophical concept developed in the United States by Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At the same time, the traditional Chinese thoughts, as represented by Confucianism, contain clear elements of pragmatism (Hall 1998).

⁷ 'Chairman's Statement of the 16th ASEAN-China Summit, 9 October 2013, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam'. Available from: <http://www.asean.org/images/archive/23rdASEANSummit/chairmans%20statementfor%20the%2016th%20asean-china%20summit%20-%20final%203.pdf>.

⁸ 'ASEAN Dialogue Coordinatorship'. Available from: <http://www.asean.org/asean/external-relations/asean-dialogue-coordinator>.

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