Interview - Ieong Meng U

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Ieong Meng U is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Government and Public Administration at the University of Macau. His research interest is in comparative authoritarianism with a specific regional interest in Greater China. His work has appeared in The China Review, Asian Survey and China: An International Journal among other. He received his PhD from Peking University in 2015 and his Master of Arts in Social Science from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology in 2010. He was also a Pre-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Ash Center of Harvard Kennedy School of Government from 2013 to 2014.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

My research interest is comparative authoritarianism. There are, of course, a lot of important and interesting questions in this field. But I think my colleagues would all agree that a core concern in authoritarian politics is: how autocracies survive? Political scientists used to be very optimistic about the future of global democratization at the end of the twentieth century—the background wo which Fukuyama wrote his well-known book *The End of History and the Last Man,* which argued that democracy will be the final form of human government. So the aforementioned question brings political scientists back to the studies of authoritarian politics in the early 2000s as Fukuyama's prediction didn't come true.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Well, it is a difficult question as there are many brilliant works that inspired me. But if I must name one, I would choose *The Logic of Political Survival* written by Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson and James D. Morrow. The main idea of the book is a theory known as selectorate theory which intends to explain the rationality behind the dictator who wants to stay in power as long as he can. In autocracies a small group of elites usually have a say in the selection of the leader (known as selectorate) so the dictator only needs to buy-off the loyalty from some of the members of elite groups and construct a winning coalition in the ruling. In other words, from a selectorate theory perspective, democracy and autocracy look qualitatively different not because they are running a different logic or value but due to the differences in quantitation. This is the ratio of the size of the winning coalition (W) and the selectorate (S) – a democracy must have a bigger S and W which means more people have a say in leader selection. And such differences in institutional settings have rich implications in policy outcomes and governance (e.g. why democracy tends to have more responsiveness then autocracy). For me, the above idea is astonishing and completely changed my understanding of autocracy.

What are the biggest challenges facing Macau at the moment?

Macau's political system shares the institutional defects that are common in authoritarian regimes — lack of government responsiveness and accountability. In the typology of authoritarian regimes, Macau would classify as a so-called hybrid regime which means it shares some features of democracy. 14 out of 33 seats in Macau's Legislative Assembly are directly elected by ordinary people. However, the Chief Executive is elected by a 400-election committee which excluded almost the whole of Macau society. In other words, the design of the political system makes it impossible to hold the leader of the government accountable through elections, as in a democracy.

The same logic is applicable even for high-ranking government officials who are directly held responsible by the Chief Executive. Technically, authoritarian regimes can have accountability if the government leader intends to maintain regime legitimacy. For example, local government officials are sometimes forced to resign as a result of misconduct in China. However, this is not likely to be the case in Macau. A good recent example is the "Hato Incident" which happened in 2017. Hato was the first super typhoon Macau encountered since 1999 (though Macau was not the only city affected). Because it was so powerful, other cities near Macau such as Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Zhuhai, issued an alarm the day before the typhoon hit. However, the weather bureau in Macau didn't issue an alarm until Hato was close. The consequences were horrible. Hundreds of residents were injured and there were 10 deaths. The city suffered a water and electricity shortage over the following few days. Later, the director of the weather bureau was accused of misconduct in an investigative report conducted by the Commission Against Corruption. If a government is responsible and accountable, the director would certainly be forced to resign and probably face prosecution for what he had done. None of these things happened. Indeed, the director choose to retire from this position and will enjoy a considerable pension for the rest of his life.

How does Macau's political and social development compare to Hong Kong's? To what extent do perceptions of "one country, two systems" and democracy differ?

I have partially answered this question in my recent article published in Asian Survey. Macau and Hong Kong have two distinctive differences. First, civil society is under development in Macau. Macau people are less willing to show different opinions to those of the government due to being afraid of sanctions and the lack of institutional settings (e.g. the rule of law) to protect dissent. Second, Macau people lack a strong local consciousness compared to Hong Kong. The core value system that is inside the Hong Kong people's local consciousness is a kind of cultural ritual which shares a lot of the components of liberal democracy. As seen in the cases of the Umbrella Movement and the recent Anti-Extradition Bill protest. A strong local consciousness can be a powerful social mobilization mechanism in large-scale protest. Macau people do not have a cultural ritual like this. Thus, the same mechanism is not feasible in the case of Macau. That is why I described the social mobilization mechanism in Macau as "interest-oriented" which concentrates on a tangible and specific issue but has fewer interests in "high politics" such as rule of law and democracy.

How would you describe Macau's current relations with China, Hong Kong, and Portugal?

There are more than thirty million passenger trips annually in Macau. Over 70% of tourists are from mainland China. Some of these tourists are the main source of the profits in casinos. Because government revenue mostly comes from the gambling tax, we can say Macau is economically highly dependent on China. Noting that the land area of Macau is merely 30 km^2, such large number of tourists in a small city would inevitably generate some negative externalities for Macau society. Now over-tourism becomes an issue of concern for more and more local residents. Culturally, Macau society is deeply influenced by Hong Kong's pop culture (e.g., music, movie, celebrity). Finally, Macau is historically connected with Portugal, but it does not have substantial influence, economically or culturally, on the city.

What changes have you seen in the Umbrella Movement since it formed in 2014? How is it perceived by Macanese people, especially students?

I think one interesting change is that now, Macau, and not Hong Kong, has a role in China's foreign policy. Macau currently serves as a bridge between China and the Portuguese-speaking countries. An example is the Permanent Secretariat of the Forum for Economic and Commercial Cooperation (PSFECC), a multilateral cooperation mechanism that encourages international trade between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. Five rounds of ministerial conferences have been held since its establishment in 2003. One achievement of the PSFECC is the China-Portuguese Speaking Countries Cooperation and Development Fund announced in 2013—a 1 billion USD investment fund headquartered in Macao for Portuguese-speaking countries to use to facilitate infrastructure improvement and industrial development. According to Eric Ip, the reason Beijing choose Macau and not Hong Kong is because "there has always existed an inherent tension between the liberal and Westernized identity of Hong Kong and the authoritarian agenda of China". As I explain in more detail below, Macau doesn't have a strong demand to

push forward democratization as in the case of Hong Kong. That is why we have never seen a social movement like the Umbrella Movement happening in Macau. So Macau is regarded as a more ideal choice for Beijing if it wants to make use of the historical connections between Macau and the Portuguese-speaking countries as national security is now the top concern.

Traditionally, Macau is a politically conservative society that is less concerned about democracy. But my recent survey of university students suggested that they show moderate support for the demand for universal suffrage made by the Umbrella Movement. I have not had a chance to do a similar survey regarding the Anti-Extradition Bill protest. According to what I've seen on social media, young people in Macau agree that the bill should be repealed but there is less consensus over the use of violence as part of the protests.

Macau is known as a major resort and gambling city. How has this affected its political system, its society, and its relations with other countries?

As I said before Macau is an authoritarian regime, authoritarian regimes usually rely on performance legitimacy. This can be defined as a strategy of legitimation via the acquiescence of the status quo by the government through material concession. The gambling industry is an extremely profitable business that brings the Macau government abundant tax revenue. This enables the Macau government to maintain regime stability by providing various social welfare and public goods without making substantial political reform to improve its government responsiveness and accountability. To what extent the above legitimation strategy is sustainable, is an open question.

What is the most important advice that you would give to young scholars studying international relations?

I would recommend that students of IR and comparative politics work on developing their research methods and skills. A strong methodology will greatly improve the chances of publishing in a top journal.