

ASEAN membership expansion, spatial construction and ASEAN normative power: A comparative study of Brunei and Timor-Leste

Ekspansi keanggotaan ASEAN, konstruksi ruang dan kekuatan normatif ASEAN: Studi perbandingan Brunei dan Timor-Leste

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Abstract

As the most powerful organization in Southeast Asia, ASEAN's normative power has become an important regional order for its member countries, and its primary task is to maintain the survival of Southeast Asian countries. However, in the process of forming the normative power of ASEAN, Brunei and Timor-Leste, two smaller countries, were treated differently. Therefore, this article attempts to use Brunei and Timor-Leste as examples to explore the impact of their accession to ASEAN on the normative power of ASEAN. This article uses historical analysis methods to compare the differences in interactions between ASEAN, Brunei, and Timor-Leste. This study finds that "trust" is the key to the differences in interaction between ASEAN and Brunei and Timor-Leste. The normative power of ASEAN will only come into play when member states have 'trust' in its identity. At the same time, the state, which is trusted by other member states, can also shape the direction and strength of norms, strengthen the integration of the community, and thus drive the expansion of the space for order. This study concluded that although economic and security factors are important, the fundamental reason for the expansion and integration of ASEAN lies in 'trust'.

Keywords: ASEAN membership; Brunei and Timor-Leste; normative power; space and trust

Abstrak

Sebagai organisasi terkuat di Asia Tenggara, kekuatan normatif ASEAN telah menjadi tatanan regional yang penting bagi negara-negara anggotanya, dan tugas utamanya adalah mempertahankan kelangsungan hidup negara-negara Asia Tenggara. Namun, dalam proses membentuk kekuatan normatif ASEAN, Brunei dan Timor-Leste, dua negara yang lebih kecil, diperlakukan secara berbeda. Oleh karena itu, artikel ini berusaha menggunakan Brunei dan Timor-Leste sebagai contoh untuk mengeksplorasi dampak akses mereka ke ASEAN pada kekuatan normatif ASEAN. Artikel ini menggunakan metode analisis sejarah untuk membandingkan perbedaan interaksi antara ASEAN, Brunei, dan Timor-Leste. Studi ini menemukan bahwa "kepercayaan" adalah kunci perbedaan dalam interaksi antara ASEAN dan Brunei dan Timor-Leste. Kekuatan normatif ASEAN hanya akan dimainkan ketika negara anggota memiliki 'kepercayaan' pada identitasnya. Pada saat yang sama, negara, yang dipercaya oleh negara anggota lainnya, juga dapat membentuk arah dan kekuatan norma, memperkuat integrasi masyarakat, dan dengan demikian mendorong perluasan ruang untuk ketertiban. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa meskipun faktor ekonomi dan keamanan penting, alasan mendasar untuk ekspansi dan integrasi ASEAN terletak pada "kepercayaan".

Kata kunci: keanggotaan ASEAN; Brunei dan Timor-Leste; kekuatan normatif; ruang dan kepercayaan

Introduction

For ASEAN, although economic and security integration is important, trust is its foundation. Without trust, any integration of ASEAN faces the risk of regression. And this is also different from previous studies that only focused on economics and security. This article takes the perspective of the order space formed by "trust" as the starting point. The generation of trust comes from two channels, one is based on rational choices, and the other is based on moral and emotional judgments (全燕2017). For regional communities, "universal trust" is one of the effective means for small states to participate in regional governance. Generalized trust is defined as a dense network of closely interconnected entities. Trust promotes frequent interaction, information sharing, and the enforcement of social norms. Universal trust

is of great significance to regional development, and existing research has shown that universal trust is a driving force for economic growth (Bischoff 2023). The establishment of ASEAN in 1967 marked the beginning of the Southeast Asian regional order being dominated by Southeast Asian states. As one of the most effective regional governance communities in Southeast Asia, ASEAN plays an important role. However, the emergence of “community” implies the formation of “space” and “boundaries.”

“Boundaries” and “space” are the key factors determining whether actors can integrate into a community. The “boundary” of a community is the initial standard that actors need to meet, while “space” is the “structure” that actors need to adapt to. For ASEAN, its highest achievement is the platform for peaceful management of conflicts among member states. ASEAN member states have established mutual trust among themselves through regular interactions and a shared sense of mission. It can be said that it is precisely because of frequent interaction and trust that ASEAN has been able to shape the regional order of Southeast Asia. The normative power shaped by the ASEAN community has also brought about changes in the security order in Southeast Asia. Regarding the “normative power,” according to Ian Manners’ definition of “normative power Europe,” this power is the “ability to shape normative concepts” reflected in the EU’s foreign relations in the new international context after the Cold War. In fact, ASEAN also has a normative power which is the collective trust that drives the practice of various issues.

Among them, why did Brunei and Timor-Leste, as states that were once outside the ASEAN community, present different situations in their process of joining ASEAN? In addition, why did the impact of Brunei and Timor-Leste’s accession to ASEAN on the normative power of ASEAN perform a difference situation? Although both Brunei and Timor-Leste have attempted to integrate into the “borders” and “spaces” of ASEAN, the process and outcomes have presented different situations. This article will analyze this as the core issue to effectively explain why the accession of the two states has different impacts on the normative power of ASEAN.

The reasons why Brunei and Timor-Leste were chosen as case studies in this article are as follows. Firstly, Brunei and Timor Leste are micro-states in ASEAN and both joined at a critical moment of ASEAN’s transformation. Secondly, both states have been influenced by Western colonialism, but have been treated differently by other larger ASEAN states. Furthermore, the two states are geographically close and both have Islam and Catholicism as their main religions. However, in terms of development status, Brunei presents an advanced state, while Timor-Leste presents a backward state.

Based on the problem awareness in the above article, it can be roughly divided into two categories for discussion, namely research on Brunei’s accession to ASEAN and research on Timor-Leste’s accession to ASEAN. In terms of research on Brunei’s accession to ASEAN, most studies only focus on its potential after joining ASEAN (Thambipillai 1982). Roberts & Lee (2009) believe that after joining ASEAN, Brunei has integrated well into ASEAN integration in all aspects, especially in terms of promoting the diversified development of Brunei’s industries in the economy. These studies are more specific in discussing Brunei’s accession to ASEAN, while other studies focus more on ASEAN and its normative powers after the Cold War, without carefully discussing the process of this part.

In terms of research on Timor-Leste’s accession to ASEAN, Arisanto (2020) believes that Timor-Leste’s accession to ASEAN is due to the attractiveness of ASEAN as a potential regional organization. In addition, Timor-Leste has also received ethical support and training from international mechanisms, as well as Indonesia through tourism. Among them, especially with the strong support of Indonesia, Timor-Leste can gradually integrate with ASEAN. Putra et al. (2022) believe that the reason why Timor-Leste cannot smoothly join ASEAN is that it cannot meet the hard standards such as the ASEAN Charter. Foreman’s research report focuses on the impact of ASEAN and the international community on Timor-Leste’s accession to ASEAN (Foreman 2021). Seixas et al. (2019) believe that the empirical analysis of the reasons why Timor-Leste cannot join ASEAN is that it is still on the edge of integrating into the international community. However, this report still only analyzed the integration of politics and economy, without analyzing the reasons for Timor-Leste’s slow accession to ASEAN. Soares et al. (2004) believe

that the issue of Timor-Leste joining ASEAN is due to the complex geopolitical situation and differences in consensus within ASEAN. Although Timor-Leste has made efforts to meet most of the criteria for joining ASEAN, the ambiguity of ASEAN norms has repeatedly delayed its accession to ASEAN.

Research Method

This study draws on the traditional methodology of comparative historical analysis, which has three characteristics: focusing on causal analysis, emphasizing historical processes, and adopting systematic and contextualized comparative methods (Ziblatt 2024). On this basis, this article takes Brunei from the 1980s to the present and Timor-Leste from the 1970s to the present as empirical cases and places both in the context of ASEAN expansion and then analyzes them using the method of seeking common ground. In short, this article analyzes why Brunei can quickly gain the trust of most ASEAN states, while Timor-Leste cannot achieve this result. Such differences have led to different situations in shaping the normative power of ASEAN between the two states.

The data used in this article are mostly from existing research in the academic community, serving as the main material. This article uses the methodology of comparative historical analysis and research from Indonesia and the Chinese academic community as a basis to discover that Brunei, due to its similarity in Islamic culture and its proactive release of goodwill, has been able to integrate into the collective identity and “normative space” constructed by ASEAN. The reason for using these materials is that the existing discussions on the topic of this article are relatively one-sided. In addition, the topic of this article remains sensitive, and not all official documents can be reviewed.

Results and Discussion

In any social field, social relationships have two attributes: “space” and “boundary”. Firstly, in terms of “boundaries”, Lamont & Molnár (2002) point out that “symbolic boundaries” refer to conceptual distinctions made by social actors to classify objects, people, practices, and even time and space. “Social boundary” is the objective form of social differences, manifested as unequal access and distribution of resources (material and non-material) and social opportunities, often reflected in stable patterns of social behavior” while “symbolic boundary” refers to the struggle between individuals and collectives for the meaning and value of the real world. “Symbolic boundary” can be considered as a necessary but insufficient condition for the existence of social boundaries, that is, only when symbolic boundaries are widely recognized can they have binding properties, thereby regulating social interactions and transforming into “social boundaries” (Lamont & Molnár 2002). In addition, although “symbolic boundary” and “social boundary” can be converted to each other, they generally require a long process, so the boundary between the two is not easily changed.

Secondly, regardless of which “boundary” they come from, they will produce some kind of “space.” According to Lefebvre’s theory of spatial production, the formation of space is the result of the interaction of social relations, economic activities, political power, culture, and other factors, and is a social product that is produced and reproduced. The reason why this article chooses Henri Lefebvre’s spatial theory is because it particularly highlights the factors of production in space and effectively demonstrates that space is not entirely dominated by symbols and ideas. Therefore, Lefebvre believed that the production mode of (social) space mainly has three dimensions, namely “spatial practice,” “representations of space,” and “representational spaces.”

In this spatial system, “spatial practice” belongs to the material dimension, which refers to the space that can be felt in daily life and carries the function of material production and reproduction. Especially referring to the integration of spatial elements and the resulting system, which is mainly created by decision-makers, implementers, and audiences; Representation of space belongs to the social dimension, which refers to the spiritual conception of space shaped and governed by language and text by designers, planners (decision-makers and implementers), etc. It is the level of production relations and their order.

Especially in all symbols that can refer to or represent symbolic spaces, they will determine the meaning of space; Representational spaces belong to the dimension of life, between the previous two dimensions, and are spaces created by the actual lives of citizens and audiences, with both objectivity and subjectivity. This dimension particularly refers to the process of linking matter and meaning together (Lefebvre 2022, Huang 2024).

The three ways of spatial production correspond to the ternary framework of “perceived space,” “conceptual space,” and “live space.” Perceived space is the result of spatial practice, especially the elements of sensory experience. This space emphasizes the daily life elements of actors and is a material manifestation of social life practice. The concept of “conceptual space” emphasizes the use of knowledge power, with the aim of transforming the characteristics of the material (real) world into the expression of certain ideas. In short, this space will integrate all elements together and serve as a conceptual meaning. Live space emphasizes the interaction between individuals and collectives in terms of emotions, values, and symbolic meanings, where space serves as a normative structure that shapes each other’s identities. This space contains the production factors of the first two, namely the elements of (material) practice and the elements of ideas, as well as the elements of life (such as emotions and trust) (Christian 2021).

Table 1.
ASEAN’s spatial boundary hypothesis

	High degree of “spatial practice” (integrated into ‘social boundary’)	Low level of “spatial practice” (not integrated into ‘social boundary’)
High degree of “representations of space” and “representational spaces” (integrated into “symbolic boundaries”)	“lived space” (Strong normative power)	“conceived space” (Moderate normative power)
Low degree of “representations of space” and “representational spaces” (not integrated into “symbolic boundaries”)	“perceived space” (Moderate normative power)	“differential space” (Weak normative power)

Source: Created by authors

This article attempts to combine the theoretical frameworks of “boundary” and “space” and form a new framework to illustrate the situation of Brunei and Timor-Leste joining ASEAN and their impact on the normative power of ASEAN. Firstly, there are varying degrees of production methods for the three types of spaces: “spatial practice,” “representations of space, and “representational spaces.” “Spatial practice” and “social boundary” refer to the situation of material integration, that is, the integration of politics and economy; and “representations of space,” “representational spaces,” and “symbolic boundaries” indicate the integration of knowledge, ideas, and trust, that is, the integration of security concepts and trust. Ultimately, the two variables will form four different spatial attributes, namely “live space,” “conceptual space,” “perceived space,” and “differential space,” as shown in Table 1.

Brunei’s independence and the formation of a ‘differential space’ order within ASEAN

In terms of “spatial practice,” Southeast Asian states have been striving for independence and greater autonomy since World War II. In 1946, Britain officially declared Sabah and Sarawak as British colonies, while Brunei maintained its status as a “protectorate” (Joo-Jock 1976). Subsequently, the UK launched a merger plan to merge Sabah, Sarawak, and Brunei (Wang 2011). Since then, the UK has gradually expanded Brunei’s power and attempted to keep Brunei within the framework of British rule (Efavirenz 1978, Singh 1988). During this period, Southeast Asian states, including former European colonies such as Brunei, actively sought to form a larger and more autonomous regional community. However, from before independence to joining ASEAN after independence, Brunei’s relations with neighboring states

were not particularly friendly. The overall situation is basically in a state of being partially integrated into the "spatial practice" and not integrated into the "symbolic boundary" (Horton 1986, Hussainmiya 2014, Mukoyama 2020).

Regarding the Indonesian government, in May 1961, Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman announced the establishment of a Federation of Malaysia that would include Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak, and Brunei, which led to political division within Brunei. At that time, the Sultan of Brunei, Sir Omer Ali Saifuddin, decided to join the Federation of Malaysia but was opposed by the left-wing People's Party of Brunei. The Brunei People's Party advocated the establishment of the North Borneo Federation, which includes Brunei, Sabah, and Sarawak. In 1962, Brunei held legislative elections, and the Brunei People's Party gained the support of the majority of the population. The Brunei People's Party therefore demanded that Britain hand over sovereignty over Sabah and Sarawak to the Sultan of Brunei, but the British side rejected this demand (Alexander 2016).

In December of the same year, the Brunei People's Party launched an armed uprising and gained support from Indonesia. This uprising also provided a legitimate reason for the Indonesian government to oppose the plan to establish a Federation of Malaysia (骆永昆2012). The establishment of the Brunei People's Party was not successful; it caused factors of mutual distrust between Brunei and Indonesia. In addition, due to Britain's belief that Indonesia was interfering in Brunei's internal affairs, Britain mobilized Commonwealth forces to fight against Indonesia. The military operation known as "Operation Claret" caused a rift between Indonesia and Commonwealth states, including Brunei. Both sides engaged in uninterrupted warfare in Borneo from 1965 to 1967, and each occupied a part of Borneo (Efavirenz 1978, Christopher 2004, 2023).

In the early 1980s, leaders of the three states visited each other, strengthening mutual trust. Brunei joined ASEAN on January 7, 1984. At the ceremony of Brunei's accession to ASEAN, Crown Prince Mohamed Bolkiah expressed confidence that this was a new century of mutual equality, mutual respect, independence, and sovereign equality. Brunei could continue to pursue its economic progress and people's happiness within this vast international community (Hamzah 1981, 1989). Brunei's accession indicates that ASEAN member states recognize Brunei's national sovereignty status. After joining ASEAN, Brunei also strengthened its ties with the United States and the United Kingdom to increase its security leverage (Weatherbee 1983, Sodhy 1988). In January 1985, Brunei held talks with the United Kingdom, and the UK promised to provide Brunei with a large amount of foreign exchange reserves. Meanwhile, Brunei has established economic cooperation with the United States (Graham 2002). For Brunei, there was no integration into ASEAN during the period of "social boundary" or "symbolic boundary." Although ASEAN has included Brunei within its community, it has not established effective material ties with Brunei, and its trust in Brunei is limited to recognizing its sovereign status.

In terms of "representations of space" and "representational spaces," although Brunei accepted the "Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia," the "Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality in Southeast Asia," and the "Declaration on the Coordination of ASEAN states" when joining ASEAN, Brunei does not fully trust the commitments of ASEAN states. As the only expansion of ASEAN during the Cold War, Brunei attempted to use Islam as a medium of trust-building after joining ASEAN. In the 1970s, influenced by the international Islamic revival movement, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei began to strengthen their ties with Islamic orthodoxy. Since Brunei's independence in 1984, the centralized rule implemented by its royal family has been legitimized by Islam, which plays an unusual political role in Brunei. The three states have initially formed a foundation of trust within ASEAN through Islam but have created a "Berlin Wall" against non-Islamic states within ASEAN (Niu 2012).

In 1984, the Sultan of Brunei announced that Brunei would be a "perpetual Islamic Malay Monarchy" (MIB) country, and, under this structure, the legitimacy of the Sultan of Brunei came from Islam and the Malay people. The entire society must also abide by this framework, and Brunei has expanded the influence of this framework in its constitution (Menon 1987, Mansurnoor 2008). In addition, since independence

the Brunei government has regained control over religious affairs. The Brunei government controls the construction of the pilgrimage management system, providing professional and comprehensive pilgrimage services covering various contents such as financial products, pilgrimage information, travel and accommodation, pilgrimage safety, etc., for different enterprises and related functional institutions. There are also some supervisory departments responsible for supervising the promotion of pilgrimage matters in order to urge all parties to better serve the pilgrimage (Müller 2016, Wang & Wu 2023).

The interdependence between Brunei and ASEAN and the emergence of the “live space” order

In terms of “spatial practice,” after the end of the Cold War, Brunei began to increase its interaction with ASEAN. In 1992, in response to the new political security situation and with the expansion of the ASEAN Community, ASEAN states established the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Institute of Strategy and International Studies (ASEAN-ISI) (Siddique 1992). In 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) officially became the main force in regional security mechanisms, paving the way for political integration in ASEAN. In 2001, ASEAN Regional Forum ministers adopted a document called “Perspectives and Guidelines on Preventive Diplomacy,” emphasizing that preventive diplomacy is a consensus diplomacy and political action of sovereign states agreed upon by all participating parties with the aim of preventing conflicts from escalating into military confrontation (Lin 2016). At the same time, in response to terrorism, ASEAN issued joint communiqués at its annual meetings in 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 and adopted many documents on security integration. For example, the Vientiane Action Program, the Plan of Action for ASEAN Security Community, and the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism (Rymarenko 2022).

In addition, ASEAN issued the Joint Declaration of ASEAN Defense Ministers on Enhancing Regional Peace and Stability and the ASEAN Charter at the Second ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting in November 2007. At the same time, ASEAN continuously strengthened cooperation among defense departments of various states from 2008 to 2010, promoting the construction of the ASEAN Security Community concept. All of these indicate that Brunei and ASEAN are comprehensively advancing their relationship and increasing their interdependence in terms of security (邵波2010). With the promulgation of the ASEAN Charter, Brunei and ASEAN have also taken further steps towards integration. In 2015, ASEAN officially established the ASEAN Community based on the ASEAN Charter and the aforementioned security cooperation. The ASEAN Community includes the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Socio Cultural Community (ASCC) (Severino 2012, Grenfell 2015).

Economically, with the end of the Cold War, cooperation among ASEAN states has shown an upward trend. In 1992, ASEAN held its fourth ASEAN Summit and signed the Framework Agreement on Strengthening ASEAN Economic Cooperation (Severino 2012). In the subsequent financial storms of 1997 and 2008, ASEAN also strengthened each other’s economic resilience. The Agreement on the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) of the ASEAN Free Trade Area after 1997 requires ASEAN states to reduce intra-ASEAN trade tariffs to 0% to 5%, and the ASEAN Single Window policy implemented by ASEAN after 2008 (Wang 2008). Faced with the impact of COVID-19 in 2022, ASEAN states announced at the 54th Economic Ministers’ Meeting that they would strengthen economic recovery (Xinhua News 2022). From the documents adopted by ASEAN mentioned above, it can be seen that the ASEAN community has become a space order of material interdependence. Brunei has basically participated in every decision on political and economic integration and has also fully utilized the material strength of the ASEAN community to join the security governance of Southeast Asia. It can be said that Brunei and ASEAN have achieved high levels of development on a material level, and Brunei has internalized the constraints of ASEAN norms. In terms of “representations of space” and “representational spaces,”

Brunei has also established trust with other ASEAN member states in terms of “representations of space” and “representational spaces.” Especially on issues in Southeast Asia, Brunei no longer only considers its own interests but also takes into account the overall interests of ASEAN. Among them, the most obvious is that Brunei unhesitatingly stands on the side of ASEAN in disputes with external forces.

Brunei, a small oil-rich country, took the rotating presidency of ASEAN in 2013 and faced a time when the Chinese Mainland strongly advocated sovereignty over the South China Sea and raised tensions with many ASEAN states. The official cited a statement from Brunei's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stating that Brunei views the sovereignty dispute in the South China Sea as a major threat to regional security and is attempting to resolve this issue through dialogue among all states claiming sovereignty in the South China Sea, including China (Sun 2014, Pan 2019, Li & Zheng 2021). In 2023, Brunei participated in maritime exercises held by ASEAN, symbolizing its willingness to share the same position with ASEAN on the South China Sea issue.

Regarding the Myanmar issue that erupted in 2021, Brunei stated that Myanmar is "a part of the ASEAN family." Previously, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations held a summit, and Myanmar General Myint Aung Hlaing was banned from attending the summit due to his failure to implement the reconciliation plan reached at the April meeting. Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah emphasized that Myanmar will continue to maintain its membership in ASEAN. At the same time, he stated, "Myanmar is an integral part of the ASEAN family, and its membership has not been questioned. ASEAN will always support Myanmar, and we (ASEAN) will continue to provide assistance through the implementation of the five-point consensus in ASEAN" (Al Jazeera 2021).

The absence of identity before the 2006 Timor-Leste crisis and the formation of a "differential space" order

In terms of "social boundary" and "symbolic boundary," Timor-Leste is the last colony of European states in Southeast Asia and, therefore, maintains a hostile attitude toward Timor-Leste. However, in 1974, the Carnation Revolution occurred within Portugal, leading to changes in the country's political system. The rule of Portuguese Prime Minister António de Oliveira Salazar was overthrown and subsequently succeeded by Marcello Jos é das Neves Alves Caetano. Marcello Jos é das Neves Alves Caetano recognized the autonomy rights of Portuguese colonies, including Timor-Leste. In 1975, the "Revolutionary Front for Independence" (FRETILIN) declared Timor-Leste's independence, but Timor-Leste's actions made the United States and Indonesia uneasy and they believed it was communist infiltration. Therefore, with the support of the United States, Canada, Australia, and most ASEAN states, Timor-Leste was occupied (Borgerhoff 2006, Boden 2008, Severino 2012).

After Indonesia's annexation of Timor-Leste, ASEAN states did not respond strongly. On the contrary, they supported Indonesia's actions, believing that it was the result of Indonesia completely driving Western colonial governments out of Southeast Asia. Although Singapore's attitude toward this process is different from other states, considering Indonesia's influence in ASEAN, ASEAN member states generally support the Indonesian government in the international community. Nevertheless, the United Nations Security Council still condemns Indonesia's actions and demands that Indonesia withdraw from Timor-Leste. The United Nations Security Council reaffirmed its respect for the independence of Timor-Leste every year from 1976 to 1982 but did not achieve any significant accomplishments (周士新2019).

The international situation changed after the Cold War, and the contradictions that were originally hidden under the bipolar structure gradually emerged. In November 1991, Indonesian security forces opened fire on protesters in the capital city of Dili in order to consolidate their rule in Timor-Leste, resulting in the Santa Cruz Massacre (Braithwaite 2012). The Indonesian government's move has attracted international attention, causing the issue of Timor-Leste to once again become a hot topic in the international community. At this time, many Western states and international organizations supported Timor-Leste's independence, especially the United States and the International Monetary Organization who first linked the Timor-Leste issue, human rights, and economic aid to each other, forcing Indonesia to grant Timor-Leste autonomy (Wang 2011).

In terms of "spatial practice," after Timor-Leste gained independence, it began to consider joining ASEAN as its top priority strategy. In a speech in 2000, o Jos é Manuel Ramos Horta, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Timor-Leste, said "We realize that our geographical location

forces us to coexist with our neighbors and become a part of the world. We will seek to become members of ASEAN and APEC.” ASEAN did not respond to Timor-Leste until 2002 and stated that they would discuss the issue of Timor-Leste’s accession. In order to ensure its own development and expand its influence in Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste joined two security mechanisms, the Community of Portuguese Speaking states (CPLP) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), in 2002 and 2005 (Ralf 2003).

Economically, Timor-Leste has engaged in import activities with states from several regions. ASEAN states were Timor-Leste’s main import partners (Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand) for the three years prior to 2011. In 2008, imports from ASEAN states accounted for 73% of Timor-Leste’s total imports. During these three years, ASEAN states dominated Timor-Leste’s total import value, with an average proportion of about 69%. This means that ASEAN states have become important partners of Timor-Leste, and the interdependence between Timor-Leste and ASEAN states is inseparable (Arisanto 2020, Feijó 2020). Despite Timor-Leste’s attempt to reach a consensus on integration with ASEAN, this strategy has, however, led to internal conflicts within Timor-Leste, causing ASEAN as a whole to once again debate whether Timor-Leste has the conditions to join.

In terms of “representations of space” and “representational spaces,” there are still some ASEAN states that do not trust Timor-Leste after entering the 21st century. In terms of relations with ASEAN states, Indonesia has always been a country that supports Timor-Leste’s accession to the EU. Indonesian Ambassador Abdurrahman Wahid has actively supported Timor-Leste’s accession to ASEAN since 2000 and hopes to strengthen relations with Timor-Leste. But it does not affect the progress of the relationship between the two parties (Cotton 2000). In 2011, Indonesia became the chair of ASEAN, and Timor-Leste began taking active actions to join ASEAN. Timor-Leste hopes to assist in increasing its exposure in ASEAN as Indonesia’s ASEAN Chair and initiate its plan to join ASEAN. In 2014, Indonesia’s investment in Timor-Leste reached 595 million US dollars (Medcom.id 2019). In the same year, Timor-Leste’s President Jose Ramos Horta submitted an application to join ASEAN, but it was rejected by other ASEAN member states (Ye & Zhuang 2024). Myanmar’s Aung San Suu Kyi believes that the democratic conditions in Timor-Leste have not yet met the criteria for joining ASEAN; Cambodia also does not accept Timor-Leste’s accession and Singapore believes that Timor-Leste does not yet have the conditions to join ASEAN (Putra et al. 2022).

Attempt to join ASEAN after the “Timor-Leste Crisis” in 2006 and the construction of the “perceived space” order

On December 31, 2012, the United Nations peacekeeping forces officially withdrew from Timor-Leste (Sahin 2007, Kingsbury 2018). In order to gain the trust of ASEAN member states, Timor-Leste has further expanded its interaction with member states within the ASEAN framework since 2014. Firstly, Timor-Leste has established embassies in 10 ASEAN states in an attempt to gain recognition of its status. Secondly, Timor-Leste promises to abide by the constraints of the ASEAN Charter and participate in ASEAN meetings at all levels as an observer (Strating 2014, International Cooperation Center 2023). Timor-Leste’s actions have achieved initial results and established partnerships with some ASEAN states. In 2015, Timor-Leste held the “Timor-Leste Partners Annual Meeting” to showcase the achievements of Timor-Leste’s efforts to join ASEAN. In terms of economic development, according to the World Bank’s statistics at that time, the economic growth of Timor-Leste was 6.9%. In 2016, due to the unstable domestic situation in Cambodia, the ASEAN chair country, the location of the ASEAN summit was changed to Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste (Leach 2014, Vietnamplus 2015).

In 2017, ASEAN sent three independent fact-finding missions (FFMs) to Timor-Leste to assess its eligibility to join ASEAN. This inspection examined the political, economic, and socio-cultural situation in Timor-Leste but ultimately only concluded that there is a need to continue strengthening social development (Strating 2018). According to a report by ASEAN Today, as Timor-Leste’s oil and gas revenue runs out, it will benefit primarily from joining the ASEAN Economic Community. Timor-Leste hopes to become the newest member of ASEAN (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum 2017). In order to meet the conditions for joining ASEAN as soon as possible, Timor-Leste has launched the Timor-Leste ASEAN

Mobilization Plan. From 2011 to 2017, Timor-Leste made many efforts to join ASEAN, and ASEAN gradually changed its attitude. In 2019, the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) of ASEAN, the ASEAN Political and Security Community Assessment Team (APSC-FFM), the ASEAN Economic Community Assessment Team, and the ASEAN Socio Cultural Community Assessment Team visited Timor-Leste for inspection (Dewa 2017, 賀嘉洁2023).

As the trust level of the ASEAN community in Timor-Leste increases, Timor-Leste’s “membership application” is beginning to win the support of some ASEAN states. In 2018, Vietnam and Timor-Leste met at the World Economic Forum ASEAN Summit. Both sides have reached an agreement to strengthen bilateral cooperation in areas with enormous potential, such as national defense, security, agriculture, aquaculture development, and oil and gas exploration and exploitation. At the same time, both sides also emphasize the need to continue to strengthen close cooperation in regional and international forums (Ishikawa 2021, Dewa 2023). On June 3, 2019, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen met with Timor-Leste’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Babo, in Phnom Penh. Hun Sen stated that Timor-Leste has sufficient capability to join ASEAN. Cambodia will strengthen cooperation with Timor-Leste in areas such as economy, trade, investment, tourism, and culture. Cambodia supports Timor-Leste’s accession to ASEAN (Voice of Vietnam 2020).

In 2021, Vietnam held the 11th working group meeting on the issue of Timor-Leste’s application to join ASEAN. At the meeting, Nguyen Quoc Dung, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam and head of the Vietnamese ASEAN High Officials Delegation, stated that “the three pillars of the ASEAN Community and the ASEAN Secretariat will continue to assist Timor-Leste in participating in various ASEAN activities” (Vietnamplus 2021). At the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits held from November 10th to 13th, 2022, Cambodia served as the chair and decided to grant observer status to Timor-Leste before it became the 11th official member of ASEAN. Timor-Leste’s goal is to become a formal member of ASEAN by 2025. Hong Mane emphasized that Cambodia supports Timor-Leste to become a formal member of ASEAN as soon as possible and supports any practical or creative measures taken towards this end (Vietnamplus 2023, Pan 2024).

Table 2.
The practice of Brunei and Timor-Leste joining ASEAN

	Brunei	Timor-Leste
The degree of integration of boundaries	Incorporating both “symbolic boundary” and “social boundary”	“Social boundary” has been integrated, but “symbolic boundary” has not been fully integrated yet
The attribute of being in space	From “differential space” to “lived space”	From “differential space” to “perceived space”
The significance of the country’s accession to ASEAN for the normative power of ASEAN	Becoming a model before ASEAN expands into the “Ten ASEAN states,” adding attractiveness and influence to ASEAN’s normative power	Enhance the effectiveness of ASEAN’s normative powers.
Join ASEAN Time	1984	2022
The ASEAN Community’s attitude toward it	Always quite supportive	From neglect to support

Source: Created by authors

In 2023, Indonesia, the ASEAN rotating country, expressed support for Timor-Leste’s application, and other ASEAN states also expressed the same attitude. In his annual press statement on January 11, 2023, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi stated, “Indonesia welcomes Timor-Leste’s accession

to ASEAN in principle.” Singapore’s Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said, “I believe everyone (representatives of ASEAN states) fully supports their full participation.” However, he warned that “ASEAN membership carries heavy responsibilities and obligations.” Timor-Leste’s representative Ramos Horta acknowledged these challenges. José Manuel Ramos-Horta said, “We (Timor-Leste) have weaknesses in this regard because we are a new country. We have difficulties in both human resources and economy” (RCEP Chinese News 2023).

Comparing the process of Brunei and Timor-Leste joining ASEAN, although both states are small states, in fact, they are the benchmarks for ASEAN security norms (see Table 2). The reason why the two states are willing to join ASEAN shows that the normative power of ASEAN is trustworthy. The expectations of the two states for the ASEAN community also indicate the scope of its capabilities. Although there is a significant difference in the starting points of politics and economy between the two states, after entering ASEAN from Brunei, there has been no deep interaction with other non-Islamic member states of ASEAN, and the two states still maintain contacts with external Islamic states and major powers outside the region. This indicates that political and economic integration does not fully enable ASEAN’s normative powers to play a role. Similar situations can also be found in the case of Timor-Leste. Even though Timor-Leste continues to approach ASEAN standards politically and economically, it is still excluded without gaining the trust of member states.

This article finds that the expectation of political and economic integration advocated by many scholars earlier is not the main reason why ASEAN can exert normative power. Unlike previous scholars who believed that “ASEAN integration is based on political and economic maximization,” this article finds that all of this stems from “trust.” The normative power of ASEAN largely comes from the “trust” among member states, which means that member states are willing to actively cooperate, offer benefits, and bear each other’s risks. The “space” formed by “trust” is the foundation for ASEAN to exert its initiative in the process of political and economic integration.

Conclusion

By analyzing the cases of Brunei and Timor-Leste joining ASEAN, this article believes that trust is the key to enhancing the normative power of ASEAN. Previous studies have focused too much on the political and economic integration process of ASEAN, but what truly makes the ASEAN community order an effective security mechanism is the behavior of every member state to trust each other. For Brunei, whether ASEAN can ensure the survival of small states is an important indicator. On the one hand, ASEAN ensures the survival of Brunei; on the other hand, it has given Brunei a voice in regional governance, increasing the interdependence between Brunei and ASEAN. For Timor-Leste, the initial lack of recognition of its status by ASEAN resulted in a lack of mutual trust between Timor-Leste and ASEAN, leading to Timor-Leste becoming a “gray area” for ASEAN. As Timor-Leste improved its relations with ASEAN states in the 21st century, it gradually integrated into the spatial order of the ASEAN community.

The “symbolic boundary” formed by emotions, trust, and other factors is the way individuals understand the world. As the “symbolic boundary” continues to move, individuals also expand their circle of trust (field) as a result. The expansion of the trust circle also indicates a willingness to share the same risks with the collective. Only by truly integrating into the “symbolic boundary” can the power of space be demonstrated and brought into play on the symbols representing spatial order. From the three dimensions of “degree of integration into the border,” “attributes of being in space,” and “significance of the country’s accession to ASEAN normative power,” it can be observed that Brunei was able to join ASEAN quickly after independence and shifted from integrating into the “symbolic boundary” to integrating into the “social boundary.”

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