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Asian values and human security cooperation in Asia

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Throughout the 1980s, Western scholars tried to explain the somewhat puzzling but nonetheless remarkable economic success occurring in East Asia. Many scholars concluded that, among other factors, Asia's intellectual and social tradition – what we now call ''Asian values'' – was the hidden ingredient explaining Asian economic success. Asian values include attachment to the family as an institution, deference to societal interest, thrift, respect for authority, valuing consensus over confrontation, and emphasizing the importance of education. Collectively these had laid the foundation for many Asian states achieving rapid material progress by enabling social stability, unity, and economic efficiency. Because the ''Asian economic miracle'' was mainly led by the four so-called ''dragons'' (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore), Asian values generally referred to Confucian ideas, and the main focus of debate was on the relationship between these values and the rapid economic growth being realized in the region.

As several of these countries (including South Korea and Taiwan) have also moved toward political liberalization, the Asian values issue has gradually shifted toward examining several political dimensions. The leaders of some Asian states, along with various scholars in the region, overtly proud of their remarkable economic performance and impressive record of political developments, began to argue that an Asian model based on Asian values could be an alternative to capitalism and liberal democracy as applied in other regions. Some even went so far as to assert

that the Asian model is superior to liberal democracy. They argued, first, that the West's headlong pursuit of individualism has brought about the breakdown of the family, intensified drug problems, and increased violence and social decay. Secondly, individual freedom and liberal democracy are not necessarily ''universal'' values and, in many cases, they would not be suitable for Asia. Therefore, expecting Asia to accept the extra-regional conceptions of democracy and human rights at face value is unreasonable.

Currently, the debate over Asian values is moving into a third stage, as most Asian countries are facing severe economic difficulties. Now some scholars are taking the offensive, arguing that previously lauded Asian social and cultural mores have also caused the economic crash in Asia. The gloomy economic realities of Asia are now being interpreted as evidence of Asian values gone wrong. The attachment to family has suddenly become ''nepotism.'' The importance of personal relationships rather than formal legality becomes cronyism. Consensus has become ''wheel-greasing'' and corrupt politics. Conservatism and respect for authority have become ''rigidity'' and an inability to innovate. Whether it is about democracy, human rights, or economic growth, the controversy surrounding Asian values remains unresolved and it continues to act as a source of tension, not only between Asia and the West, but also within Asia.

This chapter deals with the issue of Asian values in the context of Asia's potential for human security cooperation. As noted in both chapters 1 and 2, human security emphasizes the welfare of individuals and the quality of life of the people of a society or polity. It also refers to freedom from hunger, attack, torture, and imprisonment without a free and fair trial, and to guarantees against discrimination on spurious grounds. In a positive sense, human security means the freedom to exercise the capacity and opportunity that allow each human being to enjoy life to the fullest without imposing constraints upon others engaged in the same pursuit. Human rights violations therefore threaten human security. Ramesh Thakur has observed that human security issues are closely connected to peace. He notes that the ''democratic peace thesis'' suggests that democracies rarely go to war against one another and that democracies also promote human rights better than alternative regimes. Consequently, increasing democratization will lead simultaneously to an enhancement of human rights and a more peaceful world.[1]

For the sake of regional stability, there are two major tasks. The first is that there should be an effective measure to control human rights violations both domestically and internationally. This is because the abuse and violation of human rights can lead to violent conflicts spreading across borders: the group whose rights are being abused can resort to arms in

retaliation; the conflict can entangle neighbouring countries; the scale of the human rights abuses can lead to international involvement and intervention. The important point here is that human rights issues are no longer domestic matters but are now a matter of legitimate international concern. Secondly (and this is related to the first point), in order to have international institutions that promote cooperation in elevating human rights (and therefore enhance human security), there needs to be a shared understanding of just what ''human rights'' are. In this sense, it is very important to formulate a concept of democracy and human rights that can be universally accepted by the countries in the region.

It is argued here that the current ''Asian values'' debate is misplaced; it is going in the wrong direction and will have only a negative impact on building up a commonly shared conception of human rights in the Asian region. For this reason we need initially to go beyond the current discussion of ''Asian values,'' which is based on a false dichotomy between East and West. More attention must be directed toward the immediate task of formulating a universally acceptable concept of human rights. A proper vision of human rights should incorporate traditional cultures such as Confucianism and this attempt should not be viewed as the rejection of prevalent human rights thinking; instead, it should be perceived as an effort to improve it.

The Asian values debate: Development and limitations

The so-called ''Asian values debate'' intensified with the signing of the Bangkok Declaration on Human Rights in April 1993 by 40 East and South-East Asian states, including China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Korea.[2] In the words of a government spokesman for Singapore (whose leaders have been particularly outspoken participants in the debate), the Declaration ''stakes out a distinctive Asian point of view'' on human rights.[3] The governments of countries that signed the Declaration argue that Asian states, because of their ''unique'' values and special historical circumstances, are justified in adopting an understanding of human rights and democracy that is fundamentally different from that prevailing in the West. According to these states, Western diplomacy focusing on human rights is simply part of an effort to assert political and economic hegemony over Asia. The Bangkok Declaration, along with views presented during its signing, sparked a heated debate.

That debate raged not only between Asia and the West but also among Asians. It was fuelled even more by a now-famous interview given by Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore and one of the most outspoken Asian leaders campaigning against Western hegemony. In his

interview with *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 1994), he implied that Western-style democracy is not applicable to East Asia, asserting that, in the East, ''the ruler or the government does not try to provide for a person what the family best provides.'' This self-reliant and family-oriented culture was identified as the primary reason for East Asia's economic success. In Lee's view, the moral breakdown of Western societies can be attributed to too much liberal democracy and too many individual rights. Consequently, the Western political system is not suited to family-oriented East Asia.[4]

I will argue that this embodiment of ''Asian values'' has several problems. First, as other commentators have already suggested, there is no such thing as ''Asian values.''[5] Asians, broadly defined, make up more than 60 per cent of the world's population and it is absurd to argue that there is one set of values that represents such a huge demographic composition. Even in East Asia, referring to a single set of values involves the forced blending of many of the world's intellectual traditions – Confucianism, Buddhism, and Islam, to name but three. The term ''Asian values'' in the current ''Asian values debate'' is often used to denote Confucian values.

The second major problem with the ''Asian values debate'' is that it has been fuelled and shaped by the opinion of prominent figures such as Lee Kuan Yew and Dr. Mahathir and then given further life by responses to those views from both the West and Asia. These selective views are wrongly referred to as being representative of definitive ''Asian views.'' The fact is that, although these perspectives contain some interesting points and arguments, they do not represent the consensus of all Asian people. In other words, the term ''Asian values'' often misleads non-Asians. Asia's intellectuals and politicians have not even come close to unanimity about the notion of Asian values propagated by the concept's leading promoters.

In fact there has been much criticism toward ''Asian values'' inside Asia. Kim Dae Jung, the President of South Korea, argues that Lee Kuan Yew has projected misleading arguments in order to reject Western-style democracy and to provide an excuse for his total intolerance of dissent. Contrary to Lee's claim, Asia has democratic philosophies that are as profound as those to be found in the West. Kim mentions the ideas of Meng-tzu, a Chinese philosopher who preached that the people come first, the country comes second, and the king comes third. In addition, the ancient Chinese philosophy of *Minben Zhengchi*, or ''people-based politics,'' teaches that ''the will of people is the will of the heaven'' and that one should ''respect the people as heaven'' itself.[6]

The most critical problem with the current ''Asian values debate'' is that it wrongly leads people to believe that Asians do not honour human

rights or that various Asian philosophies such as Confucianism are totally incompatible with the Western conception of human rights. How such misunderstandings occur was well illustrated in a speech made by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter. He argued that the ''Asian values'' doctrine (''which rejects the notion of inalienable human rights'') is one of the main challenges to democracy and human rights.[7] Wei Jingsheng, a well-known dissident expelled from China, and Nobel Peace Prize winner and East Timorese dissident Jose Ramos Horta both consequently criticized this type of ''misconception'' about ''Asian values.'' They asserted there is nothing intrinsically anti-democratic about genuine Asian philosophies and that such Western constructs as those postulated by Brzezinski were intellectually contemptuous of all Asians. Their criticism implies that in the ''Asian values debate'' Westerners have got the wrong idea about ''Asian values'' and that this is because some authoritarian leaders in Asia have used the concept as a justification for their non-democratic rule.[8] In fact, Brzezinski was correct in his assertion about the Asian values *doctrine* (which has a clearly ideological dimension). But this is not the same thing as saying that ''genuine Asian philosophies'' are anti-democratic.

It is contended here that the Asian values debate should not be about whether or not Asian values can be presented as an alternative to Western democratization. As Joseph Chan has proposed, '' 'Asian values' need not be understood as a set of values entirely distinct from and in opposition to Western values, but simply as those values that many people in Asia would endorse and that would guide them in their search for a political morality.''[9] According to the Confucian tradition, the social distance between the state and the individual is much closer than that embraced by Western liberalism. Therefore, the core of the ''Asian values debate'' (especially pertaining to human rights) should be about the proper relationship between the state and individual in light of promoting human rights.

The human rights conception in Asia and the West

In order to promote human rights regionally there should be a commonly acceptable understanding of human rights by countries in the region. In other words, since Asia is the most diverse region in terms of culture, religion, ethnicity, and language, it is necessary to have a consensus on the norms and institutions of human rights among countries in the region. The tension between Asia and the West and even within Asia regarding human rights is the result of differing interpretations of that concept. In

all candour, it is extremely difficult to present a set of views on human rights that would truly represent all of the Asian states. Each country has a different set of views on human rights. Some Asian countries accept the idea of universal human rights, while others stress the legitimacy of tolerating different understandings and human rights practices as a reflection of different historical traditions and cultural backgrounds. Secondly, Asian countries' views on human rights also vary according to the type and intensity of a given issue. Asian policy-makers, for example, might share an understanding of human rights with Western states as a matter of general principle but, when the implications of a specific position are weighed in depth, serious disagreements can arise over how critical human security considerations really are to the issue at hand.

Imposing trade sanctions as part of a ''linkage policy'' to compel different human rights behaviour has been a recurrent case-in-point over the past few years. Despite the inherent difficulty of identifying ''Asian'' human rights postures, it is correct to say that differences regarding human rights really have emerged between Asia and the West. The most striking difference is that Asian culture views individuals as an element of society and emphasizes their responsibilities and duties within it. Western liberal democracy is based on the concept of the individual, who has inborn and inalienable rights. A government that restricts any of these rights can be justified only on the basis of consent. On the other hand, human rights in the Asian (more correctly Confucian) tradition are understood as relating to other individuals' rights as well as to society as a whole. The anecdote that Lee Kuan Yew mentioned in his interview at least clarifies this aspect. In Singapore, any customs or police officer who sees someone behaving suspiciously can require that person to have a urine test. In America, it would be a violation of the suspected individual's rights, but in the view of many Asian states it would be acceptable for the sake of the welfare of that individual as well as of the society.

The ''East–West difference'' in approaching the problem of human rights does not necessarily mean that the two cultures' images are always incompatible. Much of the controversy arises over secondary principles of human rights. Joseph Chan argues that Asian states and the West do not differ in their positions on basic principles. What causes difficulties, he asserts, is what he terms ''mid-level principles,'' which can help determine the scope and limits of rights and duties. Indeed, there is a possibility that Asia and the West could formulate a commonly acceptable conception of human rights. Chan suggests that ''Asian political moralities would probably diverge significantly from the strand of liberalism, which is arguably a very influential vision of political morality in the United States. Most Asian political moralities would probably endorse the principles of

perfectionism, moralism, and paternalism. While endorsing basic human rights, they would allow these midlevel principles to affect the scope of those rights.''[10] He goes on to say: ''What is involved in the development of human rights norms in Asia is Asians' search for a coherent political morality. This is an important task for each Asian society – a task that should not be understood in terms of a contest between Asians and Westerners.''[11]

There is ample evidence that Asia has a rich tradition of democracy-oriented philosophies that accommodate the importance of human rights. As I noted above, Chinese philosopher Meng-tzu's dictum that people have the right to rise up and overthrow their government in the name of heaven shows the importance of human rights. A native philosopher of Korea, Tonghak, went even further, advocating that ''man is heaven'' and that one must serve people as one does heaven. South Korean President Kim Dae Jung claims on this basis that there are no ideas more fundamental to democracy than the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Tonghak.[12] Besides these human rights-oriented philosophies, there are many democratic traditions and institutions in Asia including freedom of speech and the board of censor system. Some might argue that these traditions and ideas are meaningless given the region's poor contemporary human rights record and the low level of political democratization of many Asian states. But Chan argues that the violations of human rights by Asian states should be separated from the values that Asians really cherish. His argument deserves attention because Western societies, despite their long tradition of democracy and concept of universal human rights, are guilty of many human rights violations of their own – including discrimination against minorities and dual standards on policies regarding human rights violations (e.g. Australia's Cold War policy toward East Timor, which leaned toward Indonesia).

It is true, however, that there has been no *universal* conception of human rights in Asia. Confucianism, as represented by the thought of Confucius and Meng-tzu, does not incorporate the idea of human rights. Rather, it puts great emphasis on duties arising from social roles in human relations; on the virtues of respect for the elderly and filial piety; and on mutual trust and care between family members.[13] In the sense that Confucian ideas tend to limit the role of rights in human relationships to a minimum fallback mechanism to protect the vulnerable party against exploitation and harm, they could be viewed as contradicting the Western conception of human rights. However, it is more accurate to view Confucian ideas of human rights as based on different ideas of how relationships should develop between individuals and between an individual and the community or the state. Confucian ideas on the relationship between the state and the individual and the Western conception of human rights

could actually complement each other if duty and reward are viewed as common variables in both approaches.

Therefore, once Western states accept that there is room for improvement in their own conception of human rights (which means Westerners acknowledging that there are values other than Western liberalism that could enrich human rights conceptions), traditional cultures such as Confucianism have much to contribute to the modern discourse on human security and to the development of human rights norms. We often witness the rights of the socially vulnerable (the poor, the elderly, ethnic minorities, women, etc.) being violated, even in societies that have a long tradition of human rights protection. This tendency has intensified as the process of globalization has accelerated and the neoliberal ideology that champions market principles and non-interventionism gains worldwide acceptance.[14] In this situation, the role of the state in protecting the rights of the socially weak is important. Although it is the state that most frequently threatens human security (through war, repression, systemic discrimination, and so on), it is equally true that it is only the state that can protect the socially weak from the tyranny of the market and enhance human rights principles.

The important point here is that the norms and institutions of human rights and liberal democracy are not permanent visions but are continually evolving. Recently, many Westerners have felt that serious problems have arisen in their own countries as a result of an overemphasis on liberal values and individual rights. Bilahari Kausikan claims that the most trenchant criticisms of extreme individualism, of liberal democracy, and of key elements of Western-style systems have been voiced by Westerners themselves.[15] This realization once more underscores the possibility that the two sets of socio-cultural values (Asian and Western) could complement each other and contribute to developing a new conception of human security that can be shared by both Asia and the West. As the precondition for this, traditional cultures of Asia such as Confucianism must be transformed in light of the spirit of human rights. As Chan argues, vibrant and transformed Confucianism could supply rich ethical norms and virtues that would take their place alongside Western concepts of human rights to guide people's behaviour, effectively tempering an otherwise overly rigid rights-based culture often found in Western societies.[16]

Conclusion: Regional cooperation to elevate human rights

The best word to characterize the Asian region is "diversity." In addition to ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, there are different views of the

notion of human rights among countries in the region. In order to promote human security in Asia, a coordinated regional strategy for human rights is critical. As a precondition for this coordinated effort, there must be a shared regional view on what should constitute human rights.

The major difficulty in achieving this objective is cultural diversity among the countries in the region. Many Asia-Pacific countries – including Australia and New Zealand – are not comfortable with Dr. Mahathir's position or Lee Kuan Yew's stance within the ''Asian values'' debate. Moreover, the most fundamental policy of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) since its foundation in 1967 has been ''non-interference'' in a country's affairs. Moreover, ASEAN's new recruits, e.g. Viet Nam and Myanmar, do not want intervention in their domestic matters by external forces.

How can we, in this situation, develop a concept of human rights that can be accepted by all countries of the region, and pursue joint measures to promote human security there? A good starting point would be to promote the collective realization among Asian peoples that the current ''Asian values'' debate is mainly shaped by controversy over the views of several outspoken Asian leaders. This controversy digresses from the real issue. Basically, the key question is not about which set of values is superior to others. The current ''Asian values'' debate is based on a false dichotomy between Asian and Western values concerning human rights, and has a negative impact on building up a commonly shared conception of human rights.

The real issue, then, is the social distance between the individual and the state. Some Asian states are still prone to exploit the closeness between the state and the individual in their culture, rationalizing it as a basis for maintaining their non-democratic rule. This trend should not be allowed to shape the core of the ''Asian values'' debate. In fact that kind of non-democratic system is not acceptable in the Confucian values system. A proper distance that guarantees individual human rights to the maximum extent must be cultivated in *all* Asia-Pacific societies at the dawn of a new century.

Notes

1. Ramesh Thakur, ''From National to Human Security'' in Stuart Harris and Andrew Mack, eds., *Asia-Pacific Security: The Economics–Politics Nexus* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997), pp. 72–73.
2. Within the East Asian region, Japan did not sign the Declaration under pressure from the United States.
3. ''Asian Values Revisited,'' *The Economist* 368, no. 8078 (25 July 1998), p. 25.

4. Fareed Zakaria, ''Culture Is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew,'' *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (March/April 1994), pp. 109–126.
5. I am not persuaded by an attempt to explain social phenomena with cultural factors. This so-called ''cultural approach'' is able to present plausible explanations only of something that has already happened. In other words, when it comes to predictive power, the cultural approach is hardly impressive. I do not deny the importance of culture. But the concept of ''Asian values,'' which first won wide acceptance in academia as a factor explaining the East Asian economic miracle, has proven, with hindsight, to be nothing more than an explanation scholars came up with to explain something they could not explain otherwise.
6. Kim Dae Jung, ''Is Culture Destiny? The Myth of Asia's Anti-Democratic Values,'' *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 6 (November/December 1994), pp. 189–194.
7. Zbigniew Brzezinski, ''The New Challenges of Human Rights,'' *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 2 (April 1997), p. 4.
8. Wei's views were offered at the Forum 2000 conference hosted by former Czech Republic president, Václav Havel, and recounted in *Inside China Today*, 23 June 1999. This source can be found on the Internet at http//www.insidechina.com/special/weijing/weijingbio.php3. Horta's views were expounded in an address on ''Human Rights and Morality vs Pragmatism and Real Politik,'' Human Rights Oration, 13 December 1998, Alfred Dreyfus Anti-Defamation Unit at B'nai B'rith, Sydney. The address is reprinted on the Internet at http//www.pactok.net.au/docs-et/jrhsp131298.html.
9. Joseph Chan, ''An Alternative View,'' *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 2 (1997), p. 42.
10. Ibid., p. 40.
11. Ibid., p. 41.
12. Kim Dae Jung, ''Is Culture Destiny,'' p. 194.
13. Chan, ''An Alternative View,'' p. 44.
14. Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello, *Global Village or Global Pillage* (Boston: South End Press, 1994).
15. Bilahari Kausikan, ''Governance That Works,'' *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 2 (April 1997), pp. 24–34.
16. Chan, ''An Alternative View,'' p. 45.