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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO “ASIAN VALUES”?

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The discourse contrasting the defects of “Western” individualism and democracy with the virtues of “Asian” communitarianism and good governance, which blossomed during East and Southeast Asia’s economic boom, has withered since the financial bust of 1997–98. Economic crisis seems to be a particularly effective form of ideological critique. “Asian values,” adieu?

The most prominent contributions to the discussion of “Asian values” were made by East and Southeast Asian government officials and their critics in journals such as Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, and the Journal of Democracy.¹ This debate received international attention because the assertion that Asian cultural particularity justified the rejection of liberal democracy was matched by impressive economic results. Countries in other regions had earlier employed similar particularistic cultural arguments, but without much success. For example, several sub-Saharan African dictators in the 1970s asserted that their rule accorded with “African traditions,” but obvious economic failings undercut their claims. In East and Southeast Asia, by contrast, three decades as the world’s fastest-growing region made the “Asian challenge” much more interesting than anti-Western positions of the past. “Asian authoritarians,” the Economist wrote in 1992, “argue from a position of economic and social success.”²

The recent financial crisis in the region, however, has undermined the international prestige of “Asian values.” Having been forced onto the defensive, senior Singaporean government official Tommy Koh no longer attempted to convince an international audience of the merits of
“Asian values”; he merely tried to convince readers that they were not to blame for the recent economic downturn.3 Academics, conservative politicians, and businesspeople in the West who had sympathized with “Asian values” were also embarrassed. Economists who had claimed that a Confucian ethos promoted capitalist growth in Asia as the Protestant ethic had done in the West (an inversion of Max Weber’s thesis that Confucianism was an obstacle to economic development) found themselves without an Asian economic miracle to explain.

Cultural relativists had suggested that liberal democratic universalism was an arrogant and naive attempt to impose the ways of “the West” on “the East.” Yet opposition activists from Indonesia to Malaysia blamed authoritarianism for their countries’ economic ills and looked to democracy as a cure. Samuel P. Huntington saw the region’s economic growth and the West’s relative decline as an “Asian affirmation,” which, along with the “Islamic resurgence,” posed the major threat in the “clash of civilizations.”4 This “danger,” however, seemed to recede as the region’s economies declined. British Tories and other conservatives preferred not to recall their previous admiration of some aspects of the now-wayward “Asian way.”5 Several foreign investors and fund managers who had praised strict labor laws and the developmental emphasis of authoritarian Asian governments were subsequently bankrupted by holdings in crony companies.

Critics of “Asian values” could hardly suppress their Schadenfreude. While their earlier attacks had been parried by the obvious “evidence” that Asian authoritarians had promoted economic development by limiting personal liberties, critics could now argue, following Camus, that those denied freedom may one day find themselves without bread as well.

Although thoroughly discredited internationally, “Asian values” face a more complex fate at the domestic level. “Asian” critiques of liberal democracy had been invoked not only in the name of good governance needed to achieve rapid economic growth in poor countries but also in defense of a paternalistic state after high living standards had been attained. Where “Asian values” had been defended from a developmental perspective (above all in Indonesia), the economic crisis was devastating. But in countries that were already economically advanced, such as Singapore and Malaysia, claims about distinctive “Asian values” are likely to continue in the postcrisis period.

**Development and Co-optation**

“Asian values” as a doctrine of developmentalism can be understood as the claim that, until prosperity is achieved, democracy remains an unaffordable luxury. This “Protestant ethic” form of “Asian values”
attributes high growth rates to certain cultural traits. These characteristics include hard work, frugality, discipline, and teamwork. Western democracy hinders rapid development, authoritarian rulers in the Asia Pacific claim, and thus must be delayed until substantial development has been achieved.

This helps explain why authoritarian advocates of “Asian values” have been so intent on weakening international human rights conventions. Only a “disciplined” (that is, authoritarian) regime, they hold, is likely to promote fast economic growth. This view led Singaporean senior minister Lee Kuan Yew to warn Manila business leaders that their country needed “discipline more than democracy.”

Indonesian strongman Suharto was the leading regional advocate of such authoritarian developmentalism. The country’s New Order government argued that its “Pancasila democracy” embodied indigenous values. Stressing deliberation (musyawarah) instead of opposition in order to reach consensus (mufakat), and excluding the masses from politics except during brief “election” campaigns through the “floating mass principle,” the regime claimed that such a political system was necessary to create the stability needed for rapid economic growth. The military regime in Burma (Myanmar) tried to imitate the “Indonesian model” of developmentalist dictatorship with a similar culturalist justification.

Indonesia’s economic crisis, which began in late 1997, was the catalyst of the overthrow of the Suharto dictatorship by a student-led popular movement. With the economy in crisis and “crony capitalism” widespread, no culturalist argument could hide the fact that the would-be developmentalist dictator had lost all legitimacy. The fall of Suharto in May 1998 eliminated the chief ideologue of developmentalist “Asian values.” With the Indonesian New Order now an ancien régime and Burma also badly hit by the regional economic crisis, the Burmese generals have been forced to return to the familiar pattern of relying on brute force without ideological pretense.

“Asian values” have also been propagated in Singapore and Malaysia, countries with relatively high living standards. Despite prosperity, their governments have argued that “Western” democracy remains culturally inappropriate. While developmentalist dictatorships have used “Asian values” to justify serious human rights violations, in more economically advanced Singapore and Malaysia “soft authoritarianism” has been sufficient: Civil liberties are violated less openly, but democratization is still resisted. In such a context, claims of “Asian values” accompany the state’s attempt to co-opt an increasingly affluent and well-educated population.

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middle class. Singapore is the wealthiest non-oil-producing country in the world that is not a democracy, and, before the regional economic crisis, Malaysia was the second most prosperous nondemocratic country whose export earnings were not primarily based on oil. Yet high income levels and large middle classes have not led to political liberalization. On the contrary, the Freedom House ratings of political rights and civil liberties in Malaysia and Singapore stagnated or declined in the 1990s.

It is striking that the championing of distinctive “Asian values” by highly Westernized government officials in Singapore and Malaysia coincided with the rise of democracy movements and growing individualism in the early 1980s. A few years later, the new Singaporean prime minister Goh Chok Tong warned that Singaporeans must avoid “Western” democracy, a free press, foreign television, and pop music, “which could bring the country down.”8 “Asian values” were the antidote to all that was wrong with Westernization. Rising crime and divorce rates—as well as new tastes in music, television, and film—were linked to an electoral swing away from the ruling People’s Action Party (whose vote share fell nearly 20 percent between 1980 and 1991). The importance of maintaining “Asian values” could thus justify both draconian laws regarding personal behavior and the crackdown on political opposition in 1987. In short, the Singaporean state had created an ideology to combat democratic tendencies and individualism despite the country’s advanced stage of economic development.

In Malaysia, after a crackdown on opposition in the late 1980s led to Western criticism of the government’s human rights record, Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad defended “Asian” notions of governance and accused the West of “ramming an arbitrary version of democracy” down the country’s throat.9 At the same time, he attacked growing decadence in the West, holding up “Asian values” as an alternative. As in Singapore, the Malaysian government used a culturalist argument to discredit demands for liberal democracy and individualism, pointing to the hazards of unchecked Westernization.

Such ideological claims are usually treated with skepticism, and the “Asian values” discourse did not necessarily enjoy a high degree of popular support in Malaysia and Singapore (although legitimacy is hard to measure under nondemocratic conditions). Still, the claim of distinctive “Asian values” did help set the political agenda. In Singapore, leading oppositionist J.B. Jeyaratnam was perceived as “radical” because
of his confrontational political style and his open calls for a Western-style democracy. The Singaporean media recently made a similar attempt to marginalize Chee Soon Juan, who was convicted of making a speech in public without a police permit.

Malaysian dissidents, on the other hand, although criticizing their government’s record on human rights, have often shared Mahathir’s criticism of the West and his defense of “Asian values,” inadvertently helping to bolster the regime. At the height of the region’s financial crisis, Mahathir did not feel the need to invoke “Asian values.” His attacks on George Soros and other foreign conspirators, “rogues,” and speculators required no complicated arguments about Asian cultural particularity; thinly veiled anti-Semitism and crude xenophobia sufficed.

The Singaporean government avoided such polemics; on the contrary, it has worried that Mahathir’s “bristling nationalism” will hurt investors’ confidence in the whole region. But the recent crisis has given the Singaporean state reason to renew its calls for discipline and order, recalling the good old days when sacrifices could be demanded in the name of rapid development. Indeed, as an attempt to fend off the demands for greater political participation that follow economic modernization, the discourse of “Asian values” is likely to be re-emphasized once the Singaporean and Malaysian economies begin to show renewed signs of sustained growth.

From Kaiser Wilhelm to Lee Kuan Yew

To better understand the character of postdevelopmental “Asian values” in Singapore and Malaysia, it is helpful to consider briefly historical parallels to Imperial Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The similarities are no accident: Imperial Germany heavily influenced Meiji Japan and through it the rest of East and Southeast Asia. Like Imperial Germany, Singapore and (to a lesser extent) Malaysia have “strong” bureaucratic states that have promoted “late” industrial development. Imperial Germany had a parliament, but, as in Singapore and Malaysia today, it was mainly for show. A parallel might even be drawn between the social control exercised through housing and other policies in Singapore and the welfare state that Bismarck set up in order to buy off working-class opposition.

The key similarity, however, is that Singapore and Malaysia, like Imperial Germany, have tried to fend off pressures for democratization by invoking cultural difference. With the arrival of advanced industrialization, developmental arguments urging the temporary renunciation of democratic goals in the interest of faster modernization could no longer justify authoritarian rule. Rather, authoritarianism had to be defended even after the advent of economic modernity.
Ideologues of Imperial Germany were aware that their country, by not democratizing in the course of economic development, had departed significantly from the pattern of other industrial nations—above all Britain, France, and the United States. While today this so-called Sonderweg (separate path) is widely considered a key reason for the Nazi rise to power, in the nineteenth century it was a source of national pride. By distinguishing between Western civilization and German Kultur, ideologists were able to claim that, for Germany, industrialization ought not to lead to democratization, for democracy was alien to German culture. This particularistic identity was at the same time nationally inclusive, strengthening integration after recent unification.

The Imperial German critique of Western civilization helps us better understand “Asian values” by showing that the real issue involved is not “Asia” versus the “West,” but rather authoritarian versus democratic modernity. Imperial Germany was a European country whose ideologues denied that it belonged to Western civilization. But this claim to cultural difference merely covered over a deeper dispute about the way in which the modern world should be constructed. Conservative thinkers in Imperial Germany, like today’s “Asian values” advocates, tried to prove that authoritarianism could go hand-in-hand with an advanced form of modern living. The historian Jeffrey Herf has termed this “reactionary modernism.”

Like the “Asian values” school, the German critics of Western civilization began by drawing an invidious, crudely stereotyped contrast between “us” and “them.” Culture was taken as a given and seen as closed to meaningful changes. In German, this was known as Wesensschau, the metaphysical search for the “true” essence of culture. “Asian values,” in turn, can be characterized as a kind of reverse “Orientalism.” The Western simplification of the “East” for its own hegemonic aims (critiqued by Edward Said in Orientalism) has, through the discourse of “Asian values,” been turned into a presentation of “Asia” built to serve the interests of certain Asian leaders.

The appeal to “Asian values” is also part of an effort to strengthen national identity. Just as “Germanness” was stressed against regional identities in Germany, common “Asianness” is emphasized over cultural difference in multiethnic Malaysia and Singapore.

Another way in which this comparison sheds light on “Asian values” is that the critique of Western civilization in Imperial Germany also sought to appeal to a society that was largely middle class. It has often been claimed that the reason for the failure of democratization in Imperial Germany was the weakness of “the bourgeoisie”—a general label that includes big business as well as the middle class. But the middle and upper classes were not numerically small: Germany after 1870 was an increasingly urbanized country with rapidly growing ranks of civil servants, businessmen, and professionals.
In fact, the prevailing political views in Germany were the outcome of an ideological struggle, in which ideologues of the “German way” used nationalism to sideline the local democrats. Max Weber could see this, which is why he used his famous Freiburg inaugural lecture of 1895 to berate the German middle class for its unpolitical spirit and its unwillingness to take the lead in liberalizing society.

The leaders of Malaysia and Singapore are concerned—as the rulers of Imperial Germany were before them—about the rise of the middle class and its potential to serve as a social base for political change. The “Asian values” discourse is thus directed primarily at that middle class, which, beginning in the 1980s, increasingly supported new prodemocracy opposition groups. Although repression was used against these groups, as it was against socialists and Catholics in Imperial Germany, significant efforts were also made in Malaysia and Singapore to co-opt their middle-class backers. Indeed, the “Asian values” discourse was part of an effort to depoliticize students, civil servants, professionals, and small-business owners.

**Resurgence or Retreat?**

Even if postdevelopmental “Asian values” have survived the recent financial crisis, the question remains as to how long they will endure. Middle-class-based opposition political movements challenge the claim that Asian cultural particularity is reason to resist democracy. This does not mean that these movements are highly Westernized. On the contrary, traditional identities and symbols often prove an important resource for democratization, even as they expose the pretensions of Westernized authoritarianists who drape themselves in the garb of culturalist rhetoric.

In Malaysia, the dismissal and arrest of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998 led to the formation of a Malay-based middle-class protest movement. Although the immediate cause for the political crisis in Malaysia was a personal dispute between Anwar and Prime Minister Mahathir, the reformasi campaign that grew out of it has found much more popular resonance than did opposition that arose after previous elite conflicts within the dominant United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Mahathir’s “un-Malay” treatment of Anwar (who was fired abruptly, beaten by the chief of police, tried on charges of corruption and sodomy, and sentenced to long prison terms) is a key reason for this strong reaction.

Another reason for popular outcry is that, even before his fall from power, Anwar was beginning to articulate a culturalist argument in favor of democracy, a point he stressed at rallies held around the country between his removal from office and his arrest. Anwar’s own account of Asian traditions is that they are compatible with—and even conducive
to—democracy, echoing a point made by other Asian democrats. In
addition, Anwar effectively combined Islamic language with his liberal
program, as others had done earlier in Indonesia.\textsuperscript{12}

A new alliance brought together middle-class oppositionists across
ethnic lines after Anwar’s arrest. Peaceful street demonstrations took
place in Kuala Lumpur and other urban areas regularly from late 1998
through 1999. Several intellectuals who had once flirted with “Asian
values,” such as Chandra Muzaffar, became opposition leaders.

The victory of Mahathir’s UMNO-led ruling coalition in the
November 1999 elections—again achieving the two-thirds parliamentary
majority that allows unhindered legislative and constitutional
authority—might be taken to suggest that the reformasi challenge failed.
The Justice Party, headed by Anwar’s wife, won only five seats
(including Anwar’s old seat, to which she was elected). But the UMNO
lost two predominantly Malay states in the north and did poorly among
Malay voters as a whole. The reformasi movement had forced Mahathir
to shift his electoral base from Malay to Chinese and Indian constitu-
encies.

Mahathir and his supporters effectively raised doubts among minority
voters by playing up the opposition’s alliance with the Islamic Party
(PAS), as well as Anwar’s own Islamic ties. By cleverly exploiting fears
of communal conflict, they shifted the debate from the need for political
change to worries about maintaining stability. In addition, the massive
patronage of the UMNO, the short campaign, restrictions on opposition
meetings, a press blackout (with pro-opposition coverage restricted to a
few websites), the holding of early elections to keep out a batch of newly
enrolled voters, and electoral “dirty tricks” propelled the ruling coalition
to victory. Nonetheless, the opposition coalition (primarily the PAS)
tripled its seats in parliament, while prominent UMNO politicians—
including Mahathir and his new deputy Abdullah Badawi—received far
fewer votes than usual.

The ethnic-Malay middle class has been politicized, and there is
increasing criticism within the UMNO of the heavy loss of Malay
support. Mahathir recently denounced the “many Malays” who “were
not grateful and tried to overthrow the government” and admitted that
the UMNO might lose the next election, which must be held by 2004.\textsuperscript{13}

The reformasi movement has transformed the political agenda. Democ-
ratization can no longer be so easily dismissed as a “Western” pre-
occupation. It has become the most important issue in Malaysian politics
today.

In Singapore, by contrast, the prospects of the middle class breaking
free of political co-optation are less rosy. Yet, even there, Chan Heng
Chee, a prominent scholar with close links to the regime who currently
serves as ambassador to the United States, admitted to growing
disaffection among “the increasing numbers of well-educated, articulate,
and materially secure professionals, civil servants, academics, and school teachers." There is no issue that has politicized the middle class in Singapore as the Anwar affair did in Malaysia. Yet it is striking how many oppositionists in Singapore, as in Malaysia, are less Westernized and more traditionally oriented than their regime. In fact, those with the strongest “Asian” identities are often the most adamant in calling for democratic reforms.

At low levels of per-capita income, capitalist development is not necessarily inhibited by authoritarian rule, even if the evidence does not show that “developmental” authoritarianism is necessary for growth. Higher-income countries, however, have greater difficulty reconciling capitalism and nondemocratic rule. In East and Southeast Asia, the first challenge has been the pressure applied by the United States and other industrialized Western powers on the neo-mercantilist Asian states to open their markets to Western imports. Both Taiwan and South Korea confronted such international demands in the mid-1980s, at about the same time that democratization began.

The economic policies of Malaysia and Singapore also have strong mercantilist tendencies, apparent during the recent economic crisis. Malaysian prime minister Mahathir became the enfant terrible of the world financial community by blaming a global capitalist conspiracy. He also imposed capital controls, a deadly sin in the eyes of international finance. On this issue Western conservatives and the advocates of “Asian values” part ways. The former have supported free trade and financial liberalization, while some of the latter have been among its most outspoken critics since the crisis.

A second challenge of globalization is the growing importance of information technology, which is dependent on rapid, dependable, and virtually unrestricted communication flows. The governments of Singapore and Malaysia have encouraged the establishment of information technology industries, with Malaysia even sponsoring a Multimedia Supercorridor in cooperation with Microsoft. But concerns about authoritarian interference (including the government reading business e-mails), as well as the international legitimacy problems of nondemocratic regimes, have slowed these efforts. Mahathir, for example, pays a price for his antiforeign rhetoric in terms of the unease of some potential foreign investors in the Multimedia Supercorridor.

Lee Kuan Yew has recently expressed the view that attempts to block off the Internet and other worldwide information flows are self-defeating.

More generally, the creativity which is so vital for success in high-tech industries is hampered by authoritarianism. Lee has complained, without apparent irony, that Singapore lacks the “free-wheeling buzz” of Hong Kong. Aside from the state’s direct role in the economy and the strict political controls, the educational system of the island is designed
to promote conformity, not creativity. As one Western diplomat has suggested: “It’s hard for Singaporeans to learn that questioning is acceptable. People aren’t trained to be creative. Companies feel that if you were educated in Singapore, you’ll need to be re-educated before you can do a lot of things.” A comparison with Taiwan, which outperformed Singapore during the Asian economic crisis, suggests that political democratization can have positive economic consequences in a developed country.

The Chinese Challenge

Looming over all these considerations is the ideological struggle for China’s soul. It is the outcome of this battle that will determine above all else the long-term significance of “Asian values.” The Chinese experiment in Hong Kong of using cultural difference to justify authoritarianism has failed. Large segments of this politically sleepy society were politicized by the Tiananmen Square massacre and the democratic reforms of the late colonial era. With Hong Kong’s return to China in 1997, Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa and his pro-Beijing allies attempted to use “Asian values” against democracy. They were badly defeated, however, in the 1998 legislative elections in the small percentage of seats open to electoral competition.

Yet conservative Chinese ideologues continued to see Singapore as a model. In 1994, Lee Kuan Yew was elected honorary chairman of the International Confucius Association, established by the Chinese government. In its effort to justify authoritarian rule, China’s communist leadership (once militantly anti-Confucian) has begun experimenting with traditional culture as a possible form of ideological cover. (Because of its relative cultural homogeneity, Confucianism could be invoked in China; in multi-ethnic Singapore only the more encompassing “Asian values” can safely be emphasized.)

While some Chinese ideologues have employed a “developmentalist” argument that democracy must be delayed until substantial economic growth has been achieved, others have expounded a critique independent of China’s rising living standards. Dissident Liu Xiaobo has complained that the Chinese government rejects criticisms of human rights on the grounds of supposed differences in “national conditions” and “traditions.” Government ideologues also point to the moral decline of the West as manifested by drug consumption, suicide, divorce, and increasing crime. “Western” democracy can thus be dismissed as both alien and decadent. Unlike straightforward appeals to Chinese nationalism, appeals to Confucian traditions can draw on the economic success of countries with a similar cultural heritage—from Meiji Japan to South Korea (overlooking their eventual democratization, of course).

In the mid-1980s, the countries of “greater China” (China, Hong Kong,
Singapore, and Taiwan) were all authoritarian in one way or another. At the beginning of the twenty-first century these states are much more politically diverse, showing beyond any doubt that culturally “the Chinese” are not inevitably authoritarian. Should China continue to industrialize successfully under authoritarian rule, “Asian values” are likely to be part of the regime’s legitimation strategy. But should a major democratization movement again emerge in China, more liberal values, even those supposedly confined to Western civilization, may prove of greater significance.

NOTES


