

# An Exploration of the East Asian Community and Its Identity: Focusing on Asian Values

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## 목 차

Introduction
Historical Review on the Discourse on East Asia
Issues Relevant to a Discussion of East Asian Values
Reinterpreting Asian Values
Conclusion

## Introduction

The establishment of an East Asian Community, the area redefined as ASEAN+3 is being pursued in many sectors. Unlike APEC or ASEM, cooperation in the ASEAN+3 model is based exclusively on regionalism. The focus is on regional cooperation in all areas: economic, defense, and security. If this cooperation were supported by the idea of a common cultural identity, the success of ASEAN+3 would most likely double. A theory of Asian values could act as a prominent hypothesis by which to postulate, for the rest of the world and for East Asians themselves, an East Asian cultural identity.

Strong objection to this hypothesis have been raised and the Asian Financial Crisis from 1997-1998 struck almost a fatal blow. Moreover, even Lee Kuan Yew, a missionary of Asian values, has taken a step backward.

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Is East Asia just a virtual community? Is the theory of Asian values just an ideology to justify the authoritarian system?

This paper will clarify issues related to the theory of Asian values and will attempt a more systematic analysis of them. The main purposes of this paper are to reformulate this hypothesis and to show its adoptability at a certain level. Cultural politics as a broad concept is one of the assumptions of this hypothesis.

### Historical Review on the Discourse on East Asia

Originally the concept of Asia has developed as an outcome of Western thinking. From the era of Homer to the era of Montesquieu, Marx, and Weber, the existence of Asia as the embodiment of European otherness has been recognized in an exaggerated and negative way to some extent. According to E. W. Said, as the acquisition of 'colonies' by the Western Powers accelerated, the image of Asia became more distorted and the term 'Asia' came to imply underdevelopment, stagnation, sensuality, and barbarism. Asian Studies programs at Western universities still have vestiges of the thinking which characterized colonial thought (Milner and Johnson, 1997: 11).

However, from the end of the 19th century, a fresh concept of Asia has emerged. In the wave of modernization, intellectuals in Japan, India, and China thinkers such as Okakura Tenshin, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sun Yat-Sen started to advocate an Asian solidarity, insisting upon the superiority of Asia's peace-oriented, spiritual civilization. Moreover, the theory of Asian civilization of this period actively resisted and confronted Western colonialism especially in terms of its ideas, their thinking, however, did not go beyond the level of abstract or general logic. When Japan started the Pacific War, it insisted upon a theory of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere to justify its advance into the continent. After the World War II, this tradition was resurrected under the auspices of the non-Allied, Third World movement. Nehru in India and Sukarno in Indonesia initiated this campaign. In particular, at the Bandung Conference in 1955, a resolution to show the moral and spiritual potential energy of Asia in opposition to the new economically-based colonialism, or, neo-colonialism based on the West's economic power was announced.

Since the late 1970's, another facet of the concept of Asian community has emerged. Even though the theory of Asian values advocated by Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Mohammed Mahathir of Malaysia contained the political motives, it also postulated a bold hypothesis which would revive Asia. Their hypothesis linked the confidence gained from the high economic growth of East Asian countries with a critical view on the moral degeneration of Western societies. They pointed to a series of virtues as the foundation of Asian values, focusing on the Confucian tradition of East Asian countries<sup>1)</sup>. Confucianism includes a view of community in which authority, order, and harmony are respected, and family tie, hard work ethic, thrift, and enthusiasm for education are highly valued. Lee Kuan Yew made the development of Singapore itself a model while Mahathir focused on the four dragons of Asia. Lee Kuan Yew aimed at the soft authoritarianism while Mahathir advocated the non-liberal democracy more openly. In particular, Mahathir maintained, in part, the tradition of resisting Asian discourse, showing his more combatant nature by emphasizing the war against neo-colonialism and suggesting conspiracy theories (Mahatir, 1997: 1998). Some Western scholars have also positively evaluated the relation between economic growth in East Asia and the new Confucian ethics (Kahn, 1979; Vogel, 1991). The theory of Asian values as an alternative to Western liberalism gained momentum after the end of the Cold War and the clash of civilizations (Devan, 1994; Hall, 1999).

In the 1990's, China belatedly joined the discussion demonstrating the so-called 'China School' (Barr, 2002: 51-63). As China experienced pressure from the international community due to the Tiananmen Square incident and the persecution on minorities such as Tibetans, at the Bangkok Conference and the Vienna Conference in 1993, it insisted that human rights issue has to be examined in each country's context and the unilateral application of Western standard is not valid. China's argument that it will never tolerate interference in its domestic affairs or sovereignty received support from most ASEAN countries. As a result, China succeeded in adhering to its course of action. 'The right to development' suggested by China indicates that individual

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1) See, for instance, Noordin Sopiee, "The Development of an East Asian Consciousness," in G. Shridan (ed.), *Living with Dragons: Australia Confronts Its Asian Destiny* (Sidney: Allen & Unwin, 1995), pp. 180-193. A listing of 'Asian Values' is contained in J. Mirsky, "Asian values, a fabulous notion," *New Statesman*, 3 (April 1998), p. 26.

rights and freedoms can be sacrificed for the sake of national development. This is no different from the theory of developmental dictatorship. In this case, the theory of Asian values becomes just another political ideology.

Samuel Huntington embraced the proposition of Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir in some sense. East Asians have come to have pride in their values and way of life amid their economic success and realize that there exists an important homogeneity even though they are culturally heterogeneous. Now the occidentalism phenomenon in which Western society has been negatively described is coming to pass (Huntington, 1998: 142). According to Huntington, most countries in East Asia have historically shared or respected the Confucian value system. The three countries of Northeast Asia are located at the heart of the cultural circle and the countries of southeast Asia form a second group a little distant from the center. China has ruled or exerted its influence in this area to a greater or lesser degree for the past 2,000 years. Moreover, Chinese emigrants who have been a driving force in East Asian economic development are rapidly growing in China itself, and also in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Huntington has predicted that China will soon recover its traditional hegemony in East Asia and that Japan will eventually have to give way to China's hegemony and join in this movement even though it will take a cautious attitude concerning the U.S. in the beginning (Huntington, 1998: 319). Huntington says that, like the Muslim population increase, development of each nation in East Asia will affect the international order initiated by the West.

As a matter of fact, Japan's economic growth is an important background parameter which triggered the theory of Asian values. Mahathir's 'Look East!' policy, directly acclaimed the Japanese model and suggestion of the EAEC (East Asian Economic Caucus) also regard Japan as the driving force of the East Asian community. However, Japan does not appear to embrace the theory of Asian values or the discourse on East Asia discussed above. Only the term 'the Asianization of Asia', coined by the renowned journalist, Yoichi Funabashi, is mentioned in the English-language literature on this topic. (Funabashi, 1993). He insisted that 'the chopstick culture' is the common heritage of East Asia just as the Western society has the traditions of the Greek, Roman, and Jude-Christian cultures, and Asian cultural identity is to be found in Asia rather than the Pacific region. In the case of Korea,

Asian values and the discourse on East Asia have recently been popular research themes. One book(이승환 외, 1999), published in 1999, introduces 70 domestic papers on Asian values in its supplement and another book(한국동북아지식인연대, 2004), published in 2004, introduces 170 papers by sociologists about the same theme in its supplement. However, the overall response to the argument on Asian values in Korea does not seem to be as favorable. This relates to the general atmosphere in the Korean academic community in which the Western paradigm prevails.

### Issues Relevant to a Discussion of East Asian Values

The concept of Asian values contains both the aspects of analysis and evaluation. Its intent is to indicate the unique political culture of East Asia and justifies its outcome at the same time. An examination of the issues in each dimension is as follows.

The theory of Asian values has at least four issues needing analysis.

First, are Asian values different from Western values? For instance, diligence, thrift, and enthusiasm for education are emphasized in Protestantism as well as in Confucianism.

Second, some argue that Asian values are only representative of some Confucian countries in East Asia. They tend to excessively emphasize the religious aspect of Asian values. Third, are Asian values a phenomenon only in less developed societies and will they converge with Western values as time goes by? This view is held by those in favor of modernization or developmentalism who regard Western values as universal. Fourth, are Asian values the culture of some political leaders or a certain ruling group and not representative of the thinking of the middle class or ordinary people? This is a controversial issue that has many different perspectives, depending on who has conducted the research<sup>2)</sup>.

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2) Some surveys confirmed the values and attitudes of ordinary people. Anthony Milner and Mary Quilty (eds.), *Australia in Asia: Comparing Cultures* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997); David I. Hitchcock, *Asian Values and the United States: How Much Conflict?* (Washington: Center to Strategic and International Studies, 1994); Joel S. Kahn, "Malaysian

In terms of evaluation, the theory of Asian values justifies Asian politics and economy, or Asian democracy and the East Asian economic growth model. First, even though Asian democracy restricts individual rights and freedom in part, it aims at good government by securing the prosperity of the community (Chang Heng Chee, 1993; Chua Beng Huat, 1994). Second, East Asian economic growth is fully supported by Confucian capitalism where there is political stability, effective government, and a unique work ethic. One objection to this aspect of evaluation is that Asian democracy is just a theory formulated to justify the authoritarian governance. And, as shown in the Asian Financial Crisis from 1997-1998, Confucian capitalism highlighted the disadvantages of crony capitalism which subsequently lost its international competitiveness. Some scholars say that the East Asian economic success is highly supported by accidental factors and a causal correlation with Asian values cannot be proven. Lucian Pye predicted that the democratization of Asia would be tough even with modernization (Pye, 1985) and Huntington insisted that the 'Confucian democracy' is a contradiction in terms (Huntington, 1991). Meanwhile, Francis Fukuyama has said that the Asian Financial Crisis punctured the notion of Asian exceptionalism (Fukuyama, 1998) and Sebastian Mallaby has insisted that, due to the Asian Financial Crisis, the American world view could spread around the world with little resistance (Mallaby, 1998).

## Reinterpreting Asian Values

### 1) Theoretical Bases for Analysis

The theoretical bases needed for an analysis of Asian values are the theory of modernization and the theory of cultural autonomy. The former basic assumption is that along with economic growth, even the non-Western consciousness will be finally converged with Western values. Meanwhile, the basis of the theory of cultural autonomy, assumes that a fault line between different civilizations will be formed (Inglehart,

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Modern or Anti-anti Asian values," *Thesis Eleven* 50 (August 1997), pp. 29-30.

2000: 80-81). However, I support a third hypothesis in which non-Western societies, including those in Asia, will adapt to Western culture to a certain point in the modernization process and then detach and follow on a separate, parallel line. In this hypothesis, there are two parameters. One is the presence of cultural self-esteem shown in the late modern society and the other is consciousness of crisis in the neo-colonial world following globalization. Mostly, the spirit of the post-industrial society is based on a philosophy of cultural coexistence where cultural differences are tolerated and it is spiritual value-oriented. That is why the 21st century is defined as the century of culture. Moreover, the economic and cultural attack by the neo-liberalism of the West causes non-Western societies to be concerned about the destruction of traditional culture (Birch, 2001: 63).

## **2) Future Directions for a Reinterpretation of Asian Values**

From Singapore and Malaysia to China, the theory of Asian values apparently has the ideological underpinnings which will secure their systems of governance. The problem is that this theory was not created in a vacuum (Milner, 2002: 8). It means that the theory of Asian values as it exists now was based on reality. Therefore, the theory of Asian values is highly likely to survive as an important discourse even after the complete democratization of most of the countries in this region. However, the values outlined in the theory will be confirmed at a lesser level. It means that Asian values will go toward the expansion of individual rights and freedom while stressing the national authority and order. The arrival of the late modern society and the wave of globalization would weaken the Asian values by enhancing liberalism.

Politics, economics, and culture are three main driving forces which form the reality and each has a simultaneous causal effect upon the others. The existence of an Asian culture maintaining its distance to a certain degree from Western individualism and liberalism will also affect the Asian political and economic systems to a certain extent. In this case, the political aspect of Asian values would ultimately be to aim at communitarian democracy as a form of the liberal democracy rather than the currently discussed non-liberal democracy of Mahathir or Singaporean soft authoritarianism. Allowing for the possibility of compatibility between Confucian norms and democracy.

Fukuyama believes that in the process of harmony between the individual rights and freedom and the needs of the community, an Asian democracy based on Confucianism will develop somewhat different aspects from American democracy (Fukuyama, 1995). Moreover, the economic effect of Asian values would showcase the ongoing developmental trend where, despite the pressure from the WTO or the IMF, the governmental interference in the market cannot be totally eliminated in the view of the social equality and economic development. Also, its outcome cannot be hastily judged as a failure. As for Huntington, he is skeptical about the political manifestations of Asian values but acknowledges the positive aspects of economic development. According to Huntington, Asian values have contributed tremendously to East Asian economic growth, then becoming a main culprit of the Financial Crisis, and once again are facilitating economic recovery in the region.

Therefore, will Asian values that aim at the establishment of communitarian democracy and developmental economic policy exert the same power all around East Asia? What is the application range and level of the theory of Asian values? Regarding this, I would like to adopt Huntington paradigm. I think that starting from the countries near China such as Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, and Korea, Asian values will give rise to the second and third waves to the neighboring countries of the ASEAN. There are two reasons why it is possible to speak of an East Asian cultural identity by generalizing the values of some geographically limited Confucian countries.

First, Confucian values exemplify an ethos of life which has already lost its meaning as a religion. The way of life that emphasizes family values, respect for authority, and the rejection of individualism is a common Asian spiritual heritage discovered not only in Confucianism but also in Islamic and Buddhist cultures (Barr, 2002: 5). Therefore, Asian values have a full analytical meaning as an ideal type in Weberian sense. The argument which denies the possibility of a common cultural identity due to the religious diversity of East Asia is somewhat a hasty conclusion. Second, Asian values can function as excellent human role model. In the process of defining an East Asian cultural identity, if the consciousness of the dominant countries in the region receive recognition as purveyors of cultural norms, the ripple effect would be extensive. In this vein, Asian value have the potential to become the driving force behind the establishment of an East Asian cultural identity. The current



diaspora of emigrant workers, for example, is then a part of the momentum to spread Asian values<sup>3</sup>).

## Conclusion

Some fundamentally deny the politics of identity. According to this view, the concept of identity itself is artificial and just a political tool. Moreover, a cultural identity at all levels could threaten the existence of the upper or lower-level society.

The current proposal of an East Asian community focuses on its approach to political and economic cooperation. However, agreement on utilitarian ideas could be short-lived if the mutual relationships are not solid. Therefore, the exploration and creation of a common cultural identity is an important matter in regional cooperation.

The negative view in the discussion of an East Asian cultural identity comes from hasty conclusions that only focus on the region's religious and ethnic diversity or on biased thinking which tacitly accepts Western values as universal. Even in American society, some of its citizens oppose its excessive individualism and there have been various attempts to explore a more communitarian form of democracy (Fowler, 1999: 149-174). In fact, the importance of family values in the theory of Asian values is also one of the slogans of American conservatives<sup>4</sup>). There is no reason to vilify a theory of Asian values if it can complement potential weak points of Western values and act as an alternative to them through bona-fide competition .

Like the argument of Tu Wei-ming, I believe that it is important for Confucianism as a political ideology and Confucianism as a philosophy of life to be separated (Tu Wei-ming, 1984). Confucianism as a philosophy of life can be compatible with democracy and contribute to the economic growth of this region. In this case, Confucian democracy

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3) Diasporic communities both influence, and are transformed by, their host communities. At the same time they are playing an increasingly important role in shaping the direction of cultural politics 'back home'. David Birch, Tony Schirato, and Sanjay Srivastava, *Asia: Cultural Politics in the Global Age* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 190.

4) But there has been very little interaction between Asian values proponents and the critics of Western liberalism from within the ideology. Michael D. Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The tepid war* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 11.

refers to communitarian democracy in Western sense rather than the Singaporean soft authoritarianism. Moreover, I would like to view the relationship between Asian values and Western values as compatible and mutually complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Daniel Bell postulated the possibility of a partial integration of Asian values and Western values. He points out that the sense of the responsibility of government to the people and the respect of people for authority, a vital Asian value, may help mitigate some of the drawbacks of liberalism (D. Bell, 1995). Some Asian values could be accepted as universal ethics. This attitude is very desirable. It points toward the formulation of a new historical philosophy which respects both Asian values and Western values and explores the potential benefits of mutual cooperation. The time is ripe for a dialogue of civilization based on the spirit of interdependence(Tu Wei-Ming, 2000: 266)

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