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Mark R. Thompson

Introduction

A common misunderstanding about the "Asian Values" discourse is that it is about Asia. Originally it involved a more prosaic conservative championing of Confucian values by Singaporean prime minister Lee Kwan Yew, which had been key to his political thinking since the 1960s (Barr, 2000: 310). It only came to be labeled "Asian" in the early 1990s to serve as a causeway connecting the views of Lee and another major advocate in Southeast Asia, Malaysian prime minister Mohamad Mahathir, who like the majority of Malaysians is Muslim (Barr, 2000: 313; Thompson, 2001: 157). Government-linked intellectuals in Singapore, particularly Kishore Mahbubani (1992, 1995) and Bilahari Kausikan (1993, 1997), took the lead in a brief international debate about these supposedly distinctive Asian norms.

But this would have only been a plausible discursive strategy if "Asia" could be meaningfully defined as a single value community or at least made up of overlapping ones. The search for such common Asian norms has been termed "Asianisms," the "multifarious discursive and material constructions of Asia" (Frey & Spakowski, 2015). The debate about such shared values and cultural practices in the region has distinguished intellectual lineage. Major thinkers in Japan, India, and China—particularly Okakura Tenshin, Rabindranath Tagore,

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and Zhang Taiyan—pursued it in the early twentieth century as an "an intellectual and cultural effort until it was overtaken by the Japanese military for imperialist purposes" (Duara, 2010: 969). This earlier project has recently been the subject of renewed attention by several influential Asian intellectuals such as Prasenjit Duara (2002, 2010) and Amitav Acharya (2010). This lack of engagement with Asia as a region has made the Asian Values a strikingly parochial discussion and strongly essentialist with a Sinicist bias leading to constant slippage between Asian and Confucian values, which can be traced to Lee's original intent (Barr, 2000: 313).

But while advocates of Asian Values showed no serious interest in drawing on, much less contributing to a learned discussion of regionalized norms, this has not kept defenders of distinct Asian norms such as Mahbubani from claiming to be able to speak on behalf of Asians. Mahbubani (2011, cited in Emmerson, 2013) wrote: "Asians are too polite. Sometimes it takes a relatively rude Asian, like me, to express our continent's true feelings." One commentator, Donald Emmerson (2013: 167) quipped sarcastically: "Unable as I am to fathom the 'true feelings' of more than four-billion people, I cannot know whether they feel they are living in Mahbubani's world or not."

Shortly after the Asian Values debate began, it was noted that claims made by its proponents were in fact very similar to those made earlier in Africa and elsewhere by authoritarian rulers and their apologists (Economist, 1992). They too had criticized individualist, competitive, "Western"-style liberal democracy as culturally inappropriate to more collectivist, consensual societies in which respect for authority and hierarchy were upheld. Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen (1997: 37, cited in Jenco, 2013: 237) argued that the culturally specific aspect was largely irrelevant as "so-called Asian Values... are not especially Asian in any significant sense." Even an influential Singaporean scholar Beng Huat Chua (1999) who has shown some sympathy for the Asian Values discourse "as a potentially salubrious invocation of communitarian values over liberal capitalist self-interestedness, argued that its goals could be better sustained without claiming any particular Asian affinity" (Jenco, 2013: 237). Malaysian cultural critic Farish Noor (1999, cited in Hoon, 2004: 161) argued that, "Like the Arabian Phoenix of Mozart's opera [*Così fan Tutte*], everyone knows about Asian Values, but nobody knows where they are."

So what is the Asian Values discussion if not actually about Asian norms? Sen (1997) claimed it is largely an instrumentalization of supposed cultural values by authoritarian rulers to justify nondemocratic rule. In their effort to "other" supposed "Western values," authoritarian advocates of Asian Values have engaged in a crude cultural essentialization (Tatsuo, 1999). Dieter Senghaas (1995) noted that Asian Values are also not different in kind from traditional anti-individualist, hierarchical, and authority re-enforcing values in the West, such as those prevalent in slave owning antebellum American south. A striking historical parallel to (and forgotten progenitor of) this discourse is how apologists of Imperial Germany in the nineteenth century criticized individualist, liberal Western, particularly French "civilization" (*Zivilisationskritik*)

in order to uphold collectivist, authoritarian German culture (Thompson, 2001).

This shows the real issue involved is not "Asia" versus the "West," but rather authoritarian versus democratic modernity. A culturalist argument misdirects away from a dispute about the way in which the modern world should be constructed. Conservative thinkers in Imperial Germany attempted to demonstrate that authoritarianism could go hand-in-hand with an advanced form of modern living by pointing to Germany's distinctive *Kultur*. This has led Kanishka Jayasuriya (1997) to compare the Asian Values debate with Jeffrey Herf's (1984) description of early twentieth-century Germany's "reactionary modernism."

As alluded to above, conservative culturalism in Imperial Germany is historically connected with several of its manifestations in Asia. After studying various Western political systems, the Meiji Japanese reformers chose to model their political system on Imperial Germany's (Martin, 1995). This included constructing cultural difference as a means to fend off pressures for democratization. A prominent Meiji-era slogan was *wakon-yōsai* (和魂洋才; Japanese spirit and Western technology) (Carr, 1994). In the interwar period, the controversial "Kyoto school" philosophers argued that modernity could be "overcome" by a reliance on Asian (and particularly Japanese) cultural values (Harootunian, 2002; Heisig, 2001). In doing so, they were echoing the civilizational critique of conservative German culturalists. Japan was a model for many authoritarian regimes in Northeast and Southeast Asia, particularly South Korea (president Park Chung-hee had served in the Japanese military), Malaysia (Mahathir's "Look East" slogan), and Singapore (Lee's "Learn from Japan" campaign) (Thompson, 2019: Chapter 2). The lineage of reactionary culturalism from Meiji Japan to Singapore and Malaysia is not difficult to discern.

A key premise in the Asian Values discourse is cultural relativism (Barr, 2000: 310). Norms proposed as universal, particularly related to human rights, are, upon closer examination, actually "Western" in origin and applicability. Asia is radically divergent from the West because of its distinct historical and cultural background. The basic premise of this authoritarian culturalist discourse about democracy is that there is no general standard of democracy but only culturally specific ones. What is commonly proclaimed as the universal character of democracy is in fact a "Western" version of it involving unbridled freedom and selfish individualism.

The Asian Values discourse can be best summed up as a series of dichotomies: particularism versus universalism, the nation-cum-family versus individualism, social and economic rights over political rights, and noninterference in a country's domestic affairs rather than the enforcement of international norms. It is claimed that this demonstrates that human rights are not universal and cannot be globalized and that "other nations should not interfere with the internal affairs of a state, including its human rights

policy" (Hoon, 2004: 155). Asian values can be understood as a form of reactionary culturalism which involves the invocation of Asian culture(s) to justify the rejection of "Western" democracy as culturally alien (Thompson, 2019: Chapter 5).

The plan of the remainder of this chapter is as follows. In the next part of the paper it will be shown how the Asian Values debate occurred in the context of perceived external and internal challenges by Singaporean and Malaysian electoral authoritarian governments in which proclaiming democracy as culturally alien proved a useful autocratic tool. The subsequent part points to how earlier versions of such reactionary culturalism in Southeast Asia, e.g. "Thai-style democracy," functioned similarly. The subsequent section discusses how reactionary culturalism shaped political agendas, as efforts by democratic oppositionists throughout Southeast Asia to develop a counter narrative of "vernacularised" liberalism demonstrated. What follows shows how, unsurprisingly, an Asian Values-style exculpatory discourse has been revived alongside a recent autocratization wave in Southeast Asia. In the penultimate section, it is suggested the essentialist character of influential studies of political culture and constructivists' search for a common regional identity have inadvertently help inspire and also legitimate reactionary culturalist discourses. The conclusion briefly explores the importance of more complex understandings of culture before it is invoked in political discourse.

Asian Values as Internal and External Defensive Mechanism

As mentioned above, advocacy of Asian Values by authoritarian leaders and government-linked intellectuals in Singapore and Malaysia provoked an international debate about the appropriateness of democracy in non-Western countries during the early 1990s (Emmerson, 1995; Hoon, 2004; Robison, 1996; Sen, 1997; Subramaniam, 2000). Asian Values were chiefly propagated by electoral authoritarian regimes in Singapore and Malaysia, countries with relatively high living standards. Despite prosperity, their governments argued that "Western" democracy remained culturally inappropriate, defying the "iron law" of modernization theorists claiming wealth leads to greater political openness (Thompson, 2019). In economically advanced Singapore and Malaysia, civil liberties are not often openly violated but democratization is usually still stoutly resisted. In such a context, claims of Asian Values accompany the state's attempt to co-opt an increasingly affluent and well-educated population.

The coexistence of high living standards and illiberal politics makes Singapore and Malaysia international exceptions to the "rule" that democracy follows economic development thanks to the rise of a large middle class. Singapore is the wealthiest non-oil-producing country in the world that is not a democracy, and, before the regional economic crisis of 2007–2008, 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 substantial political liberalization (except briefly later in 2018 in Malaysia) (Thompson, 2019: Chapter 1).

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 1980s. A few years later, the new Singaporean prime minister Goh Chok Tong was warning that Singaporeans must avoid "Western" democracy, a free press, foreign television, and pop music, as these "could bring the country down" (cited in Economist, 1994). Asian Values were the antidote to all that was wrong with Westernization. Rising crime and divorce rates, the rise of the gay rights movement 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 a crackdown on political opposition. In short, the Singaporean state had created an ideology to combat democratic tendencies and individualism despite the country's advanced stage of economic development (ibid.).

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 (cited in Vatikiotis, 1992). 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.

But besides fending off threats of domestic democratic opposition, the Asian Values discourse was also offered as an external defense of autocratic rule. It rejected liberal democracy as history's Hegelian end as Francis Fukuyama (1992) had (in)famously propagated.[1] The U.S. and Western Europe were "triumphalist" in the early Cold War era, pressuring countries in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the world to democratize (Subramaniam, 2000: 24). The U.S. "had just won the Cold War, Europe was a Union, and markets were multiplying, growing and becoming increasingly more open," which prompted the U.S. and Europe to respond with "uncharacteristic enthusiasm" to export democracy and human rights throughout the world (Barr, 2000: 313). In addition, "resentment at past colonial and neo-colonial exploitation by the West was never very far below the surface" (ibid., 314). At the same time Singapore and other authoritarian Southeast Asian countries

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[1] Although Fukuyama (1998: 227) defended his thesis from the "Asian exceptionalists," he also considered the "excessive individualism and self-indulgence, deterioration of the family and all the pathologies that stem therefrom" a credible aspect of the discourse, indicating Fukuyama's conservative values despite his liberal claims (cited in Subramaniam, 2000: 32).

were celebrating their world-beating economic growth rates, while also being insecure about their own hold on power, as discussed above.

Thus, Asian Values were used both against Western efforts at democratic conversion and to silence domestic opposition (Hoon, 2004). A "combination of western and Asian confidence and insecurity boiled onto the world stage in 1993 when a series of United Nations conferences on human rights coincided with a peak in American threats to cancel or put conditions on China's Most Favoured Nation (MFN) trade status because of its poor human rights record…The West's new-found assertiveness on human rights was perceived as a hypocritical attempt to keep Asia subservient to the West politically and economically" (Barr, 2000: 314).

But the discourse appeared to wither during the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis as economies in the region slammed to a halt. Asian "family values" now seemed to promote corruption and cronyism, not rapid growth and social harmony. It was harder to argue human rights had to take a back seat to economic considerations when economies were crashing. Critics of Asian Values could hardly suppress their *Schadenfreude*. They argued that the region's Machiavellian leaders, who had hidden dictatorial ways behind a culturalist disguise, had finally been unmasked (Lee, 1997). Long frustrated that their criticisms were parried by the obvious "evidence" that Asian authoritarians had limited personal liberties in order to promote economic development, they could now claim following Albert Camus that those denied freedom may one day find themselves without bread as well. This led journalist Frank Ching (1998) to ask "Are Asian Values Finished?".

In fact, Asian Values were far from finished even if they would be re-labeled. In part, this was due to the fact that such culturalist essentialism in the service of authoritarianism had a long tradition in Southeast Asia. This explains why democrats in the region felt the need to embed their liberal demands in culturalist arguments in order to avoid being called "un-Asian." Furthermore, a new wave of autocratization has been accompanied by a revival of Asian Values-style arguments. Cultural essentialization also received succor from the methodologies of the comparative study of political cultures and regional constructivists. Although often declared dead, the Asian Values discourse appears to have many lives.

OTHER AUTHORITARIAN CULTURALIST DISCOURSES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Parallel narratives of "Western" democracy being culturally inappropriate were propagated in Thailand (Thai-style democracy), Indonesia (*Pancasila*-democracy), Myanmar (Buddhist authoritarianism), and the Philippines (the *Tadhana* project). These discourses each offered a distinct form of culturalist legitimation for authoritarian rule. What they share is a similar pattern of "reactionary culturalism" constructed in order to counter the "threat" posed

by internal democratization movements and external pressure to liberalize (Thompson, 2019: Chapter 4).

Already in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but also recurring in subsequent decades, it was argued only "Thai-style" not "Western" liberal democracy was appropriate to Thailand with its indigenous "despotic paternalism" based around military rule and the monarchy (Chaloemtiarana, 2007; Hewison & Kitirianglarp, 2010). Suharto's "New Order" regime in Indonesia interpreted the country's five-point *Pancasila* ideology as showing authoritarian rule was most suitable to the country's indigenous values while "Western" democracy was alien (Ramage, 1995). Ne Win, the military leader of Burma from 1962 to 1988 (renamed Myanmar by a later junta) claimed to have introduced an authoritarian form of government based on Buddhist principles to "more authentically represent the traditional Burmese polity of the precolonial era" (Matthews, 1993: 414).

Ferdinand E. Marcos (1971), who declared martial law in Philippines in 1972, "could not hide his contempt for liberal representative democracy" (Curaming, 2020: 87). Marcos sought justification for this claim in a multi-volume official history project called *Tadhana* (fate) which employed some of the country's leading young historians. It was in the "indigenous buried in the very distant past that the spectre of Marcos's project lurked" (ibid., 87–88). Marcos aimed to consign all ideologies of "foreign provenance"—from Marxism to liberalism—to Philippine history's waste bin. With its "emphasis on the indigenous," the *Tadhana* project allowed Marcos to encode his authoritarianism "in a historical, scholarly and presumably authoritative template" to what otherwise would be a "patently self-serving political project" (ibid., 88).

Counter-narratives of "Vernacularised" Liberalism

Despite the obvious essentialism of Asian Values and similar forms of reactionary culturalist discourses in Asia, they have significantly shaped political discourse in the region. Efforts by democratic oppositionists throughout Southeast Asia to develop a counter narrative of "vernacularised" liberalism demonstrate the agenda setting character of authoritarian critiques of "Western" liberalism (Thompson, 2022). Hoon (2004: 156) writes that claims about non-Western, Asian Values allowed autocratic regimes in the region to dismiss their domestic opponents "as opposing the national interest or simply being un-Asian."

Liberals responded by framing demands for upholding civil liberties and installing democratic rule in religious-communalist terms. Such language accorded legitimacy to liberal principles through their enculturation (Hefner, 2000, 2019: 380). Authoritarian and liberal culturalist discourses are dialectically related, with dictators responding to claims about liberalism's supposed universal applicability with assertions of cultural particularism against Western democratic impositions. This, in turn, triggered a reaction by Asian liberals

pointing to the tolerant and humanistic nature of the region's religious traditions (Thompson, 2015). Vernacularized liberalism was influentially championed by oppositionist and later South Korean president Kim Dae Jung (1994) and the aforementioned Amartya Sen (1997) who both attacked the hubris of authoritarian claims that liberal democracy was culturally alien to Asia, insisting instead there are strong precedents for liberal democratic principles in traditional Asian societies.

Vernacularized liberalism has been a central narrative of several anti-dictatorship struggles in Southeast Asia against the despotic and corrupt rule of dictators, such as Ferdinand E. Marcos of the Philippines, Suharto of Indonesia, Najib Razak of Malaysia, and the post-1988 junta in Myanmar. Opposition leaders such as the Philippines' Corazon C. Aquino, Indonesia's Wahid Abdurrahman, Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim, and Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi framed their democratic appeals which generated mass support in culturalist terms, gaining substantial "moral capital" in the process (Kane, 2001). They were at the forefront of movements of civil society activists, business leaders, and communalist groups. Religious organizations articulating liberal democratic demands—e.g., the Catholic Church in the Philippines, the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama and the modernist Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, "Muslim democrats" in Malaysia, and Buddhist monks in Myanmar—were also decisive in mobilizing and organizing for protests and electoral campaigns against dictatorships (Barry, 2006; Bush, 2009; Hamid, 2018; Slater, 2009; Walton, 2016).

To discuss one example briefly, the leader of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) which is the largest Muslim group in Indonesia, Suharto critic and later president Abdurrahman Wahid denounced the attempt to utilize the cultural relativism characteristic of Suharto's "*Pancasila*-democracy" to undermine liberalism while pointing to democratic lessons that can be learned from Islam (Barton, 2002). Wahid called for the respect of civil liberties and a reform of government to eliminate corruption and restore economic growth (Hefner, 2019). Developing the so called "*fiqh* paradigm" long predominant among NU leaders, Wahid argued Islam is not the "foundation of the state" but rather it is a "as a social-ethical resource for the peaceful and harmonious running of the state" (Rochmat, 2017: 173). Wahid reconciled Islamic *Syari'ah* law with liberal democracy under Indonesia's *Pancasila* ideology of the plurality religious belief and the importance of tolerance while opposing the authoritarian instrumentalization of religion (ibid., 173–174).

But in Singapore, liberals have been less successful in countering the authoritarian claim that democracy is culturally inappropriate in the city-state. This appears puzzling when one considers that it is a highly globalized society where knowledge of Confucianism was so limited that when the government launched a "Religious Knowledge" curriculum in schools, foreign experts had to be flown into the country (Vasil, 1995). There are many reasons for the weakness of opposition in Singapore—the relative success of the regime in

terms of "good governance," economic growth, and welfare measures particularly regarding public housing, arrests of key antigovernment leaders, media controls, libel suits as part of an "authoritarian rule of law," manipulated electoral laws, and opposition party fragmentation (Ortmann, 2019; Rajah, 2019; Rodan, 1996; Tan, 2013). But precisely the lack of a dominant religious tradition and powerful communalist leaders able to construct a counter discourse of vernacularized liberalism appears a key factor when the city-state is compared to the other Southeast Asian countries (Slater, 2009). Singapore has remained an outlier in electoral Southeast Asia with liberalism, portrayed as "Western," still successfully "disavowed" (Chua, 2017).

The Revival of Exculpatory Culturalism during the Recent Autocratization Wave

All of Southeast Asia's major electoral or semi-democracies have regressed, often significantly, over the past decade. This was particularly obvious with military coups in Thailand in 2014 and Myanmar in 2021 (Kongkirati & Kanchoochat, 2018; Thawnghmung & Noah, 2021). Democratic backsliding via executive aggrandizement has been subtle but steady in Indonesia under Joko Widodo (elected president in 2014) while it was much more dramatic and bloody with the election of Rodrigo R. Duterte as Philippine president in 2016 (Mietzner, 2018; Thompson, 2021). Malaysia's brief democratic experiment began after an opposition coalition won a surprise victory in the 2018 general election. But it quickly ended after the alliance collapsed (Case, 2021). Cambodia transitioned to full blown "hegemonic authoritarianism" with a severe crackdown on what remained of open opposition to the regime and sham parliamentary elections in 2018, giving strongman Hun Sen an iron grip on power (Morgenbesser, 2019). Small (though significant in the island state's political context) opposition gains in several recent elections in Singapore have been counterbalanced by mounting restrictions on civil society and internet freedoms (Ortmann, 2019; Freedom House, 2020). This backsliding has often been accompanied by a revival of culturalist authoritarian arguments similar to the Asian Values and similar discourses accompanied above. It too had an exculpatory aim—legitimizing an authoritarian turn as culturally appropriate.

In Thailand, for example, the "military-monarchical" regime returned to familiar arguments of "Thai-style" democracy mentioned above to justify a crackdown on opposition and electoral irregularities while real power continues to reside with the army and the king (Rojanaphruk, 2018). It has been described as a "mix of Siamese palingenetic ultranationalist sentiment with re-interpretations of a conservative Buddhist ideology which is based on the morality and right of the rulers to rule" which for "the military–monarchy nexus embodies a supreme source of secular morality and power with the right to dominate and where the ends (always) justify the means" (Taylor, 2021). This provoked strong push back from a youth-led protest movement which openly transgressed the taboo against criticizing the monarchy's central role

alongside the military in upholding authoritarian rule (Cheng & Thompson, 2022; McCargo, 2021).

In Cambodia, Hun Sen has mobilized "regal references" to support his cult of personality despite there being an enthroned King. This was utilized in order to make Hun Sen appear like a "king-like leader whose power needs no check" and project unrestricted power (Norén-Nilsson, 2021b). Severe limits have been placed on civil liberties, with the major opposition party dissolved by the government. These repressive measures were justified by the Cambodian government through "a line of argument which echoes the long-standing Asian values debate" (Lim, 2018: 1). An author celebrating strongman rulers in Asia in a pro-government news outlet argued that "Western-style democracy is not a real need in Asia" as it does not fit with "the Asian mind set and the mind set of each country" (cited in Norén-Nilsson, 2021a: 96–97). Thus, Hun Sen could be seen as upholding Asian values when he dissolved an opposition party despite foreign criticism (ibid.).

In the Philippines, president Duterte defied international criticism of the massive human rights violations involved in his "war on drugs" in which tens of thousands have been killed by police vigilantes (Thompson, 2021). When the UN special rapporteur on human rights made a request to investigate the killings, Duterte's government rejected it, with the president's spokesman claiming UN was seeking to impose "liberal Western values" on "an Asian nation that places premium on common good" (cited in Claudio, 2017: 103). Duterte himself, "always more pithy," claimed "if it involves human rights, I don't give a shit" (ibid.). Lisandro Claudio (ibid.: 104) adds: "To put things in blunt and moralistic terms: my president is slaughtering my countrymen by the thousands, justifying the murders by dismissing liberalism and human rights as 'Western.'".

POLITICAL CULTURE, REGIONAL CONSTRUCTIVISM, AND REACTIONARY CULTURALISM

One insightful but often overlooked strand of research on the genesis and continued prevalence of an Asian Values-style discourse is its methodological roots in the often highly essentialized comparative study of political culture and the search of regional identities by constructivists. Essentialized notions of culture in such studies inadvertently helped inspire and legitimate an Asian Values-style authoritarian discourse.

Scholarly work is of relevance because Southeast Asian authoritarian leaders have paid attention to it. For example, Lee Kwan Yew and Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad were both strongly influenced by the work of the prominent American Asian studies scholar Ezra Vogel (Siow, 2020). Singapore's ruling party was so impressed it invited him to visit and lecture in the island state on several occasions. In Malaysia, Vogel's book *Japan as Number One* (1979) "prompted then-prime minister Mahathir in 1981 to launch the

Look East Policy" (ibid.). Zakaria, (1994: 126) provides an illuminating anecdote from his interview with Lee Kwan Yew about Asian Values: "At the close of the interview Lee handed me three pages. This was, he explained, to emphasise how alien Confucian culture is to the West. The pages were from the book *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* by John Fairbank, an American scholar."

Comparativist scholars of political culture have developed an essentialized framework for studying "culture" (even in some cases using it to defend "indigenous" authoritarian values). In terms of political culture, Samuel Huntington's (1993, 1996) "clash of civilisations" argument has been (rightly) criticized as highly essentialist (in lieu of multiple references I offer my own overview of the debate: Thompson, 2004). The point most relevant here is his argument that modernization leads to a "resurgence" of indigenous cultures. Huntington explicitly references the Asian Values discussion approvingly (Huntington, 1996: 96 and 109). Daniel Bell (2000: i) opts for a "middle position" in which he "criticises the use of 'Asian values' to justify oppression" but also suggests there is a "need to take into account East Asian perspectives on human rights and democracy" to create an "as-yet-unrealised Confucian political institution that justifiably differs from Western-style liberal democracy."

Beyond these normative political cultural engagements with the Asian Values discussion, even explicitly value neutral discussions are relevant in this regard. Englehart (2000: 563) argues that while Singapore's ruling party can be easily condemned for its "cynical use of the Asian Values argument" which involves a "simplified, essentialist interpretation of culture in an attempt to solidify its own power and deflect criticism," the Anglo-American study of political culture "has unwittingly lent credibility to this endeavor." Englehart suggests that such studies, following in the tradition of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's influential book *Civic Culture* (1963), have "relied on a view of culture that conforms to an essentialist use of the term," which instead of admitting to "the complexity of cultures" simplifies "them in ways that make them more tractable for study" (Englehart, 2000: 563). He adds in this book and subsequent studies it inspired, culture is often approached as "a static and primordial set of attitudes and dispositions" with "certain orientations" seen as "typical of a given population and to determine the ways in which they can interact with political institutions. They remain more or less fixed in a population over time and determine the kinds of political institutions those people can have" (ibid.). Political science has been stuck with an essentialist view of culture while anthropologists have taken a more flexible approach, more sensitive to cultural complexity, the multiplicity of traditions in cultures, and constant change (ibid., 566).

In addition, some constructivists' "search" for a common Southeast Asian regional identity have led them to become sympathetic to the Asian Values discourse. For example, Gürol Baba (2016) has argued that the normative-based Asian Values discussion can help overcome "ethnic, cultural, political,

territorial, and historical diversities" in Southeast Asia and thus may contribute to the formation of a "normative/ideational" Southeast Asian identity. Ksenia Efremova (2021: 104) argues that in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) "cultural relativism… constitutes the fundamental base of its normative vision." It has become a "norms provider" based on the rejection of "Western universalism and struggle to find their own way in world politics" (ibid.).

Conclusion

Commonly misunderstood to be about Asia, the "Asian Values" discussion was from its beginning in the 1990s used as a tool by "soft" authoritarian regimes in Singapore and Malaysia both to delegitimize domestic democratic opposition and to fend off Western pressures to democratize. Originally dubbed "Confucian values," it did not contribute to, much less take cognizance of a long-running "Asianisms" debate about common values in the region. Instead it offered a crude culturalist justification for authoritarian rule. Earlier versions of this reactionary culturalism in the region functioned similarly, e.g., "Thai-style democracy," *Pancasila*-democracy in Indonesia, the *Tadhana* project in the Philippines, and an authoritarian interpretation of Buddhism in Burma/Myanmar. But such discourses have shaped the political agenda. Southeast Asian liberals felt it necessary to frame their demands for civil liberties and democratic reforms in religious-communalist terms to avoid being seen as overly Westernized. Not surprisingly, an Asian Values-style exculpatory discourse has been revived alongside a recent autocratization wave in Southeast Asia.

It was also argued that this kind of discourse was both partially inspired, and is legitimated by the often highly essentialized comparative study of political culture and the search for a Southeast Asian regional identity by constructivists. Claudio (2017: 104) goes further by criticizing scholars in the Global North studying the region who show sympathy for the "problematising" of human rights by authoritarian culturalists. Scholars should be careful about inadvertently becoming apologists for illiberalism "because we in the Global South just might get it in the form of a bloodthirsty autocrat," he says referring to president Duterte of the Philippines who, as discussed above, has said he could care less about "Western" human rights (ibid.).

Lily Zubaidah Rahim (1998: 70), who sees the "Asian way" discourse as involving "self-orientalising rhetoric which has served to reify a Western orientalist conception of Asia," makes an important point about its patriarchal character:

> Primarily articulated by men of privilege, the cultural nationalist "Asian way" discourse is strongly patriarchal in orientation and has little to say about women, ethnic minorities, child labourers, guest workers and other marginal groups in society. They have been rendered invisible and speechless in the triumphalist

"Asian way" discourse. In extolling the virtues of the traditional "Asian" society and family, it is generally the patriarchal state and traditional family structures that are implied. Such structures are based on an inherently hierarchical relationship between the political elite and the masses, husband and wife, and authoritarian ties between parents and children. Not surprisingly, few women have adopted a high public profile in championing the cultural nationalist discourse… (ibid.: 69–70).

In an empirical analysis of the Asian values discussion, So Young Kim (2010: 227) has subjected claims about the supposed distinctiveness of cultural values in Asia to a comprehensive statistical analysis of value surveys. She shows that surveys of Asians and non-Asians reveal the evidence actually "*contradicts the claims of the Asian values proponents. In particular, it calls into question the cultural defenders of authoritarian rule in East Asia*" (ibid., my emphasis).

But despite the obvious essentialism behind and lack of empirical support for Asian values, Englehart (2000: 567) has argued that without a more sophisticated view of culture which takes into account its complexity and contradictions, it is difficult to respond to Asian Values-style arguments. Cultures contain multiple traditions, including "subaltern strands" which given the right conditions, "may eventually emerge as dominant." There is a "need to be able to recognise that the debate over human rights and democracy in a place like Singapore is not really a debate between two cultures, one Asian and one Western" (ibid.). Rather, Asian Values and similar discourses in the region involve a "reactionary culturalist" defense of an authoritarian form of modernity based on a hierarchical, patriarchal view of society intolerant of diversity and strongly opposed to broader political participation.

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