

Human Rights And Asian Values (With emphasis on Eastern Asia)

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From the viewpoint of Asian people, the fall of the Union Soviet Republics reinforced the American claim that a universal culture should be instituted. This viewpoint sprang from two celebrated works by Samuel P. Huntington and Francis Fukuyama.

Fukuyama claimed that history would end with the fall of communism. The implication was not that no event would take place but that the clashes, struggles and oppositions (thoughts and movements) would eventually end in the supremacy of Technocratic Secular Liberalism¹ and that no other powerful rival would exist to vie this supremacy.

Huntington observed that the struggles would pivot on the axis of culture and civilization with the fall of communism and considered the struggles between Islamic civilizations and Confucianism with the Western culture the main axis of the new struggles.²

Fukuyama and Huntington present opposite views as to the idea that the clashes between civilizations would not exist if according to Fukuyama, there remained only one culture. However, we can detect a synthesis or conformity between them by carefully studying those works. Fukuyama maintains that religion and nationalism will replace liberalism but will not defy it. Huntington reinforces the notion that those who remain outside the realm of Western culture try to weaken its pillars and oppose it one way or another.

Probing the aforementioned essays and books, Chen Yangu states that the difference between them is actually misleading because the clashes between civilizations hinge upon the end of history. From Huntington and Fukuyama's views, one can gather that the ideological attempt for Western domination is accompanied by a certain interpretation of human rights.³

Confucian Concept

The Asian countries have suggested that the emphasis on Asian culture or Asian Values serve as an attempt to fight the hegemonic policies of the West. They hold that the stress on a public culture and extending it to the entire globe shows Western domination and suggests an attempt to create uni-dimensional world.

The Asian countries lay stress on a collective outlook on Asian values as opposed to Western individualism. Likewise, the Confucian Concept is introduced as opposed to Western thought. Confucianism lays stress on the mutual relations of individuals. Confucius believes that men constantly live in mutual relation to each other. In other words, the society is not a convention among strange individuals but rather, it is congruent to man's nature and that man discloses his nature in relation to others. As a rule, the dominant relation within each society follows a hierarchical order; the inherent relation between father and mother and their children or the relations fabricated as a result of social convention.[4](#)

According to the Confucian Concept, the proper behavior or function (the term *Li*[5](#) meaning ritual) is based on the relations we conduct with others. We should honor those who are inferior to us and respect those who are superior to us. The implication is not that we should act like slaves to the ruling power or accept unsound judgement but that we should obey the rules, respect the social relations, consider ourselves as its subjects and express our views in the ways previously determined.

In Western view, the notion of human rights lays stress on individual rights. You may have heard this many times that, "You cannot do this. I have certain rights." On the contrary, Confucianism claims that one is indebted to others. According to the great Chinese philosopher, one should not care whether others respect him or fulfil their duties to him, as they should. What a man should care about is whether he respects others as he should. At this

Point, we come up with the idea of mutual respect. If I respect others the way I should, others will respect me in like manner.[6](#)

The Confucian Concept enjoins its followers not to concern themselves with what others are indebted to them. Confucius places stress on the superior dignity of man in relation to other beings, considering man as a moral being who lays the foundation of his faith on mutual respect, living in harmony with others and respecting fraternity and the hierarchical order. Ethics takes root in some relations and becomes universalized. Children will bear love to their elders. Parental love thus induced is generalized to the entire humane society because if someone loves his elders, he will expect others to love their own elders and those of others.

According to Muslim values, we should do as we expect to be done by. Eminence is a great trait in Islam, in the Confucian Concept and in other religions. Confucius states that a weak and narrow-minded person does not stand responsible for what he does whereas a person of high caliber stands responsible

for his actions and scolds himself.

Abstract Rights

Abstract rights are the reflections of people's boundless dignity. Han Zhen, the Chinese theoretician, reinforces the notion that justice is not a matter of abstract rights but rather it has a social context. As people find themselves in particular social intercourse, there is no public status, which can be generalized to all. John Rawls⁷ affirms that there are no absolute rights. Abstract rights cannot be regarded as the model for justice.⁸

Also, the Confucian Concept stresses the inherent equality of men. At all events, equality in dignity is not the intended meaning in the Confucian Concept. Xunzi⁹, one of the disciples of Confucius, maintained that any socio-political system obligates each individual to obey hierarchically social order and rules (as a rule, human beings are egoistic; hence they see no point in preferring anyone's will to their own.)

Mencius¹⁰ had an opposite view on this case, believing that goodness is an innate trait in man and he is capable of attaining the apex of humanity and ultimately saintliness. Man's goodness and perfection lie in his co-operating with others and following *Li* (ritual). At all events, according to eastern doctrine, equality does not mean that all human beings are equal. As to this point, Confucius states that a great moral individual values harmony, not equality. On the contrary, a low person stresses equality, not harmony.¹¹

Eastern people believe that an excess of emphasis on individual whether pessimistic or optimistic is the root of all evil. Confucian disciples have emphasized the Private Desires and keeping aloof from Heavenly Principles. Human nature and the aforementioned description do not refer to man's personality. Man's egoistic desires and aspirations are not particular to his nature, but rather they are a deviation from nature, for man's limited desires triumph over the general desires.¹² For example, it is not selfishness that man wishes to eat good food. However, gluttony is both unnatural and egoistic.

Concerning what was mentioned, it must be admitted that the discourse of Asian values is part of the reaction directed against Western domination after the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR. From the time of imperialists to the flourish of theories of reconstruction, the clashes between civilizations and the end of history, it has been generally believed that the developed West is the arena in which modernism is manifested and will surely overcome those who oppose it. Hence, the American blade of human rights is aimed on those who do not follow this way, trying to pull them in own rank.

Eastern people believe that human rights are abstract and within the certain social context of interrelated communities. Besides, they are the cause of the agonies and sufferings inflicted on some Western communities today. The dominant milieu in the West that is, nihilism, and Western predicaments originate from them. (Self-alienation, lack of wholesome social intercourse, absolute individualism, asocial and unnatural selfishness, lack of hierarchical order, and respect.)

Eastern countries hold that the emphasis on human rights in the hope of reaching a certain concept is illogical and impractical, believing that it is a washed up culture and the exercise of human rights is an interference in their internal affairs.

In Asia, it is believed that the West proposes the notion of human rights in order that they may fortify their stance as a dominant power. The democracy engineered in the West is not the best form of democracy but an interpretation of democracy, which exactly accords the concept of Asian values. In general, Asia (with the exception of Japan and the Philippines, for these two Asian countries do not agree on the concept of democracy) [13](#) holds that liberty is sublime but should be achieved with a sense of responsibility towards the other subjects of community: otherwise, absolute freedom is not but the freedom particular to jungle.

How is it that everyone (including the Western countries) stresses the sociability of man but regards individualism as absolute? Two hundred years ago, the Americans stated that there would be no taxation without representation: now, the Asian countries relying on their rich human resources insist that there will be no freedom allowed without a sense of responsibility.

For the Asians (Muslims, Buddhists, Confucian disciples, Shintoists and Hindus,) the society is at the top of everything else. The individuals and minorities should enjoy certain rights but not at the price of sacrificing the rights of the majorities. The individuals and minorities should correspond with the social ethics and norms. A little deviation is allowed: however, the unleashing of unlimited freedom which jeopardizes peace and quiet and threatens the society is not what the Asians expect of democracy.

On a moral basis, democracy is a right idea but it is good when it results in goodness. At this point, a statement by Mahatir Muhammad, the Malaysian premier seems to clarify the point noted above. He stated:

Ten years ago, a televised report affirmed the massacre of Palestinian refugees in the United Nations camps by Israel. The American reporter commenting on this newsreel expressed his aversion to this act so cruelly perpetrated (human aspect): however, at the end of the report, he said, "The United States should support Israel because it is the only democratic state in the region." Apparently, mass murder is allowed in the name of democracy. [14](#)

Exploiting by democrats does not inflict less pain than the exploitation by the dictators. Both of them are to be condemned. Asia cannot accept Western culture altogether, particularly when the selfsame culture has failed in its own home. Asia is well aware of the fact that it should accept those principles, which conform to the Asian community. (All the countries because each one of the Asian countries is different from the other).

According to Mao Zedong, the former leader of New China, one has to treat each phenomenon as food: one has to taste it first: if it delights the palate, one has to chew it: hence, the process of digestion starts; the body absorbs and assimilates the suitable substance and eliminates the residues.

Swallowing is the only thing some Asians and Africans have done which has been of no use to them.

The discourse of democracy is true as to the issue of human rights. Asian human rights should not be an imitation of Western human rights. Individuals and the minorities should enjoy reasonable freedom: however, this freedom should not deny the majorities of their rights. In the West, they believe that their beliefs have the quality of universality and that the nonnative proponents of human rights (concerning us Asians) encourage the advocacy of exploitation, dictatorship and non-civilized conduct.[15](#)

As in other regions, we in Asia are bound to values which are universal. We are all fathers or mothers. We live in a human society so we should believe in certain principles. However, we have different values from the West. Those who believe in a dominant culture, and propagate it with all their might, are like those who are purblind and see only gray shadows and they are unable to see the rainbow. So, they say there is no other color except the one they see.

Can we affirm the point that there was no difference between the American way and some of the ways and values of the Old World in Europe? Indeed, for a million of people who fled the Old World, was it not for this that they wished to escape old values and ways?

At present, there are values towards which the Americans have an affective regard but the same values are abhorred by the French. Even Britain, the devoted cohort of America in Europe, criticizes some of the values institutionalized in America. In fact, many people regard the European culture as exemplary and universal, and the cradle for all Western values. The US culture is by no means the unique outcome of International community conditions and experiences to have a unique model or to deserve universalization. As a multinational country with diverse cultures emerging from different races and religions, America does not have a definite culture to universalize.

Asia: Power and Values

The problem that we encountered in the past or rather have in the present, is that we have long been exploited; sadly, most of us thought that our values and beliefs were secondhand. However, with the passage of time and the strengthening of Asia, especially in the last quarter of the present century, and the advent of the newly industrialized countries, the Asian tigers and the Asian tiger cubs and so on and so forth. Asia has secured its veritable dignity, and plunged fear in the hearts of the Western countries. Nowadays, they are worried about Asian power seekers.

We should note that in regard to the administration of affairs, treating cultures the traditional values of Asia and the achievement of success, there is a close bond among nations, which has brought up the game of human rights. At the end of Peloponnesian wars Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian, stated that the authorities acted on a personal will basis in administering state's affairs and that the weak ones should do as they were dictated.

The Asian countries (mainly including thriving eastern Asian countries and Iran, India ...) will no longer yield to blind obedience because Asia is not materialistically or spiritually weak. A great portion of Asia will strive against New Imperialism initiated within the context of human rights . Asia will struggle, not merely because it has succeeded in casting the chains of material and spiritual servitude but because it should pursue its course victoriously: it is the course which internal and external forces seek to thwart. Time will belong to us Asians when we are capable of resurrecting our past potentials: The past is the way of Asian future.

It must be born in mind that Asia is a continent comprising innumerable cultures, but in my opinion, the Asian features (stress on family and society as the first principle in social relations) have priority in Asia. Eastern Asia is the main concern of this article. David Hitchcock, the ex-president of East Asian and Pacific Affairs Department of the United States Information Agency, has performed a slight comparison between American and east Asian values which may be useful to us in our discussion of human rights.

In 1994, Hitchcock inquired the Americans and Eastern Asians (the Japanese, Thais, Koreans, Malaysians, Singaporeans, Indonesians and Filipinos) to choose six societal values and five personal values as the cornerstone of their society. The results of his research were presented under the title *Asian Values and the United States: How Much Conflict*.^{[16](#)}

The six societal values which the Eastern Asians emphasized more than others included (1) disciplined society, (2) social integrity, (3) accountability of legal states for people,^{[17](#)} (4) flexibility to accept new thoughts and ideas, (5) freedom of expression and (6) respect for power (government, State, organization). The Eastern Asians emphasized that a stable and disciplined society lay at the top of all other affairs in which individual rights preceded the social rights through reasonable respect.

The most important values stated by the Americans in order of priority were as follows: (1) freedom of expression, (2) personal freedom, (3) individual freedom, (4) free discussion, (5) thinking for oneself, (none of them appealed to the Asians) (6) accountability of legal states. The point, which manifests the sentence of the Asians, is the emphasis the Eastern Asian people laid on the importance of new thoughts and state's accountability.

Despite the discovery of common points between the Eastern Asians and the Americans, Hichcock's study disclosed not only interesting differences in societal values but it also differences of opinions touching personal values.

The five important personal values the Eastern Asians stressed were (1) hardworking, (2) respect for education^{[18](#)} (3) rightfulness, (4) self-sufficiency and (5) personal discipline. The Americans stressed (1) self-reliance, (2) personal success, (3) industriousness, and (4) achieving success in life and (5) aiding others.

In evaluating the results stated above, one comes up with these important points: fulfilling one's duties to others is emphasized by 39 percent of the Eastern Asian people as the social cornerstone whereas

merely 19 percent of American people laid stressed on it. On the other hand, 59 percent of American people stressed the achievement of success in life while the rate fell to half among Asian people. Whereas 59 percent of American people stressed personal success, only 39 percent of Asian people stressed it. [19](#)

More interestingly, 69 percent of the Eastern Asian people laid stress on education but only 15 percent of American people emphasized it. Whereas 48 percent of East Asian people laid stress on personal discipline, only 22 percent of American people emphasized it. The writer of this article leaves the judgement to the readers on this score.

The outlook of the Eastern Asian peoples in particular and the Asian people in general on the West (particularly the U.S.A.) and the emphasis on Asian values should be discussed within the framework of the aforementioned societies. Western Model 2 (American one) does not avail Asia, not only because of its alienation to Asian climate but because as stated earlier, it has met failure (In general, cultural liberalism and emphasis on individual as the axis of the society) in its home, that is, in the West.

Despite our knowledge that human rights is used as a weapon against the States, which do not tend to belong to the so-called New World, we have avoided purely political discussions. Basically, Asia holds that morality is deteriorating in Western societies, sense of responsibility is diminishing, and socialism is greatly threatened; hence, those societies are falling apart.

The tradition of intellectual liberalism developed after World War II averred that man had attained a superior social system (man's desirable condition); everyone could have enjoyed the condition if laissez faire was generalized, and if everyone had the license to act as they wished; the system proved a total failure and we in Asia strongly believe that it will never succeed because some human principles (fundamental principles) are immutable. Man needs to know what is right or wrong. In human societies, there is an entity called devil, which may not be imputed to evil deeds in the society: in other words, evil deeds do not arise from being sacrificed . Man is a fallible being within whose soul lurks a devil, which should be checked as to the improvement of the society. Man's diabolical power should be constantly checked.

In the West, they have forsaken the abovementioned principle altogether, believing that all problems may be solved via benevolent states. However, there is no such belief in Asia. There is practically no Asian model. Yet, it may be firmly stated that the Asian outlook on the collective rights is different from that of the West.

The main difference between the concepts of society, State and government in the East Asia and those in Western countries lies in the point that the eastern countries do not acknowledge the individual being but within the framework of the family unit. The individual is not isolated or alienated from the family unit and only within the framework of family he finds recognition. The State does not strive to provide what can be found best in family for the individual. [20](#)

In the West, particularly after World War II, the states gradually turned into organizations which carried out the responsibilities, commonly done in less developed countries by the family, the natural and fundamental group unit of society. This policy caused the disintegration of families: for instance, the widowed mothers for whom the State assumed responsibility. In Eastern Asia, the preservation of social norms is of great importance and the States do not tend to carry out the responsibilities placed upon the family because they believe this attitude may cause deeply social crises, discoordination and tensions.

There is a Chinese maxim that goes “*Xiushen Qijia zhinguo pingtianxia*.” The word *xiushen* means self-preservation, or the attempt to achieve self-making. *Qijia* means the protection of one’s family. *Zhinguo* means the protection of one’s country. *Pingtianxia* means peace in sheltering heaven. The Eastern Asian people have used this maxim as the model for their life. The maxim is the basis of eastern civilization. States will come. States will go; however this maxim will remain for all the time to come.

In East Asia, self-sufficiency is the basis. In the West, it is just the exact opposite. In the West, the state says, “Vote for me: I will solve your problems.”²¹ No one believes that the State can solve all the problems. In the time of natural calamities such as earthquake, storm and so on, it is always the human relation which is effectual. Family and human relations are structural and ultimately, help assure the endurance of the society members.²²

In criticizing the disciplined culture of Eastern Asia, the Western countries claim that the Asian people are not initiative because there is not enough liberty for new ideas to emerge. However, in these very countries; Eastern Asia has gained the highest rate of progress and product. Despite the extreme exercise of order (as a tradition respected by people), respect for instructors, absolute abeyance of the teachers and the refrain of disputing the teachers, serious learning (not of liberalistic nature) has been in fashion and countries like Japan, are far more advanced in technology and initiation than the West which claims free climate for initiation.

The changes in the ruling system of Eastern Asia are inevitable: however, these changes will not be an emulation of the West. Eastern Asia seeks a State with which people find themselves related, the State which is not separate from people; the State in which people find peace; the state which is not despotic; the State which multiplies peoples’ opportunities.

Now it makes no difference whether an individual has one vote or not. As to the field researches the writer of this article did in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines, it seems that a vote in Eastern Asia stands for one individual but in fact, an individual over 40 can have two votes, one for himself and another for his children, because he can use it more wisely. Regarding the research done in China, (in southern parts where education is higher), they believe that individuals over 60 should have one vote (the ages between 40 and 60 is ideal for active participation in all spheres of people’s endeavors.)²³

Conclusion

The traditional culture in Eastern Asia places emphasis on sociability of man, the preference of society to the individual, responsibility together with freedom, order, the individual within the social context, the family which is the main source of solving social problems, the prevention of the government from changing into organizations which carry out the responsibilities particular to family which is the main pillar in the east.

Considering the points mentioned above, Eastern Asia insisted on Asian values, resisted human rights and considers absolute individualism as the great calamity of the West. Besides, the Asians give political nature to Western countries on generalizing human rights, consider it a failure and regard it as the root of all problems in the West today .

In fact, the success of Eastern Asia is a stress on the dynamic and rich nature of traditions and their sufficiency for striving against cultural assault. Countries such as Malaysia, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and Thailand have succeeded in treating modernism by preserving their deepseated traditions. Nowadays, the great success of Eastern Asia lies in modernization without Westernization. Today, Japan is more Japanese than Western. Today, South Korea, though having a traditional society is dynamic and technologically advanced. (In South Korea they say if there is a power cut in Japan just for 24 hours, South Korean industry will surpass it.) Yes, anything conceived is possible.

By creating multi-media Super Corridor, Malaysia has resurrected Islam, believing that Islam is not an impediment to progress: on the contrary it facilitates it. American human rights are without values for two main reasons: firstly, it is self-alienated and secondly, the east offers more constant and richer evaluation of anything that the West wishes to. Self-alienation, which has penetrated to the core of American society, has no place in Eastern Asia. The eastern people have started a serious struggle against corruption. They have the license and the power to encounter it. Malaysia is a successful country in fighting corruption and Western society; hence, it is a successful model of economic and trading success. (Over 150 million dollars of export, 7 percent growth, the high rate of education, the low rate of divorce, fighting narcotics, the high rate of fund)^{[24](#)} the models of South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand in particular are interesting.^{[25](#)}

^{[1](#)}. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Man*, (New York: Free Press, 1992)

^{[2](#)}. Fukuyama, op. cit, pp. 1–10.

^{[3](#)}. Chen Yangu, *Cultural leadership, Power and Socialism*, Liawang no. 19 (1995) in *Xin Hua Wenzhai* (September 1995) pp. 20–21

^{[4](#)}. Confucius *Analects*, Lib 1: 16 (Confucian *Analects*)

^{[5](#)}. The Confucian term Li or ritual

^{[6](#)}. The Confucian *Analects*, 1: 18

^{[7](#)}. John Rawls quoted in Michael Walzer, *Spheres of justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books 1983) p. 175

^{[8](#)}. Han Zhen, *Another contemporary Western Theory of Justice*, *Philosophical trends*, No.4, 1995).

- [9.](#) Xungzi (C. 298–238 BC)
- [10.](#) Mencius (C. 371–289 BC)
- [11.](#) Donald. J. Munro, The Concept of Man in Early China, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969) p. 192
- [12.](#) Frank Dikotter, The Discourse of Race in Modern China (London: C. Hurst, 1992) p. 23
- [13.](#) In 1993, in the Conference of Asian Countries, in Bangkok which was held exactly before the Geneva Conference on Human Rights, all the Asian countries criticized the Western human rights and emphasised that human rights were abstract and closely associated with the social culture, and history of other countries.
- [14.](#) Mahathir Muhammad in an interview with Bernama (October, 1985).
- [15.](#) “Mahatir Muhammad on Western Media”, Nihon Keizei Conference on The Future of Asia, Tokyo, Japan, 17 May, 1996 (Malaysia’s Prime Minister’s Office Publication (Limited circulation)
- [16.](#) USIA, op. cit
- [17.](#) Accountability is an important principle in democratic systems
- [18.](#) It must be noted that most East Asian countries allocate 20 to 30 percent of gross domestic product to education which is per se a guarantee for the Asian miracle to preserve its dynamic procedure.
- [19.](#) High Differentials in Western and Eastern Values, Bangkok Post, p. 3, March 1997.
- [20.](#) The Straits Times Editorial (Singapore: March 15, 1997) Entitled The State Not a Substitute for Family.
- [21.](#) Farid Zakaria, A conversation with Lee Yew, Foreign Affairs, (March/April 1994) p. 113
- [22.](#) David Johnson, The Cultural Superiority of the East, (New York:Peaeger Publishers, 1996)
- [23.](#) Bihzad Shahandah, Field Researches in East Asia, (in print)
- [24.](#) Behzad Shahandah, Reconciling Deep-seated Traditions to Modernism, (Malaysia), International Higher Cultural Studies, 1996.
- [25.](#) Behzad Shahandah, State and Politics in South East Asia, (Tehran, SAMT 1995). The chapters relevant to South East Asia after World War II.

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