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# ASIAN VALUES OR ASIAN IDEOLOGY? THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF EAST ASIA

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This essay explores the question of “Asian values” within the context of the changing international relations of post-Cold War East Asia. It begins by examining the advantages and drawbacks of using culture to understand international relations, arguing for the importance of a positivist methodology over a hermeneutic approach. It concludes that the idea of “Asian values” is based on the latter, and reflects more an ideology of certain Asian leaders than the cultural disposition of Asian peoples.

East Asia is at a crossroads today. The end of the Cold War has freed up options for many states in the region. Traditional global geopolitics no longer dictate state action. What this will lead to is a concern of policymakers around the globe. This realization that states have self-directed options rather than circumstances dictated by super-power rivalry has led some analysts away from the systemic-level approach of structural realism and down to levels of analysis that consider the role of culture, institutions, ideology, and individual beliefs. These aspects of international relations have been underdeveloped in the discipline, but are gaining new ground. Among them, the study of political culture is undergoing what one researcher has described as a renaissance (Inglehart 1988).

This essay focuses on one aspect of the evolving debate on the

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role of unit-level analysis in the international relations by examining the question of political culture in East Asia. Specifically it centers on efforts to define East Asia as something other than simply a geographic concept. It will explore the question of "Asian values." First, however, one must consider the general challenges of using cultural over systemic explanations for regional international relations. For this purpose, the essay begins with a discussion of the current state of research regarding cultural approaches to international relations. Next it considers the question of why cultural approaches are undergoing a renaissance today. Finally, it examines the debate over Asian values in light of the preceding analysis.

### CULTURAL APPROACHES TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Cultural approaches to international relations have faced tough challenges in the field. Since the behavioralist revolution, theories in the discipline have been held up to a high standard derived from the scientific method.<sup>1</sup> In addition, systemic theories of international relations have dominated during this period, largely due to the geopolitics imposed by Cold War bipolarity. Contemporary neorealist or structural realist theories are hostile to culture by the very nature of their systemic explanations. Culture has no place in an international system where interaction is determined by the relative power of the major states characterized as like units seeking greater power in the system (Waltz 1979; Gilpin 1981). Contending theories in the field have also tended to be based on the system level and are similarly hostile to culture. World systems theory and its cousin Dependencia theory, for example, hold that culture is irrelevant because the key factor in national development is the world capitalist system (Wallerstein 1974; Duvall et al. 1981).

Rational choice theory, which has been growing in popularity in the field over the past several decades, reinforces the belief among international relations theorists that cultural explanations have nothing to offer international relations theory. Rather than merely suffering marginalization by systemic theories, rationalist explanations of behavior have overtly challenged the belief that the substantive content of individual people's ideas—or their group manifestation in culture—are important factors to consider. To many economists, and to political scientists captivated by rational choice and related modes of thinking, ideas are unimportant or

epiphenominal either because agents can often correctly anticipate the actions of another (independent of cultural considerations) or because of some selective process which ensures that only agents who behave as if they were rational succeed (Goldstein and Keohane 1993).<sup>2</sup> Today, however, a countertrend may be taking place in international relations. As rational choice attempts to answer bigger questions, its flaws are becoming more apparent. This has led some back to the concept of culture in an attempt to bridge the gap between the two seemingly disparate approaches.

In his review of recent cultural approaches to understanding China, Nathan begins by identifying the central problem facing the researcher attempting a cultural analysis: There can be no doubt that culture exists and that it affects behavior, but in what ways? He poses several key questions: "What do we mean by culture in the context of comparative statements? How can a culture's distinctiveness be conceptualized? What is required to demonstrate that such distinctiveness exists, what it consists of, and what influence it has on the performance of societies?" (Nathan 1993, 923). These are tough questions which must be addressed if cultural approaches are to succeed.

Advocating a cultural approach to international relations is not to say that people do not behave in self-interested and broadly rational ways. Indeed, culture would not be an identifiable phenomenon if people within the culture did not behave in generally uniform ways given certain stimuli. Rather, a cultural approach to international relations takes issue with the idea that interests *precede* beliefs held by actors. A culturally informed approach to international relations would factor in the possibility of one's beliefs or culture defining one's interests.<sup>3</sup> For example, Goldstein and Keohane write in their edited volume, *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, "Ideas influence policy when the principled or causal beliefs they embody provide road-maps that increase actor's clarity about goals or ends-means relationships, when they affect outcomes of strategic situations in which there is no unique equilibrium, and when they become embedded in political institutions" (Goldstein and Keohane 1993, 3).

Similarly, when using culture—rather than individual beliefs—as an independent variable to explain action it is important to distinguish between the beliefs or ideas that motivate action and the behavior that this manifests. As Nathan points out in his review

of cultural approaches to understanding China, "When one wants to use culture as an explanation for behavior, one must define culture as a pattern of mental attitudes separate from the pattern of behaviors that such attitudes are thought to explain" (Nathan 1993, 924).

Nathan's distinction between beliefs and values on the one hand, and behavior on the other is fundamental to the development of a scientific methodology to operationalize culture as an independent variable in international relations. Further, it allows him to distinguish between two types of cultural knowledge: hermeneutic knowledge and positivistic knowledge. Nathan describes hermeneutic knowledge as that derived from *interpretation* of a culture's context and its inner structure. Positivistic knowledge, on the other hand, is based on *empirical confirmation* of hypotheses formulated in a way that allows for falsification (Nathan 1993, 924, 928).

Findings from extensive survey research conducted by Inglehart in the advanced European democracies lead him to assert that "examination of political culture is an essential supplement to the rational choice approach" (Inglehart 1990, 15–16). His book, *Culture Shift*, is a positivist rather than a hermeneutic study. It is supported by survey evidence from twenty-five nations, with substantial time series data from eight. Through his surveys, Inglehart finds significant cultural variations between the advanced industrial states, which he argues are closely linked to the viability of democratic institutions. Further, he sees the forces of modernity causing a "culture shift" to "post-materialist values" as the economic development of the countries studied continues. Most importantly for the political culture approach is his finding that differences between societies are not decreasing, as many theorists have suspected, but in many cases intensifying. His surveys indicate, for example, that "even in advanced industrial societies, religion not only outweighs social class as an influence on electoral behavior, but actually seems to be widening its lead" (Ibid., 15). His conclusion is that "different societies are characterized to very different degrees by a specific syndrome of political cultural attitudes; that these cultural differences are relatively enduring, but not immutable; and they can have major political consequences" (Ibid.). Inglehart's findings are significant for two reasons. First, he claims to have shown real cultural differences between nation-states that

affect political decision making. Second, he has accomplished this using scientific methodology, thereby demonstrating that culture can be used as an independent variable.

Westerners have been intrigued by the “uniqueness” of Asian cultures since their discovery by European explorers. Historically, nearly all major examinations of Asian political behavior have taken as a given that Asia is fundamentally different from the West, including works by seminal Western political philosophers such as Marx (1853) and Weber (1919, 1920). Despite the growing popularity of rational choice theories discussed above, however, and the growing use of positivist methodology in studies of cultures, hermeneutic cultural explanations of Asian behavior predominate in international relations and comparative politics.<sup>4</sup>

A common error in cultural analyses in East Asia is to confuse hermeneutic and positivistic knowledge within the same study. In Nathan’s words, “Knowledge about a single culture is sometimes restated as knowledge about two cultures, hermeneutic knowledge as positivistic knowledge” (Nathan 1993, 924). This is the mistake made by van Wolferen’s deep problematizing of the Japanese state, compared to his singular notion of the West in his seminal study, *The Enigma of Japanese Power*. This is not to say that his findings are useless. Quite the contrary, van Wolferen’s insights into Japanese society helped stir a revolution in American thinking about Japan. He successfully details how Japanese society is unique. One has to take as a matter of faith, however, his second claim that Japan is somehow “uniquely unique” (Van Wolferen 1989, 14). This is because empirically one cannot compare two things that are unique. Thus, a cross-cultural comparison begins with an idea of similarity, that a society’s uniqueness comes from the different weight it places on values and beliefs that exist in all societies to some extent. As has been seen, however, few empirical cross-cultural studies between Asia and the West exist. Most knowledge of the region is based on the hermeneutic approach.

## **A RETURN TO CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS?**

With the end of the Cold War, people around the world and particularly those in the United States are having great difficulty in understanding how radically different the world has become. One major difference is that all conflicts in the world are now genuinely regional and local, with the possible exception of those that involve

major raw materials (such as oil) or that have great ideological implications (such as those surrounding Israel, South Africa, or Political Islam) (Johnson 1995). As Betts summarizes, "The Soviet collapse makes the answers to some basic questions less obvious than they once seemed" (Betts 1993/94, 35).

There has been a proliferation of writings on the question of what type of international system is most likely to succeed bipolarity. Writers have taken a variety of perspectives, from idealism to hard-core realism, from a unipolar world to multipolarity. Especially in East Asia, a region growing in terms of relative power capabilities, the United States is being forced to justify its security and economic relationship with nearly every country in the region. Betts summarizes some of the key questions facing U.S. policymakers: "Is it now in the interest of the U.S. for China to succeed in economic liberalization and become more prosperous? or for Japan to become a normal state, developing a ratio of military to economic power comparable to that of other large, rich countries? or for Korea to unify? or for Taiwan to democratize, or for Vietnam to remain poor?" (Betts 1993/94, 35).

In U.S. circles, many are searching for a new enemy, even if this means the enemy within (i.e., American decline). Within the milieu of hegemonic stability theory and power politics, nationalism and religious fundamentalism, many have been drawn to the idea of a "clash of civilizations," a phrase coined by Huntington (Huntington 1993a). "The Clash of Civilizations" sparked a debate still raging in *Foreign Affairs* regarding the relevance of culture to international relations in East Asia. Positions have ranged from Gibney's assertion that "culture is not destiny" to Lee Kuan Yew's response that "culture is destiny" (Gibney 1993; Zakaria 1994). Kim Dae Jung sums up the lack of consensus to date, asking in the title of his piece: "Is Culture Destiny?" (Kim 1994, 189). As with the bulk of cultural studies of Asia, all of these articles are based on the authors' interpretation of values, events, and their significance—not on empirical studies of the role of culture in Asia.

### THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS?

"The Clash of Civilizations" has resonated not only in American society, but in policy-making circles around the world. As Huntington himself has noted in one of his many responses to critics of his argument: "Since my article was published in the Summer 1993

issue of *Foreign Affairs*, it has been the subject of scores and possibly hundreds of articles, symposia, and commentaries in countries throughout the world. It has been intelligently debated by presidents and prime ministers, scholars and journalists" (Huntington 1994/95, 177). More than any other debate in international relations today—except perhaps the larger framework of emerging nationalism, of which the clash of civilizations is itself a part—the idea of a clash of civilizations fills the need for a globally applicable, systemic-level explanation that could parsimoniously predict the course of international events for years to come. It harkened back to the good old days of predictable bipolarity.

The essence of Huntington's argument is not just that people are different but that groups of people are different—in uniform and identifiable ways. People have cultures and these cultures affect—indeed *define*—the way they act and interact in the world. His conclusion is clear:

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great division among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. . . . The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. (Huntington 1993a, 22)

Thus, Huntington sees a grand progression in the history of the conflict among men from conflict between kings, to conflict between peoples, to conflicts between ideologies, to the apex—conflict between civilizations. Huntington describes a civilization as "a cultural entity" that is "the broadest level of identification" with which an individual can identify. He proposes seven or eight such civilizations: Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and possibly African. The differences between these large blocs are fundamental, "differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion." In his view of history, "differences among civilizations have generated the most prolonged and most violent conflicts" (Huntington 1993a, 23–25). It is relevant to note at this point that many of these differences also apply *within* individual civilizations.

Huntington's formulation poses many problems. The key problem, addressed by this essay, is that Huntington is misguided in his attempt to find a new conflict cleavage to fit into the Cold War framework. The "clash of civilizations"—if indeed there is one—is

not nearly so overt. If there is any merit in his argument, it lies in the “soft power” level, which Huntington dismisses by writing that “the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will *not* be ideological.”<sup>5</sup> One region where a new ideological battle may be forming, however, is an area that Huntington sees as a “cultural threat”: East Asia. In East Asia today one can hear a growing debate over “Asian values” and their superiority to Western conceptions of society. Thus, what one should be examining is not Chinese missile exports to other civilization groups (Huntington 1993b) but Chinese “values” exports to other states in the region. If there is a clash of civilizations in Asia today, it is an ideological clash, *not* a broadly cultural one.

What, however, is the competing ideology? During the Cold War, it was communism. All interstate conflict in the world was dichotomized into a communist/anti-communist struggle. The U.S. goal was “containment.” Today, communism is dead. Freedom and democracy have prevailed. For a brief moment, some even contemplated “the end of history.” It was this type of thinking, according to Mahbubani, that led to current problems, and ultimately perhaps to Huntington’s piece. Despite Huntington’s worries, Mahbubani points out, it is the West’s influence that is feared in most parts of the non-Western world (Mahbubani 1993, 10–14). Bartley’s critique of Huntington provides some examples of this. He writes:

The new Japanese crown princess was educated at Harvard, and the latest sumo sensation is known as Akebone [*sic*], but played basketball as Chad Rowen. The world’s language is English. Even the standard bearers of ‘the rest’ were largely educated in the West. (Bartley 1993, 16)

The West’s overpowering influence globally is especially evident if one equates modernity with the West. As Juergensmeyer argues in his variation of the clash of civilizations, the Western institution of secular nationalism has transformed the globe. The challenge between Western secular nationalism and traditional religious nationalism is difficult at best to accommodate and can never be fully reconciled (Juergensmeyer 1993). In the years since the end of the Cold War, various responses to this perceived overzealousness of the West can be seen in Asia. Quite the opposite of Huntington’s predicted unified voice, however, today one hears leaders from throughout the region asking, what is Asia? Can Asians be identified by common traits? Are there such things as ‘Asian

values"? As Ajami rightly questions in his response to Huntington, "where is the Confucian world Huntington speaks of?" (Ajami 1993, 6).

## THE SEARCH FOR ASIA

It is often repeated that the Asian challenge to the West is much more interesting than communism's ever was because Asian authoritarians (unlike those of the former Soviet bloc) argue from a position of economic and social success. ("Competitive Order" 1992; Graybow 1994). Attempts to identify this challenge, however, have proven difficult. The crux of the problem of identifying a unified, Asian challenge is the tremendous diversity of the region. East Asia accounts for over a third of the world's population. Forms of government in the region today range from liberal democracy to strict authoritarianism and absolute monarchy, with gradations of each form in between. Freedom House rankings of civil liberties and political freedoms find states in Asia at the full range of their seven point scale on both indicators.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, states within East Asia cover the entire spectrum of economic development: displaying a thirty-fold per capita income gap between Asia's richest and poorest states, from Japan's per capita income of \$30,000 to China and Indonesia's per capita incomes of less than \$1,000.

There is not much similarity between Asian states on which to formulate an Asian challenge. Still, many in Asia are attempting to develop an "Asian" identity. According to Japanese journalist Yoichi Funabashi, however, and contrary to the civilization paradigm of Huntington, Asia's 'Asianization' is the result of the globalization of its economy and media, not from forces emanating from within Asia. In Funabashi's view, "the region is not being 're-Asianized': it is being Asianized" (Funabashi 1993, 79, 77).

Funabashi argues that central to Asian notions of development is that the economy should have priority—democracy and other forms of political and social evolution should be thought of in terms of how well they serve economic development. He has recently written about what he calls "a new Asian identity" and "a cohesive Asian worldview," in which he would include South Asia. He describes the "Asian consciousness" as "animated by workaday pragmatism, the social awakening of a flourishing middle class and the moxie of technocrats, although still tinged perhaps by anticolonialist resentment, racism and indifference to civil liberties" (Funabashi 1993, 75). This view of Asians may differ from the view

of Americans hold of themselves, but hardly comprises fuel for a clash that will outweigh other factors.

One concrete example of an Asian cohesiveness for Funabashi involves security. He writes: "Most Asian nations are former colonies or protectorates, and their independence was gained through economic and societal development. They have a strong tendency to think of security not simply in military terms but as a synthesis of military, economic, technological and social strengths." Thus, "the new regional consciousness in Asia . . . stems from changes in traditional security attitudes." (Funabashi 1993, 80–81)

This constitutes more of a description of an impact felt on all actors in the region, than a cultural attribute. Beyond these very general characterizations, however, the idea of a common view of Asia or Asians (even East Asians) quickly disappears. Perhaps because of this difficulty, the focus in the debate today is not something that has been measured concretely. The emphasis has moved from a search for a common Asian identity to a search for "Asian values."

## TWO EMERGING BLOCS?

In writing about the first APEC leaders' summit in Seattle in November 1993, Graybow observed that "the remarkable diversity among the leaders underscored two powerful regional trends. The two largest blocs of leaders were a core of democrats and three authoritarian rulers: Indonesia's President Suharto, China's Jiang Jemin and Singapore's Goh Chok Tong" (Graybow 1994, 41).<sup>7</sup> As an indication of the relative distribution of power, he continued, it is interesting to note that the question of democracy was not on the agenda at Seattle.

The most vocal people to watch in Asia on the subject of Asian values are from the authoritarian camp, especially Lee Kuan Yew and Kishore Mahbubani of Singapore, and Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim of Malaysia. These two countries are in many ways competing for the right to articulate what is Asia. Lee, the former Prime Minister of Singapore from 1965 to 1990, is now Senior Minister. Mahbubani is permanent secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mahathir has been the Prime Minister of Malaysia since 1981. Anwar is the Finance Minister and was recently elected Deputy President of the ruling party and is therefore nominally in line to succeed Mahathir as Prime Minister.

Among pro-democrats, Kim Dae Jung, the former opposition

party leader in South Korea, is one of the most vocal on the world stage. The person perhaps most associated with the democracy movement in East Asia is Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her unwillingness to recant her pro-democratic views in the face of severe government oppression. Unfortunately, she has been silenced through house arrest. Each of these leaders are eloquent and vocal speakers on the topic of Asian values, but each puts a carefully different spin on how the West should view Asia.

Mahathir argues that the real aim of Western protests over the environment and human rights practices in the region is to keep Asia down. He has called "arrogant" the belief that democracy is right for everyone. He is quoted in a recent interview as saying: "To us, democracy means the welfare of the majority. While the individual must have his rights, these must not extend to the point where they deprive the majority of their rights" (Crovitz 1994, 20). Freedom House surveys confirm this mixed commitment. According to its 1993–94 report, though Malaysia has allowed somewhat greater political freedom than Indonesia or China, "Prime Minister Mahathir has used the cover of consensual politics to stifle opposition."

In recent years the government has cut back sharply on development funds to the two opposition-controlled states, Sabah and Kelantan, and has taken measures to limit debate in parliament, including reducing speaking time on the floor. (Graybow 1994, 44)

Anwar advocated a more measured view in a recent speech to the Institute for Policy Research for Development in Bangkok: "Properly instituted, democracy will ensure order and stability." When speaking of the challenges ahead, however, he cited as "foremost of these is the creation and preservation of social order" (Anwar 1994, 34). Earlier in the year, he was more critical of so-called Western values on the economic front, saying "it is highly improbable that a purely free-market mechanism will fulfill the development objectives aspired to by developing nations in Asia."<sup>8</sup> As the former leader of Abim, the Malaysia Islamic Youth Movement, Anwar has strong connections throughout the region and is seen as a regional leader of the next generation of political leaders in Southeast Asia.

Lee and Mahbubani both put forth a far more nuanced version of Asian values, laced with overt praise for Western achievements.

Their authoritarian overtones are in some ways not as strong as Mahathir's and Anwar's, but they still see democracy as a tool that can be adjusted to the necessities of social order rather than an ideal in itself. Lee tends to subscribe to Huntington's notion of a Confucian civilization. In his recent interview with *Foreign Affairs*, he defines this group by saying "when I say East Asians, I mean Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, as distinct from Southeast Asia, which is a mix between the Sinic and the Indian, though Indian culture also emphasizes similar values." He includes in his "cultural backdrop the belief in thrift, hard work, filial piety and loyalty in the extended family, and, most of all, respect for scholarship and learning" (Zakaria 1994, 113, 114). Curiously, given his record in Singapore, he describes Asians as culturally disposed to limited government and faults Western liberalism for forcing government to play too large of a role in society.

Mahbubani articulates a more developed position in the *Washington Quarterly*, writing: "Many Western societies—including the United States—are doing some major things fundamentally wrong while a growing number of East Asian societies are doing the same things right. [The United States] needs to question its fundamental assumptions about its social and political arrangements and, in the process, learn a thing or two from East Asian societies" (Mahbubani 1994, 5). One may well ask, based on the above discussion, what exactly he expects the United States to learn from "East Asia." In sum, he argues that the United States suffers from too much freedom and can learn methods of control and order from East Asia. "There can be no more vivid example of how a nation can become trapped by its ideology," in Mahbubani's opinion, than Americans clinging to the ideology of freedom (Mahbubani 1994, 9). Mahbubani, like Lee, is no fan of democracy, though he would not discard it entirely. "Consent of the governed is absolutely vital for any government," he writes, yet "to have good government, you often need less, not more, democracy" (Mahbubani 1994, 16–17).

Kim has recently emerged as a vocal counterbalance to those challenging the basis of democratic rule. He contends that democracy is bound to spread through Asia as it has in Europe and the Americas. In response to the growing chorus supporting the claim of a different Asian political culture, one hostile toward democracy, Kim writes that contrary to Huntington and many Asian leaders (such as Mahathir and Lee), Asia has "a rich heritage of democracy-

oriented philosophies and traditions” (Kim 1994, 191). He finds similarity to the Lockean notion of sovereignty residing in the people in the Chinese philosophy of Meng-tzu two thousand years earlier. Moreover, he cites other Asian practices dating back millennia, such as the rule of law and the selection of officials through merit-based examinations, as supportive of the principles of modern day democracy. A full examination of these counter-claims is not within the scope of this essay, though it must be said that many of his interpretations of Chinese history run counter to accepted Western scholarship. However, the historical consensus about the merit of such claims is not necessarily as important as the idea that the democratic tradition could be traced back to such practices if leaders attempted to ground them as such.<sup>9</sup>

Kim’s opinion of Lee is clear: “Lee’s view of Asian cultures is not only insupportable but self-serving.” Later he adds, “The biggest obstacle is not [Asia’s] cultural heritage but the resistance of authoritarian rulers and their apologists” (Kim 1994, 190, 194). He points out the hypocrisy of Lee’s statements about the role of government in the West and East Asia,

Asian governments intrude much more than Western governments into the daily affairs of individuals and families. In Lee’s Singapore, the government stringently regulates individual’s actions—such as chewing bubble-gum, spitting, smoking, littering, and so on—to an Orwellian extreme of social engineering.

In his native South Korea, he continues, each household is required to attend monthly neighborhood meetings to receive government directives and discuss local affairs. In Japan, he notes, government ministries play a significant role in regulating the domestic economy. And in China, of course, the government regulates almost all aspects of daily life from where you live, where you work, to how many children you are allowed to have. As Kim puts it, “such facts fly in the face of [Lee’s] assertion that East Asia’s governments are minimalist” (Kim 1994, 190).

Kim is not above proselytizing about Asian values, though. He asserts that “the proper way to cure the ills of industrial societies is not to impose the terror of a police state but to emphasize ethical education, give high regard to spiritual values, and promote high standards in culture and the arts.” He, of course, is speaking as the former opposition leader of an ethnically homogenous state. Even so, one wonders how “ethical education” and promoting “spiritual

values" will rest with the 25 percent of the Korean population who are Christian. Rather than joining the bandwagon of Western-bashing, though, Kim writes that "moral breakdown is attributable not to inherent shortcomings of Western cultures but to those of industrial societies; a similar phenomenon is now spreading through Asia's newly industrializing societies" (Kim 1994, 191). Thus for Kim modernity, not culture, provides the explanation for social decay. The solution to the threats of modernity may lay in culture, however.

### CULTURE OR IDEOLOGY?

Western critics of this new "Asian values" debate are increasingly viewing the rhetoric of Asian values as merely the result of economic self-confidence and a desire to fashion a response to Western (read U.S.) pressure on democracy and human rights. Indeed it is not hard to see that the movement by younger Asian leaders is an attempt to create an ideological framework to justify strong government (and hence their own political positions) in a more liberal economic environment. What is clear from the level of rhetoric about "Asian values" and the dichotomy of positions taken by Asia's democratic versus its authoritarian leaders is that this debate has very little to do with culture, and very much to do with ideology. It is not a question of how things are, but how they *should be*.

The current Asian values debate is a political debate taking place in public between the leaders of both camps, not unlike the appeals made by the Communists to peoples in developing countries in the 1950s. Just as with the Communist challenge, there is no empirical evidence to support the claim that the people of Singapore, Malaysia, or China have values and beliefs that lead them to prefer to be oppressed. In fact, today's authoritarians do not have the ability to control information to the degree authoritarians could in the 1950s. Examples of contrary "values" in these societies abound. Pro-democracy demonstrations in recent years in China, Malaysia, and Indonesia had to be violently suppressed by the government. In Singapore, the ruling party could only muster 58 percent of the popular vote in its most recent presidential elections (August 1993) despite the government-selected opposition candidate's statement that the ruling party's candidate was "far superior" (Freedom House 1994, 495). In both China and Singapore there is a widespread fear among elites of the moral decay of society. Internally, how to

develop the types of values that these leaders say exemplify the Asian way remains an enormous political question. This is compounded for leaders of the heterogeneous states of Southeast Asia, which paradoxically both Lee and Mahathir represent. In some ways, the idea of larger "Asian values" can be seen as an extension of programs designed to create shared domestic values.

Singapore has been at the forefront of countries in East Asia seeking to create a "national ethic," initiated by then Prime Minister Lee. The goal in Singapore is to help Singaporeans keep their Asian bearings as they enter the 21st century: to find a way for Singaporeans to modernize, but not Westernize. Lee has blamed the use of English as part of the general problem of too many Western influences on Singaporeans. He has publicly lamented that the consequence of the widespread use of English among Singaporeans has been to give every citizen "a pocket translator" to explore the Western world. To combat this trend, Lee initiated a "Speak Mandarin" campaign in the mid-1980s and later introduced Confucian philosophy as a core subject in secondary schools. The government is not apologetic about its common censorship of "sensitive topics" and is proud that it stops (or persuades to stop) publication of anything that might stir up ethnic discord; ironically, though, in this area it is the government itself that is stirring up such discord through its "national identity" program which Malays and Indians say stresses Chinese values too much (Pan 1989; Balakrishnan 1989a, 1989b).

Similarly, in China there is widespread concern among elites that market reforms are creating Chinese who value only money. "Chinese people are now moving to a period of pragmatism and self-interest," remarked one well-positioned scholar in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He noted that when the Institute for American Studies began publishing a new magazine for popular consumption called *American Panorama*, the topics of greatest interest to its readers were guns, crime, and sports (Wang Jisi, interview, 23 June 1994). The prevalence of such a modernized, counterculture—counter to Asian values—is not isolated to these two countries. The exact level of support for each set of views, however, is unknown. This is the drawback of such hermeneutic evidence. Until the debate on Asian values moves to a research program on Asian values, it is impossible to know the actual state of affairs.

## CONCLUSION

Cultural explanations for states' international behavior have been on the increase in recent years, primarily as a result of the end of the Cold War and the concomitant change in geopolitics. In looking at the policy ramifications for the major players in East Asia, however, the cultural approach as used to analyze recent rhetoric merely reflects cleavages already apparent due to existing political and economic rivalries and lends little insight into the international relations of the region. Cultural explanations based on an "Asian identity" are premature and reflect more the aspirations of (especially authoritarian) Asian leaders than the cultural predispositions of the people of Asia. In order to understand the cultural inclinations of Asians, one must propose falsifiable hypotheses, not derive a definition of culture through observation of behavior or blind adoption of any one person's views.

The debate over Asian values is important to keep in mind, however, because it may grow into an ideology that exerts influence over the region. As the military and economic power of East Asian states grow, the spread of an ideology counter to American views represents a potential threat that should be monitored. Such an ideology, coupled with a potential hegemon such as China, would be a dangerous combination. This is not the situation today. The international relations of East Asia should not, therefore, be characterized as a "clash of civilizations."

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Nathan distinguishes between the "diminished positivism" more common in theory today and the natural science-like laws popular into the mid-1960s. Both, however, are equally antagonistic to hermeneutic theories of culture that have comprised the bulk of the literature on culture in international relations. Nathan describes "diminished positivism" as that which "requires only that any proposition be precisely specified (for example, with respect to time frame, social actors, geographical location, and indicators of amount or degree), that it be stated in a form that is potentially disprovable by reference to empirical evidence (the falsifiability criterion), and that it be treated as unproven until empirically proven" (Nathan 1993, 928).

<sup>2</sup> For a recent example of this approach in the Asian context, see Ramseyer and Rosenbluth (1993), in which a rational choice, interest-based approach is used to explain Japanese politics. This leads the authors to the conclusion that Japan's bureaucrats (conventionally believed to be powerful

- players) are merely the servants of LDP politicians.
- <sup>3</sup> Admittedly, this is a positivistic approach to culture for it assumes the ability to separate between beliefs and interests. The reflectivist school would reject this separation, and concentrate instead on how preferences are formed and how identities are shaped. For an introduction to this latter approach, see Wendt (1987).
- <sup>4</sup> Most of these studies focus on only one country in Asia. For one attempt at pan-Asian hermeneutic theorizing, see Pye (1985). Survey research in Japan is one obvious exception to this general rule. Many studies of Japanese voting behavior have been conducted, as have surveys measuring values and beliefs more generally. Japan has even been included among a growing number of countries surveyed under *The Civic Culture* framework. Additionally, in recent years survey research has been conducted to a limited degree in China; see Nathan and Shi (1993). There have been no pan-Asian, positivistic studies of culture similar to Inglehart's work on Europe.
- <sup>5</sup> Joseph Nye defines "soft power" as "the ability to establish preferences," often associated with "intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions" (Nye 1990, 32).
- <sup>6</sup> Freedom House surveys annually rank both "political rights" and "civil liberties" on a seven-point scale. From these rankings, they determine whether a country is "free," "partially free," or "not free." Of the major states in East Asia, only Japan and South Korea are designated "free." All other states are classified as "partially free" with the exception of China and North Korea which are "not free" by Freedom House standards.
- <sup>7</sup> Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia refused to attend.
- <sup>8</sup> This was the view put forth at a conference held earlier this year in Kuala Lumpur for Asians only entitled "Asia in the 21st Century." See the February 10 issue of *Far Eastern Economic Review* for more details.
- <sup>9</sup> This argument is based on the idea that all national identities are "constructed" by elites to serve a particular purpose, usually to legitimate a claim to power. What is important is not so much the "truth" in the claim (there can be none) but that the elites are able to ground their claims in some aspect of previous history of the group (Anderson 1983).

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