

Asian Values and Communitarian Democracy

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Discussions about Asian values seem to get more attention among political scientists in the past few years than ever before. Around the early 90s, the issue was still a magazine-topic that one would see occasionally in *The Economist* or some daily news. Recently it has become a feature of academic journals such as *Political Theory*, *Review of Politics*, *Journal of Democracy*, etc. The popularity of the topic attests its potential to become an important question with solemn theoretical implications, yet it remains to be seen whether it will prove a stimulating topic that changes the way we think of Asian politics, or turn out a wind-egg that cannot go through a Socratic midwifery.

The principal theoretical meaning of the controversy of Asian values, as many commenters try to point out, is the enduring contrast and struggle between universalism and particularism. On the one side, the proponents of Asian values, such as Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamed, argue that there is a set of core values which is distinctively Asian and which entails a political-social practice other than the Western style of liberal democracy. On the other side, critics of the authoritarian regimes of Singapore and Malaysia maintain that human rights are universal values to which every human being is entitled, and which no government can violate under the guise of cultural difference. The controversy, then, seems an old story reiterated numerous times ever since the ancient Greeks decided to resist the invasion of the "barbarian" Persians, or at least since the encounter of the East and the West in the early modern ages. The characters are replaced, but the acts remain the same, with the always result that there is no result at all.

The article, however, tries to approach the issue from an angle different from the "universalism vs. particularism" perspective. I shall argue that both sides of the Asian values debate could learn, and should learn, from their adversaries as to how collective values are to be understood, and how a democratic system should be improved if the goal of engagement is not to persuade one's rivalry accept his formula, but to reflect upon the shortcomings as well as the strength of one's system. To illuminate my point, I will first reconstruct the controversy into a four-part typology of arguments, according to their answers to the questions that whether there is a distinct set of Asian values, and that whether liberal democracy is an adequate political institution for Asian countries. Then I will examine, in the second section, what the term "Asian values" actually means, and what its problematic is. In the third section, I will analyze the possibility of an illiberal model of democracy, be it called communitarian democracy or Confucian democracy or pragmatic democracy. The lessons that we can learn from this debate will be discussed in the final part, together with a short conclusion.

I. The Debate on Asian Values and Democracy

The debate on Asian values is usually simplified as an irreconcilable dichotomy, namely, a polar contrast between those who believe that there is a distinctive set of Asian values and those who do not. A careful review of literature, however, reveals that the actual warfare is much more complicated. For example, many supporters of the Asian values hold that liberal democracy is after all an acceptable institutional design even though the Asian culture is significantly different from the Western culture; while those who deny the existence of the Asian way do not necessarily promote liberal democracy. In order to grasp the subtlety of various discourses, I suggest that two questions should be put forth simultaneously: (1) Is there a set of core values which is typically Asian, shared by the people of almost all Asian countries but overlooked or downplayed by the Westerners? (2) Is it necessary for the

Asian countries to adopt liberal democracy as it is exemplified in the United States, England, or any other advanced Western countries? The answers people give to these two questions make up a four-part typology as the following:

		Is there a distinctive set of Asian values?	
		Yes	No
Is it necessary to adopt liberal democracy?	No	I	IV
	Yes	II	III

Type I indicates those people who believe that the core set of Asian values is different from that of the West, and that, as a logical consequence of the difference, Asian countries need not embrace the model of liberal democracy. The former Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, is the most prominent spokesman of this thesis. Lee believes that Singapore is "a society with communitarian values where the interests of society take precedence over that of the individual." If Singapore became a Western-style, individualistic society, he says, "we'd go down the drain; we would have more drugs, more crime, more single mothers with delinquent children, and a poor economy" (Bell, 1997: 7). Or, as Singapore's permanent representative to the United Nations asserts, "Every country is characterized by a unique set of circumstances, with natural, human, and cultural resources and historical experiences that differentiate it from all other nations. Therefore, every country must find its own specific solutions to the problems of governance." Since there are "in fact" some general differences between Asian and Western societies in the sphere of values, it is not surprising that Asian societies should have their own concept of political management. To avoid misunderstanding, the representative adds that he is not advocating non-democratic government. What he wants to emphasize is that we should make a distinction between "democracy as a political theory of legitimation" and "democracy as a mechanism or instrument of government." The former is now a universal ideal that no country can reject, Singapore being no exception. Yet the latter

is "surely robust and flexible enough" to adapt to specific sets of circumstances. Singapore's choice, as the representative quotes from the National Day speech of Prime Minister Goh, is to develop a "pragmatic democracy" that will adopt whatever works for his country (Kausikan, 1997: 24-31).

Type II represents the arguments of those who agree with the distinctive Asian values thesis, but disagree with the proposal of an alternative model of democracy. The value system of the Asians, they think, might constitute a different system of ethics other than the West, but it does not therefore exclude the possibility for the Asians to adopt liberal democracy because the aspiration for individual rights and equal respect is a universal phenomena all over the world. There is no reason to assume that Asian values are intrinsically antagonistic to the universal claims of human dignity. Chris Patten, the former Governor of Hong Kong, makes this point crystally clear in one of his speech. He says he cannot understand "why, in searching to identify and preserve what is unique about Asian communities, it is necessary to deny that which is universal in mankind." He also criticizes those Asian leaders who "lack confidence in their community's ability to cope with economic success without losing their identity." From his point of view, modernity is not incompatible with a country's specific way of life. Asian values, therefore, should not become an excuse for Asian politicians to sanction violation of basic human rights such as torture of political prisoners or oppression of free speech (Patten, 1996: 8). In the same spirit, Joseph Chan reasons:

Some authoritarian leaders in Asia have blamed human rights and democracy for the ills of industrialized societies... They argue that the solution is a strong authoritarian government or a police state that can tightly control its citizens. This view is... wrong. For the causes of those ills are not human rights and democracy but the erosive forces of marketization and industrialization, combined with a lack of strong cultural values and ethical norms that could counteract them... [Therefore] the future of Asian countries depends not only on continuing economic growth but, more importantly, on a strong commitment both to human rights and democracy *and* to the revitalization of Asian traditional values and cultures. The two sets of values complement each other and are equally important (Chan, 1997: 46).

As to type III, it is the very antithesis of Type I, representing those who neither believe "Asian values" is a meaningful talk, nor agree that liberal democracy cannot apply in the East. Basically, the proponents of type III think that Asia is not a homogeneous unity with a common system of mentality, attitude, and values. There exist in Asia diverse religions, races, ethnic groups, philosophical traditions. It is impossible to conglomerate all these components into a single system and call it "Asian", with the implication that they are absent in other areas of the world. For the same reason, it is also impossible to create a characteristic "Western" system of values, declaring that it is only shared by Westerners but never accessible to the Asians. All the rhetoric of the Asian way, in their eyes, is "exaggerated and fallacious" (Dupont, 1996: 13). It exposes a poor understanding of the diversity of human cultures, as well as a vicious denial of the universality of human aspirations. As Sharifah Munirah Alatas emphasizes, "It is more accurate to say that the *articulations* of such ideas that exist in its form today [i.e., liberty and civil rights] had its origins in European history. But this is not to say that such notions did not exist in East Asian traditions (as is seen in the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim traditions). On the contrary, these values are the building blocks of human societies, irrespective of race, religion, culture or geography. Therefore, the distinction between East Asian and Western values is false" (Alatas, 1998: 11). Based on this observation, the proponents of type III maintain that democracy is a universal value which is in no way culture-bound. "It makes little sense to ask whether 'Asia' needs democracy, for it is the same as asking whether America or Europe needs democracy" (Ng, 1997: 12).

Finally, we have the fourth type -- the people who, like those of Type III, think the talk of Asian values is more rhetorical than actual, but, on the other hand, believe that prevalent liberal democracy is not the only choice available to mankind. Liberal democracy is not the only alternative because, for the Westerns as well as the Easterns, an excessive champion of individual rights has broken the balance between individual autonomy and social order. In other words, the problematic of liberal democracy has nothing to do with Asian values. It is a problem whoever feel disappointed with the

practice of liberal democracy would be concerned with. This type of thinking is unusual, so I will explore it in more details in section four. For the time being, it suffices to quote a statement by Donald K. Emmerson. He says that it makes little sense to assume the Asians are the only people who cares about family, social order, respect for the elder, etc. The Westerners cherish these values, too. "Yet even if there are no quintessentially Asian values, the debate about them must be taken seriously by students of 'democracy' because it challenges us to consider what we mean by that term. For if differing societies may democratically implement differing views of the relative importance of social order versus individual rights, it follows that alongside right-titled or liberal democracies there could be nonliberal -- or at any rate less liberal -- variants of democracy" (Emmerson, 1995: 96). To criticize the practice of liberal democracy is not necessarily a result of promoting Asian values, it can come from the Western society itself.

With the typology kept in mind, I now turn to the two questions which make up the classification. I will examine the question about the existence of a core set of Asian values first, and surely this is a foundation of any discussion about the debate on Asian values and democracy.

II. The Contents and Implications of Asian Values

One of the most interesting things in the controversy of Asian values is that there is never a clear definition of the so-called "Asian values". Proponents of the Asian way usually refers to Asian values as all the good things that Asians inherit from their ancestors, without any explanation of what its actual contents is and why it is these values rather than other values. It is as though Asian values simply generate out of the very place where the West fails. For instance, when they observe an extreme development of individualism erode the solidarity of a society, they say "community" is an Asian value. When they see rising crime rates make urban life dangerous, they say "respect for order" is another Asian value. In this way the advocators of Asian

values create many values which they say are typically and exclusively Asian. No wonder while someone lists "ten positive values," another can identify "sixteen basic principles," and still other can forge a system of "two levels with six principles"!

In order to have a minimal basis of discussion, we cannot help but put together all those supposed Asian values, making it as comprehensive as possible. The result is a list of values as follows:

- family: it is said that the Asians cherish family ties and family duty, especially reified in filial piety and paternal care.
- respect for hierarchy and authority: this is an extension of the family relationship to the political and social spheres at large.
- hard work: the Asians are said more industrious than the Westerns; together with this value is thrift and high savings.
- consensus: the Asians try their best to avoid overt conflict in social relations and political struggle. Unanimity is better than majority rule.
- strong commitment to education: Asian parents care their children's education.
- moral persuasion: Asian people prefer to have a government ruling by moral dictates, rather than by law.
- community: the individual should realize that the interests of their nation or state is more important than one's private interests; considerations for the community should always take priority over personal concerns.
- stress on unity and order: too much diversity is a threat to society; everyone should be a law-abiding citizen.

Maybe we can make a longer list as we please, but I think the above is more or less sufficient for the purpose of our discussion below.

Now, several questions come to mind after we have a rough idea of what the Asian values means. First of all, we are not as certain as the champions about the representative function of the Asian values. Is it possible to group all the Asian countries together and list a set of core values to represent their mentality, attitude,

belief, and customs? Does there really exist a common culture which covers Japan, China, Philippine, India, Nepal and Pakistan? I think there is good reason to give a negative answer to both questions. It is true that people sometimes use general terms to indicate or describe what is in fact a collection of diverse components, such as "the Asian people", "the Chinese tradition" or "the Taiwanese customs". The usefulness of a general terms depends on the context in which it is used and on how concrete a denotation it means to convey. Thus the statement "The Indians are concerned with the military extension of the Chinese government" is more or less acceptable, while "The Indians farmers are idle and inefficient" will provoke strong objections. Unfortunately, the "Asian" in the discourse of Asian values seems to belong to the former case. As a journalist of *The Economist* points out, Asia is a huge geographical area "with not only 60% of the world's population but four or five major cultures, several distinct forms of social organization, an ethnic mosaic of astonishing complexity, and three or four big religions." It is therefore irresponsible to talk about "Asian values" as if every Asian is family-oriented, authority-revering, ancestor-worshipping, or equally committed to education. Without taking into account the diversity of Asian cultures, the argument of the Asian way will prove irrelevant at best, and dominant at worst.

Second, probably as a result of the criticism made above, the leaders of Singapore and Malaysia try to delineate the term "Asian values" more carefully when they relate cultural values to the economic success they achieve in the past decade. Lee Kuan Yew once explained that "Asian values" is shared by the people of East Asia only, and further, "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 Indians culture itself emphasizes similar values" (Quoted from Sen, 1997: 34). The limited reference is necessary because in practice the debate has concentrated on East Asia. Yet, even with this limitation, the argument of the Asian way still cannot give an adequate account of why other East Asian countries (such as Indonesia and Burma) have not improved their economic conditions. Nor does it

explain why some prosperous East Asian countries (such as Japan and Taiwan) have so far kept silent insofar as their "Asian values" is concerned. With some many East Asian countries standing aside in the debate, we cannot help doubting whether the rhetoric of Asian values is primarily an instrument of political manipulation which serves specific domestic purposes for specific countries (Dupont, 1996: 14).

Third, it is vexing to some theorists that the advocates of Asian values claim that Asian people prefer order to liberty, and that the Westerns prefer liberty to authority. In an illuminating article, Amartya Sen argues that certain "selected components" of basic notions -- such as individual liberty, authority, and social order -- are discernible *both* in the East and the West tradition. He challenges the view that Asians are as a rule skeptical of freedom and liberty, while emphasizing order and discipline. As a matter of fact, the classical texts of India reveal that the Indians are tolerant of diversity, and the Buddhist tradition is full of examples of respect for freedom. They testify the diversity of Asian value system, dramatically counterbalance the authoritarian reading of Asian culture in which Confucianism plays a dominant role. Actually, in Sen's understanding, even the widespread opinion that Confucianism represents an authoritarian force is a deplorable mistake. "Confucius did not recommend blind allegiance to the state," says Sen. To distill conservatism from the history of ancient Chinese or Indians only demonstrates the eagerness of modern authoritarian regimes to justify their illegitimate political control (Sen, 1997: 35-36). On the other hand, Sen also points out that "order and authority" is an enduring concern of the Western culture. "It is by no means clear to me that Confucius is more authoritarian than, say, Plato or Augustine." The real issue, therefore, is not whether the Asians always put order in front of freedom, but whether the selected components of freedom is totally absent from their traditions. If it is not the case, then cultural relativism should not be exaggerated.

My final point has something to do with the relation of Asian values to economic performance. As everyone knows well, Asian values are introduced by the political leaders of Singapore and Malaysia to explain their remarkable economic success in

the past decades. Yet the region's financial earthquake of the past year suddenly crumble the myth of the East Asia miracle. Those who argued that the Asian system is inherently superior to the Western society seem to have trapped themselves in a ridiculous game of language. Indeed, the very values they boasted probably have contributed to the economic collapse. As one reporter of *The Economist* bitterly ridicules, "Now some of the sins laid at the doors of the region's economic systems look suspiciously like Asian values gone wrong. The attachment to the family becomes nepotism. The importance of personal relationships rather than formal legality becomes cronyism. Consensus becomes wheel-greasing and corrupt politics. Conservatism and respect for authority become rigidity and an inability to innovate. Much vaunted educational achievements become rote-learning and a refusal to question those in authority." The values explaining the economic success turn out vices when the financial crisis deteriorates. The up and down of the fate of cultural values only remind us how absurd it is to use values as the major independent factor in economic explanations. "Asian values" is no more the reason for East Asia countries' economic prosperity in the past twenty years than it is for the region's retarded development in the past two hundred years.

III. The Possibility of a Communitarian Model of Democracy

To our second question "Is it necessary for the Asian countries to adopt liberal democracy?" the advocates of Asian values usually take a negative stand, although logically they are two different issues. In the discussion below, I will keep this distinction as possible as I can. I will first spell out what kind of regime the critics of liberal democracy is up to, and why they prefer this non-liberal (or illiberal) regime to liberal democracy. Then I will discuss how this alternative is questioned by their rivalries who support the liberal version.

The regime offered by the proponents of Asian values has different names. Some call it communitarian democracy, others call it Confucian democracy, still others call

it pragmatic democracy. The term "communitarian democracy" seem to catch the spirit of their proposal best, for "Confucianism" is not necessarily mentioned in countries in which it does not constitute the principal religious-philosophical doctrine (such as in Malaysia), and "pragmatism" is too loose and flexible to seize the idiosyncratic features of East Asia countries' political control. To describe Singapore, Malaysia, and other candidate states as communitarian democracy, however, needs some further explanations.

My first reason to call these states "communitarian" is that the leaders of these countries are happy to declare their preference of community for the individual. For example, on January 9, 1989, four core values were identified by the Singapore government in the presidential address to Parliament -- communitarianism, familism, decision making by consensus, and social and religious harmony. Communitarianism plays the primary role in Singapore government's effort to ensure national unity. Communitarianism in the sense of "community over self" -- together with the other three values -- "should be taught in schools, workplaces, and homes" (Bell, 1995: 8, 1997: 17).

In addition, the ideal regime of Asian leaders can be called communitarian because they frequently refers to the Confucian tradition which they say their people commonly share, while Confucianism is a type of communitarianism. It is not a secret that Confucianism has a community orientation or bias. The job that theorists of Confucianism need to do is to connect Confucianism/communitarianism with democracy so that the governments of East Asia will have a good reason to resist Western liberal democracy. It seems what Russell A. Fox did is exactly this work. After carefully comparing the similarities between classical Confucian and contemporary communitarian thought, Fox suggests that "Confucian theory and practice provides a strong and in many ways unique communitarian response to liberalism, without fundamentally invalidating those humanistic principles basic to democratic reform." Fox believes that classical Confucianism shares with contemporary communitarianism the critique of liberal politics insofar as the

ascendancy of extreme individualism is concerned. The challenge for Asian scholars is therefore to explore "new possibilities to those in East Asia struggling with a valuable Confucian heritage and the lure of liberal modernity" (Fox, 1997: 561-65).

What, then, is the contents of a communitarian democracy except the talks of Confucian heritage and criticism of individualism? I think Daniel A. Bell and his colleagues have outlined the framework for such an "illiberal democracy." Bell argues: the political development in East and Southeast Asia is quite different from the pattern that liberal democracy emerged in the West.

Whereas the Western experience of "democratization" emerged as a response to a growing demand for autonomy on the part of groups and classes in civil society, the dominant and intrusive role of state power in most aspects of East and Southeast Asian social life channels political change to serve the managerial and technocratic ends of the state. Where "democratization" occurs -- in the sense of fair democratic procedures that may allow for an alteration of ruling parties -- a political language deeply rooted in traditional non-liberal concepts of hierarchy, familism, and the possibility and desirability of the harmonization of potentially conflicting interests renders unlikely the emergence of a "liberal" alternative (Bell, 1995: 15).

It is based on this historical observation that Bell goes on to point out that the liberal democratic political system, informed by the ideals of equality, freedom, and recognition of pluralism, is "a culturally distinct, historically contingent artifact, not readily transferable to East and Southeast Asian societies with different traditions, needs, and conceptions of human flourishing" (Bell, 1995: 9). What cannot be transferred, according to the reasoning, seems to include the guarantee of individual freedom (such as the right to criticize one's government, political policy, and leaders themselves), the social arrangement with an egalitarian ideal (such as welfare system or equal opportunity of competition), and the encouragement of pluralistic development (such as the toleration of religions and free publication of different moral perspectives). While what remains would be those elements which contribute to the maintenance of a community with distinct cultural tradition (such as active, patriotic participation). In other words, democracy in the sense of elected government is still necessary, but it will be justified not on the ground of liberal equality, but on

the ground that it "protects and promotes communitarian ways of life, with special emphasis on the family" (Bell, 1995: 36-40).

In their conclusion, Bell and his colleagues maintain that a illiberal model of democracy has actually emerged out of the East Asia context. The prominent features of the model include: (1) a non-neutral understanding of the state, which means the government will forcefully impose what it regard as indispensable to a good life upon all citizen; (2) the evolution of a rationalistic and legalistic technocracy that manages the state as a corporate enterprise; and (3) the development of a well-controlled rather than an energetic and critical public space and civil society (Bell, 1995: 163). This model, to be sure, is not the only possibility of communitarian politics, but it is the one that advocates of Asian values would recommend for the people of East Asia.

All the features of the model of communitarian democracy deserve careful scrutiny, not only because it constitutes a possible alternative to the liberal model, but also because it will dramatically influence Asian people's life if it is carried out by the governments that are in need of a theoretical justification for their authoritarian rule.

Let us begin with the fundamental question "how democratic is it to have a regime contoured by the above features?" Most respondents, I think, would doubt such a regime is still a democratic polity. Democracy, even according to Daniel A. Bell's definition, should mean "open, competitive elections under universal franchise for occupants of these posts where actual policy decisions are made, together with the enjoyment of the freedoms of organization and speech (including publication) needed to enable self-generated political groups to compete effectively in these elections" (Bell, 1997: 8). If a country is to limit its citizen's activity in the civil society, impose certain moral consensus upon the populace, and use legal codes as an instrument of ruling rather than respect the laws as a constitutional mechanism, it would be difficult to say that the "minimal" sense of "procedural democracy" is satisfied. Bell understands this point well enough, so he wants to urge the Singapore leaders to "soften" its hard authoritarianism. He suggests Lee Kuan Yew to allow the right to run for the opposition without fear of retaliation and the freedom to organize political

associations. Yet, if these civil rights were allowed for, why not admit that liberal formula is inevitable even in a communitarian democracy? Liberalism asks for fair competition of official positions, freedom of expression and organization, due process of law, toleration of dissents, humanistic treatment of criminals... I do not see how a communitarian government can rule "democratically" without these conditions being satisfied first.

Secondly, it is occasionally argued that a communitarian regime uses moral exhortation instead of strict laws to guide its people towards the right path of life, and therefore a communitarian society is more considerate and harmonious than a materialistic liberal society. The argument is senseless because those who defend for the authoritarian regime never make a clear distinction between paternalism in its ideal form and paternalism in practice. The textbook of Confucianism, to be sure, is full of moral exhortation comparable to Aristotle's *Ethics* or the *Holly Bible*. The question is nevertheless that Confucianism as state orthodoxy has always proved abhorring and terrifying. As Dupont illuminates, "Classical Confucianism bears little resemblance to the political precepts of neo or 'vulgar' state Confucianism which predominates in contemporary East Asia, and which one writer has described as 'a system of paternalistic authority which has more recently become mixed with nationalism' " (Dupont, 1996: 21). Failure to distinguish the reality from the ideal of benign paternalism makes the theorists of communitarian democracy ignorant of the sad fact of oppression, torture, hypocrisy prevailing in authoritarian countries. The question, therefore, is not whether classical Confucianism is compatible with democracy, but whether the orthodoxy Confucianism practiced by authoritarian states such as Singapore is not a denial of democracy.

The last problem about communitarian democracy is how to adequately assess the communitarian criticism of liberal democracy. That liberalism is challenged by communitarians is not an exclusively Asian discovery. Western communitarians -- Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer, Charles Taylor, Amitai Etzioni, etc. -- also criticize liberalism from various perspectives. They argue that liberal

society is suffering from growing crimes, breakdown of family and local community, loss of civility, racial tensions, irresponsible sexual behaviors, and so on and so forth. Again, they attribute the undesirable development to an excessive extension of individualism, and a loss of communal tie as well as traditional virtues. It reminds us of the fact that criticism of liberal democracy is not a privilege of the Asians. And interesting enough, if a liberal society is not rid of the capability of self-reflection, there is virtually no point to exaggerate the contribution of the Asians when they say liberal democracy is not perfect. Unless we are going to deny everything which liberal democracy brings about in the past several centuries, it would be a better policy to improve its practice rather than throw the ideal away. In this sense, a distinct communitarian model of democracy is not only improper, but unnecessary.

IV. The Lessons of the Debate

If the above analysis is not wide of the mark, we will have ground to suspect that the whole debate on Asian values and democracy is essentially a dubious controversy with little theoretical significance. The topic of the fight -- Asian values -- is a poorly delineated concept. The reasons that advocators of the Asian way offer cannot stand up to critical examination. And most importantly, the proposal to develop a communitarian (or Confucian) democracy only turns out a wishful thinking of returning to the Golden Age. Probably the critics make a good point when they say that the talk of Asian values is more of rhetoric than practical meaning. The use of values to explain or justify a country's rise or fall has long been a habit of political leaders. It is a useful instrument because by resorting to a set of virtues unique to their culture, politicians will be able to create a sense of national solidarity, through which their political rule can be legitimized. In the case of Asian values, we find similar function is utilized by the leaders of Singapore and Malaysia. Economic success is certainly an achievement to be proud of, yet the heterogeneity of ethnic components (in Singapore) or the prevalence of social injustice (in Malaysia) constitutes an eternal

threat to an authoritarian regime that has little credit in terms of human rights. The forging or recycling of a putative tradition becomes not just an exercise in image-building, but critical to the state's unity and stability, and even to the leaders' political life. The assertion of Asian values helps politicians build up an identity which otherwise will never generate in a multi-ethnic society, and simultaneously creates an imagined regional cohesion which can increase the countries' international weight. If we look forwards seeing anything sincere and original within this kind of political manipulation, we are fooling ourselves.

The exchange of fire between the opponents and advocates of Asian values also teach us a lesson about the nature of cultural identity. It is never too often to repeat that cultural stereotyping is a popular phenomenon among different peoples around the world. Stereotyping is unavoidable, however, partly because we can perceive other people only through generalization and oversimplification, and partly because there is usually certain degree of reality in gross descriptions, no matter how many mistakes there exist. The danger of cultural stereotype emerges only when we are led into bizarre extremes and do not find a way out of the paradox. In the case of Asian values, the extremes reside in two straw men the existence of which the fighting parties try to persuade us to believe. On the one hand, we have the "ultra-Orientalism" straw man which represents the view that "East is East, West is West." It is said that between these two great civilizations no core values can be shared. On the other end, we have the "ultra-universalism" viewpoint which argues that human nature is everywhere identical, and therefore cultural differences are insignificant (Emmerson, 1995: 100). What the two extreme views cannot realize is that culture is as changeable as it is diverse. For instance, the Chinese is a people deeply influenced by the philosophy of Confucius, and thus possess some characteristics which may not be so apparent in other peoples. But it is erroneous to assume that Chinese people will never change their pattern of behavior or belief even after a long time of great social transformation such as modernization. If we insist on the unity and stability of cultural identity, we fail to understand why and how the heritage of a people had experienced

transformations before it is handed over to the offspring by the ancestry. If we believe naively that human beings are of a common mode of pleasure and pain, aspiration and fear, interest and conviction, we also fail to comprehend why national conflicts still prevail all over the world and have no sign of extinction. A balanced view of particularism and universalism is always the best guideline when cross-cultural affairs is involved.

A point related to the last observation is that the future of democracy should also be considered in light of what kind of balance we can reach, rather than in light of which type of institution we are to adopt. The advocates of Asian values despise human right and liberal democracy because they have little confidence in the system of the United States, where, they say, is full of delinquent crimes, racial discrimination, and egoistic indulgence. Their hostility toward liberal democracy would be justified if the current social condition of the United States was the only exemplar of liberal society. Fortunately it is not. Indeed there is good reason to argue that excessive individualism is never the only foundation of liberal democracy. Individualism is usually counterbalanced by an emphasis of community in the history of the West, be it called romanticism, corporatism, communalism, or republicanism. "It is only in the past couple of generations," says Fukuyama, "that the balance between individualism and communalism in the United States has been tipped decisively in favor of the former" (Fukuyama, 1995: 31). For a variety of reasons, communal ties and republican virtues have been undermined, while appeals for individual freedom under the magic word "inviolable right" have remarkably increased. The result is that even Americans themselves are worried about the inimical development and begin to criticize the liberal cause. It is not altogether impossible to imagine a new arrangement of society which is less individual and more communal, less libertarian and more republican. In other words, the current practice of liberal democracy is no so perfect that we are prohibited to explore other options or ways of improvement. Yet, the motivation of our searching for new models would not be the same as that of Daniel A. Bell, who promotes an illiberal model of democracy

primarily on the argument that Asians have their unique political development and historical heritage. It seems to me that Bell commits mistakes when he takes the status quo of East Asia to be the preconditions demarcating the possibility of any future development. He fossilizes the Asian experience into an essential entity with distinct and exclusive identity to which only an illiberal politics would be proper. The arguments are understandable, but its logic is erroneous.

The above train of thoughts brings us back to the typology I introduced in section two, where I promised to give a more detailed account of the fourth type. Now I would like to make it clear that type four ("no Asian values, no liberal democracy") is what I recommend for those interested in the discussion of Asian values. The talk of Asian values is empty in my eyes because Asia is not a geographical area where a common system of values can be applied universally. There is much more sense to talk about Confucian values, Muslim values, Buddhist values, etc. than to talk about Asian values. The cultural heterogeneity of Asia makes it presumptuous to group all the Asian countries together and assign it a collective identity. This is not to deny that in a limited sense the term "Asian culture" or "Asian values" can be used with cautions, such as in a festival which advertises rice-food to the Westerners. Yet on serious issues such as international confrontation or diplomatic crisis, the assumption of the West vs. the East is a dangerous and irresponsible notion.

To challenge the concept of Asian values, however, does not imply that the practice of Western liberal democracy is a universal institutional arrangement that every country has no other choice but to embrace. I question the universality of liberal democracy not because it is of Western origin, while we are Asians; but because in its current practice liberal democracy has proved itself insufficient, in the sense that communal ties and republican virtues are paid as cost for the development of extravagant individualism. The leaders of East Asia criticize the atomization of Western society with good reasons, but it is not a problem that only Asians feel uncomfortable with. The strong criticism generating within the society itself tells us that the practice of liberal democracy is far from perfect. The Westerners as well as the

Easterns are entitled to asking for a better democracy -- a democracy which is not only accountable to the people, but manifest in civic virtues and mutual concerns. This aspiration will eventually help us visualize a horizon beyond the muddy debate of Asian values.

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Abstract

Discussions about Asian values seem to get more attention among political scientists in the past few years than ever before. Proponents and opponents of the "Asian way" usually argue with each other along the line between universalism and particularism. My article, however, tries to approach the issue from an angle different from the "universalism vs. particularism" perspective. I shall argue that both sides of the debate could learn, and should learn, from their adversaries as to how collective values are to be understood, and how a democratic system should be improved if the goal of engagement is not to persuade one's rivalry accept his formula, but to reflect upon the shortcomings as well as the strength of liberal democracy. To illuminate my point, I will first reconstruct the controversy into a four-part typology of arguments, according to their answers to the questions that whether there is a distinct set of Asian values, and that whether liberal democracy is an adequate political institution for Asian countries. Then I will analyze, in the second section, what the term "Asian values" actually means, and what its problematic is. In the third section, I will examine the idea of an illiberal form of democracy, be it called communitarian democracy or Confucian democracy, and repudiate it as a feasible alternative to liberal democracy. My rejection of the talk of Asian values and illiberal democracy, nevertheless, does not imply that the prevalent liberal democracy is a perfect paradigm which needs no improvement or enrichment. A democracy based on liberal values, but also attuned to civic virtues and mutual concerns, would help us visualize a horizon beyond the muddy debate of Asian way.

中文摘要

近年來「亞洲價值」的討論在政治學界日益受到重視，支持及反對亞洲價值的人通常各據「普遍主義」及「特殊主義」一端，試圖以哲學觀點折服對方。本文另闢蹊徑，以「亞洲是否有獨特文化價值？」及「亞洲是否應採取自由民主體制？」等兩個問題為判準，將相關論述分成四種不同類型，逐一檢視其論證邏輯。作者基本上認為亞洲範圍廣袤、各國傳統殊異，實無法籠統歸納出共享的核心價值。另外，若干主張亞洲國家應抗拒西方自由民主體制的論調也禁不起檢驗，因為他們所訴求的儒家文明只是未曾實踐的理想，而現實中的東亞國家卻充滿威權主義的作風。筆者認為亞洲國家必須在擺脫「亞洲價值」神話的前提下，努力尋求某種奠基於自由主義民主，同時又能培養公民德行及相互關懷的政治體制。