

The Asian Values Debate

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LET me begin by saying what a great honour it is for me to speak at this PBEC conference.

I believe in community-building. And I believe one of the most important tasks in the remaining years of this millennium is to lay strong foundations for a Pacific community of friendship, goodwill and prosperity — bringing closer together the peoples of the northern Pacific, the southern Pacific, the eastern Pacific and the western Pacific. We must eschew exclusiveness and we must believe that the best way to convert non-believers is to keep in contact with them and to demonstrate the good resulting from your beliefs. The worst thing you can do is to isolate them and to cause misery in order to gain their submission to your beliefs and your ways.

Ideologies which are forced on people have invariably ended in rebellion and rejection. It is as true of economic systems as it is true of political systems. The present world-wide love affair with the free market economy is not the result of armtwisting. It is the result of observing the obvious results of the free market system. It is noteworthy that *perestroika* and *glasnost* were initiated not by the masses in the Soviet Union but by the top leaders, the only people who could go abroad to the so-called capitalist countries and see for themselves how much better-off were the workers there, compared to the poverty of the workers in the Communist countries. What Gorbachev and Edouard Shevenardze saw must have convinced them that Communism held no promise for their country. And so Gorbachev started the process of embracing the free market and also democracy.

The Cold War was not won by Western diplomats or generals. It was won by the workers of the West with their Chevys and Plymouths parked outside Western factories. It was won by well-stocked supermarkets and shopping malls.

Speech delivered by the Prime Minister of Malaysia Dato' Seri Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad at the 29th International General Meeting of the Pacific Basin Economic Council, at Washington D.C. on May 21, 1996.



I have not been asked to give my views on the Cold War. I was asked to speak on Asian Values. But what I have said so far has some bearing on the subject. Engage, don't contain.

There is a sincere belief amongst many in the West that their values and beliefs are universal – universally valued and believed in by all civilised and civil men and women everywhere. There is the sincere belief amongst many in the West that there are only universal values, and that these values are – as you may have already guessed – the values which they hold. There is also the sincere belief amongst many in the West that the advocates and champions of Asian values or other values are merely justifying oppression, dictatorship and uncivilised behaviour. Those who speak of Asian values are just looking for, or merely making, excuses.

I happen to believe that there is a large common ground of values which we all share, arising out of the fact that we are human, that we are parents, and that we, being gregarious, must live in society, and so on.

But I also happen to believe that there are natural differences in values. Those who say there are none are like the colour blind who can only see shades of grey; they cannot see all the colours of the rainbow and therefore say they do not exist.

Is anyone suggesting that there are no differences at all between the American way of life and values and some of the ways and values of the 'old world' – Europe? Indeed, did multitudes not flee to the 'new world' in order to escape from the values and the ways of the old? I am sure there are many American values and ways of today which the French would find somewhat different, if not quaint or even repulsive. Even the Americans' close cousins, the British, are put off by some American values. Indeed, I am sure there are many in Europe who would see themselves as the custodians of 'universal' Western values, who would see many American values as being at variance with, or on the fringes of Western values. America is in so many ways a result of experiences and circumstances

almost unique in the community of nations, even in the Western world.

Those who believe there are no differences at all in value systems and value beliefs might ask whether even within a single country there are no great value differences. Surely there is big city culture and 'Peyton Place' culture. And big cities across continents share much in terms of values and ways. The starving in all societies share much, just as the very wealthy and the *nouveau riche* share much. America itself has been said to be a nation of many nations – of many ethnic, cultural and geographical nations.

If all these things are true, how can it be argued that there are only universal values? If anything, it might well be argued – as I have had the temerity to argue – that just as European values are more universal than American values, Asian values are in fact more universal than both. Indeed on the basis of numbers and great similarities with others in most of Africa and much of Latin America, if anyone can claim to be the holders of universal values, Asia with its billions can. At the same time I pray the time will never come when anyone in Asia will stand up to claim that there are only universal values, i.e. the values of Asia. And that anyone who speaks of American values or European values or Western values are merely justifying the unholy things that are being perpetrated in America, Europe and the West.

If this were to happen, it could only be out of the arrogance of power. I believe that Asia will never have such power. I hope we will never have such arrogance.

However offensive or outrageous may be the idea that others elsewhere can deeply believe in different things and that these beliefs, values and ways of doing things may possibly be better, more productive and even more civilised than one's own, one should at least be prepared to accept this possibility.

Here, ladies and gentlemen, is part of the problem. For centuries, so many of us in Asia believed that our Asian values and ways were second-rate. If today, Asians have discovered that

Asian ways and values are not inferior simply because they are Asian, and often are superior despite the fact that they are Asian, perhaps we may be forgiven. Especially when we read daily about the terrible things that Westerners say are happening in the West and the wondrous things that so many Westerners say are happening in the East. If many in the West are either wondrously taken or sedately impressed by many of the values and ways of Asia, is it so strange that many Asians are similarly, wondrously or sedately struck by many of the values and ways of Asia?

Not only are we now convinced of the rightness of many of our Asian ways, but we are also convinced that these Asian ways are currently under attack. And much of the debate on Asian values is clearly defensive in nature. It is therefore not surprising that the intensity of the Asian values debate is largely determined by fear that Asian success might lead to Asian self-assertion.

Many of us in Asia cannot but be aware of results. It is hard to quarrel with results. We cannot avoid noticing the connection between our approach and our values with our success in many fields. Why then must we change ourselves to suit the West and their values. Why are so many in the West insisting that we become just like them. This the strong among us will not do. The weak unfortunately have little choice.

The ancient Greek historian, Thucydides, at the end of his history of the Peloponnesian wars, came to the conclusion that in the affairs of nations the strong will demand what they will and the weak must yield what they must. Much of Asia will no longer yield. For much of Asia is now no longer weak – in material or mental terms. Much of Asia will resist – in silence. Some in Asia will talk back.

We will do so not just because we have thrown off the shackles of mental servitude. In truth, we must fight for we are fighting for our winning ways, which are under internal as well external attack and erosion. We know we can only win the future by mustering and fortifying the many strengths of the past.

I have attempted an explanation of why it is that Asian values are often the subject of such vigorous debate. Let me now say a few things about Asian values *per se*. First, what are some of these values?

Asia is, of course, a huge continent, just as America is a huge country. For every generalisation about Asia or America that is made, exceptions can be found. And yet, there is a body of common values and beliefs that can be called 'Asian,' that most of us in Asia hold on to, in order to guide our way in the world, just as there is a body of common values and ways that can be called 'American.' I would like to emphasise here that the differences between people is not in their physiognomies, ethnicity or skin colour. What distinguishes them is their culture – that is, the system of values which they believe in.

With regard to East Asia, David Hitchcock, the former director of East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the United States Information Agency had actually conducted the first ever quantitative survey comparing East Asian and American values.

In 1994, he asked Americans and East Asians (Japanese, Thais, Chinese, Koreans, Malaysians, Singaporeans, Indonesians and Filipinos) to choose six 'societal values' and five 'personal values' which they regarded as core and critical. The results were presented in a publication called *Asian Values and the United States: How Much Conflict?*

The survey found that the six societal values most valued by the East Asians were:

- First, having an orderly society;
- Second, societal harmony;
- Third, ensuring the accountability of public officials;
- Fifth, freedom of expression; and
- Sixth, respect for authority.

On the other hand, the six most important values for the Americans polled were:

- First, freedom of expression;
- Second, the rights of the individual;

- Third, personal freedom;
- Fourth, open debate;
- Fifth, thinking for oneself (all of which did not figure among the most critical concerns of the East Asians); and
- Sixth, the accountability of public officials.

Interestingly more East Asians emphasised the importance of 'new ideas' and public accountability than did Americans.

Despite Hitchcock's interest in discovering commonalities between East Asians and Americans, he found fundamental differences not just with societal values but also with regard to personal values. The five most important personal values stressed by the Americans polled were:

- First, self-reliance;
- Second, personal achievement;
- Third, hard work;
- Fourth, achieving success in life; and
- Fifth, helping others.

The five most important personal values stressed by the East Asians, on the other hand, were:

- First, hard work;
- Second, respect for learning and education;
- Third, honesty;
- Fourth, self-reliance; and
- Fifth, self-discipline.

As for the sixth most important core value – 'fulfilling obligations to others' – it was stressed by 39 per cent of the East Asians, but only 19 per cent of the Americans polled emphasised this.

On the other hand whereas 59 per cent of the Americans stressed 'achieving success in life,' only half as many East Asians did so; whereas 59 per cent of the Americans stressed 'personal achievement' only 33 per cent of the East Asians did so.

On the other hand, whereas 69 per cent of the East Asians emphasised respect for learning, only 15 per cent of the

Americans did so; whereas 48 per cent of the East Asians stressed self discipline, only 22 per cent of the Americans did so.

First, I do not know how accurately this American study reflects reality. But Hitchcock provides figures that support the intuitive assumptions of most East Asians and those who really know East Asia well.

Second, I do know that so many Asian values which so many Asians declaim with such reverence, are often more honoured in their breach than in their practice.

Third, I do know that many of these 'Asian values' were once also 'Western values.' Many of them are what would be termed 'Victorian values.' Many of today's Asian values were Western values which much of the West have successfully thrown off or 'lost.'

Fourth, some are obviously a function of our stage of development and will be challenged and discarded – to our gain or to our loss – as we move forward.

I hope that my exposition on Asian values so far has not by any stretch of the imagination justified dictatorship, authoritarianism, anti-democratic practices, the suppression of human rights, and the denial of democracy. I hope that my arguments also do not in any way justify torture, the exploitation of child labour, the suppression of women and the wanton destruction of the environment.

Having offended the universalists, the most militant of whom are congregated in the West, let me now be permitted to offend the authoritarians, so many of whom are said to congregate in 'the East.'

The first thing that might usefully be said is that any atrocity anywhere cannot be tolerated. It should be punished. No one should be allowed to hide behind the cloak of cultural relativism. Atrocities, as you must know, are found not only in Asia; some of the worst examples are found in the West.

Secondly, many Asian values should obviously be destroyed. God only knows how hard we have struggled against

so many of them. In many parts of Asia, there is excessive materialism and in many parts there is excessive anti-materialism; there is of course extremist spiritualism, usually manifested in extremely unspiritual ways. And there is the opposite.

In some societies, there is the ethics of fatalism. In others, the dominance of contentment, smugness, even arrogance. In many Asian countries, there is excessive deference to authority resulting in social and psychological authoritarianism.

The record of Asia with regard to fundamental economic, social and cultural rights has too often been as atrocious as the record of fundamental civil and political rights.

Some of these are inequality, the repression of women and the weak; the economic, political, intellectual and social disempowerment of millions; a deep psychological sense of inferiority; the lack of self-confidence and sense of self-worth.

Uncaring societies abound in Asia; they have not an iota of love and regard for God's living creatures, for the infirm, the disadvantaged, the handicapped, and the physical environment which man holds only in trust. Much of this is a function of ignorance and poverty, though some may be due to just greed and an uncaring attitude.

Then there are in Asia, undiluted adherence to tradition, superstition and magic, deep and often widespread corruption and also the equally deep and widespread tolerance of corruption. The list is too long even to enumerate.

A third point is equally obvious. If 'Asian' does not necessarily mean 'good,' 'Western' does not necessarily mean 'bad.' Asia's process of learning from the best in the West is far from complete. There are many Western values, found in the best Western societies, which we should adopt or internalise more deeply.

I remember in my country's own history, that we had to do a lot of persuading before the British, the erstwhile advocates of democracy, granted us the right to have elections and to vote. It was we Malaysians who were denied democracy and many of

our human rights. In the end they relented and retreated without scorching the earth. But democracy came very much later in Hong Kong even as they advocated democracy in all their former colonies. The excuse was that Hong Kong was doing well without democracy. Now that Hong Kong is to revert to China, authoritarian colonial rule has become abominable.

When Malaya became independent in 1957, our per capita income was lower than that of Haiti. Haiti did not take the path of democracy. We did. Haiti today is the poorest country in all of the Americas. We now have a standard of living higher than any major economy in the Americas, save only for the United States and Canada. We could not have achieved what we have achieved without democracy. We could not have done it without the free market system. But others who think that democracy and the free market means prosperity should think again. Democracy and the free market are more likely to result in prosperity but they do not guarantee prosperity. Other things are needed.

Still, my fourth point is that we in Asia must fight for and be the champions of democracy, the market system and respect for human rights for all. We must, because our value system says that this is the moral course. And it can be the most productive course for our future.

Having said this, let me make a fifth point with equal passion. Not all forms of democracy are productive. There is good and productive democracy as well as bad and destructive democracy. Democratic freedom must go hand-in-hand with democratic responsibility. There are good and productive market systems and bad market systems as Orange County knows well. There are good and productive means for achieving advancement in the dignity and circumstances of our people as well as well-meaning but romantic, silly and unproductive nonsense.

Each society must be allowed to find its own best forms and processes. Let Americans not forget that between July 4, 1776 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 there were almost two centuries of political development and one civil war. I wonder

how many of the Western politicians who champion the interests of other peoples are not in fact bent only on championing their own.

Ideas and actions are great not because they are romantic or full of bravado but because they are productive of human welfare – productive not only immediately but in the long run. There is a need to be fair and not to demonise those in less than ideal circumstances. Unfortunately, many who pass judgement do not have the time to master even the basics, still less the complications.

I have said enough on Asian values and the Asian values debate to offend both sides of the great divide. Let me now touch on mutual respect enrichment.

Before I insist that 'the West' must have more respect for other values and other cultures, let me concede that we outside 'the West' also need a balanced perspective of 'the West.' If it was ridiculous for so many of our elites to once believe that everything that was good was in the West and everything that was in the West was good, it is equally ridiculous to now believe that everything that is bad is in the West and everything that is in the West is bad.

Mutual regard is simply that: mutual regard. There is much in the West that commands respect. At the same time, it is right and it is time that Asia too is accorded the regard and the respect that is its due.

Mutual respect demands an acceptance that those who have a different view are not necessarily misguided or evil. Mutual respect demands a minimum level of humility on all sides.

The countries of the West have a right to their preferences. But they have no right to ram their preferences down everyone's throats. They have the right to resort fully to the power of persuasion. But they have no right to resort to the persuasion of power.

In a speech at a 'Europe/East Asia Summit' organised by the World Economic Forum in 1994, I said, half-jokingly, that

there are many Asian leaders who, in their more exuberant moments, think they can solve the problem of Serbian atrocities in Bosnia, the problems of the Basques, of Northern Ireland, and the income inequalities between northern and southern Italy.

In many Western societies there are massive problems of drug addiction. There are teachers afraid of their pupils. There is chronic vandalism. There are some societies where there are more illegitimate babies than legitimate ones. There are countries where large numbers of people in their 30s or even 40s have never worked for a single day of their lives. There are places where an unemployed person is better-off not working than if he found a job.

There are some democracies where political leaders are afraid to do what they know is right, for one reason or another. And the people and their leaders live in fear – fear of the free media which they so loudly proclaim as inviolable. Indeed they are quite literally oppressed by their own media, the way people in feudal societies were oppressed by their rulers – knowing their unfortunate situation but not daring to raise their voices against an established institution, so as to curb its excesses.

Many Asian leaders, in their moments of levity, I hasten to add, believe that they have the answers to such problems. If some European countries want their help and advice, I said, 'I am sure they would be willing to give such help and advice.' But so far, it has not entered the mind of any Asian leader to threaten sanctions if any Western country fails to put its house in order. No Asian parliament I am aware of has passed a single resolution calling on its government to take steps should a European country not reform itself.

If any Asian leader were to so threaten, or if any Asian parliament were to so act, the West would regard them as mad. The West would regard the whole idea as preposterous. If it is preposterous and mad for Asian leaders to threaten sanctions when Europeans fail to measure up to their standards and norms, could it not be a little preposterous for Europeans to threaten

sanctions when decent Asian societies prefer their own standards and norms, and not Europe's?

To this and many other questions which I had asked, I did not get a reply. All I received was public admonition. Although what I had said about Europe might be true, the rebuttal that I received was that it was 'unacceptable.' I repeat 'unacceptable.' It was not 'unwise,' not 'injudicious,' but 'unacceptable' that I should have publicly mentioned some of the ills found in Europe.

A European press correspondent asked me afterwards whether I thought that the European participants had come to the forum (in Singapore) to be lectured to by me. The free Press which lectures all the time to the world obviously did not think I have a right to free speech.

The famous political scientist, Samuel Huntington ended his equally famous essay, 'The Clash of Civilisations,' with a half-hearted call for the civilisations to co-exist. With all the passion that I can command, I call not for co-existence but for mutual cultural enrichment.

We in Asia have learnt a great deal from the West. We will be unnecessarily constraining our full potential if this process were now to be stopped. At the same time we in Asia have to learn a great deal also from 'the East,' from the rest of Asia, from Africa and Latin America – and from the best that our own histories and cultures have to offer.

I believe that North America too may find some value in this message of enriching each other, of mutual enrichment, of rejuvenation and of self discovery.

Asian values are Asian values, American values are American values. But the twain can meet. And from the meeting there might develop some understanding and appreciation of the wisdom of each, and hopefully a wedding of the good, and the rejection of what is bad or evil.

Let us all admit that no one has a monopoly of wisdom. Let us deliberately prepare for and enthusiastically partake of a feast

of civilisations, where we each take the best that all of us have to offer – and together build for the first time a single global civilisation such as the world has never seen.