

## **ASIAN AND WESTERN VALUES: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE APEC COMMUNITY-BUILDING PROCESS**

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The discussion on Western and Eastern values has begun to take on emotional heat even in sedate conferences such as the Williamsburg Conference, where keeping one's cool has always been the vogue.<sup>1</sup> A "phantom" debate, an excuse and a rationalization for "authoritarian control," a "sterile and artificial" differentiation between cultures are just some of the more colorful coinages which have been traded across conference tables where Western and Eastern values is the main topic.

Throwing more logs into the fire would not be helpful. Where a controversy rages, it is helpful to contribute any perspective that can douse the fire. This paper is a call for other perspectives that can help place the controversy on Western and Eastern values within the context of a community of people who greatly needs to understand each other better.<sup>2</sup>

### **VALUES AS ABSOLUTE AND RELATIVE**

"People" provides a useful start. People places value on the "goods" they wish to have. Values stir the minds, ignite the imagination, and stimulate people to act with persistence and without ceasing until the desired goods have been acquired.<sup>3</sup>

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Mind, imagination, action: these are the capacities of any human. The question then is: *Are these goods, which are common to all humans, being used?*

In the abstract world of ideals, where "eternal verities" find their home, the answer is assuredly positive. It is in this world where men and women from the East and West find a Creator to adore, an ancestry to venerate, and a truth to tell as well as respect for the lives, honor, and property of others.<sup>4</sup> These values are universal and it is possible to generalize its application. If they spring from the basic fact of being human, then they must be absolute in the sense that they apply to all humans.<sup>5</sup>

There must be a litany of such universal values. The United Nations (UN) has formal declarations and international conventions on human, civil and political rights while the Commission for a New Asia has articulated the fundamental values that must underpin the construction of an Asian order that is responsive to and responsible for a harmonious and progressive international order.<sup>6</sup> While any effort toward a consensus on universal values can be long and difficult, a consensus can still be (and has been) reached with no distinctions between East and West.

However, people do not live in the abstract world of ideals alone. They also have to grapple with day-to-day realities. Thus, while they have long-term, strategic, and fundamental values, they also have short-term, operational and concrete targets to aim which are necessarily conditioned by time, place and other circumstances.

The lives of people are illustrative. The driving forces and concerns of a 15-year old person are markedly different from those of a 30-year old, 50-year old, and 70-year old person. The "goods" that are important to an individual who thinks he has a full life ahead are quite different from those which a dying person would value.

The operative values of people change in real life.<sup>7</sup> In the Philippines, for instance, there may have been widespread popular support for order and sacrifice for development in the 1970s; but in the 1980s, greater premium was placed on personal freedom and the restoration of democracy. In Hollywood in the 1950s, carrying an illegitimate child was enough

to drive Ingrid Bergman out of town; but in today's Hollywood, Madonna is "deliriously happy" to advertise the same fact and her fame or notoriety has not become any better or worser as a consequence. In the early decades of its economic development, Singapore, along with many other economies, adopted the slogan "Stop at two," urging people to help curb the growth of population. Today, however, one of Singapore's most famous ambassadors urges anyone who still talks Malthusianism to go through a reality check.<sup>8</sup>

People and circumstances change along with the operative values that drive, motivate, and shape their priorities. The changes may not be ethical (refer to Madonna) but they are nonetheless real.

Taking these relative changes in operative values as they come at different times, places, and circumstances is to recognize the differences between East and West. The priorities in the East at present may be one of the following: hard work, frugality, respecting authority, and sacrifices for the development of the economy. The priorities in the West may be caricatured as: leisure, conspicuous consumption, license and litigiousness even against public authority, personal greed and selfishness. In reality, there is nothing in the first set of priorities that would make them distinctly Eastern just as there is nothing in the second set of priorities that would make them exclusively Western. The fact is that the first set of priorities are universal values which everyone from East to West should try to practice in day-to-day situations while the second set of priorities are universal vices (or negative values) which should be minimized or altogether avoided.

If some people from the East are successful in making universal values operative in their societies, everyone should applaud and try to emulate them as good examples for the rest to follow.

But the problem does not lie in the attempts to operationalize universal values. It lies in the priorities of any set of people who, at any given time, try to make them universal by applying them in their associations with other people with different (although no less laudable) current priorities.

The values of order and sacrifices for economic development may be paramount in a society at a certain period. To secure order, it may curtail a few civil liberties. To exact adequate sacrifice for economic development, it

may impose some curbs on union prerogatives and social privileges, even on the licentiousness of the press. A few dissidents may get a figurative bashing in the head and many indulgences, including those of the press, may be dramatically curtailed. But it is possible that in the end, the values pursued will be successfully achieved and the gains may well be worth the sacrifice.

However, at the same time, another society may pursue its own priorities, which may be altogether different. The value of freedom and the responsibility of defending and spreading democracy depending on the level of understanding and practice may be taken as paramount. The society may insist on civil liberties, including the right to openly express dissents and criticisms against public authority. It may go further and insist on elections where the opposition has a real chance of winning or a free press where even the most outrageous and ludicrous criticisms are seemed fit to print.

The principle of "to each his own" is acceptable so long as basic, universal values are not infringed upon. Each society should be able to set its own priorities according to the values it considers most important to its own progress. There should be no problem with a society which puts a very great premium on order and sacrifices for economic development from another society which gives great stress on freedom and democracy (with its own interpretation and practice). The problem arises when one society tries to hold up its own current relative values and judge another society, which is pursuing its own current operative values, based on the former=s values. The problem becomes worse if one society preaches its own values to another. The worst situation arises when each society tries to impose its own current relative values on the other.

The solution appears obvious: To understand and accept that priorities and relative values can differ, at least for the moment, and that each society responds to its perceived needs. Once this is recognized, the tendency to impose one's own society's current relative values on another will be avoided and misunderstanding and controversy will be lessened if not eliminated.

## THE MEETING OF THE TWAIN

The differences between relative operative values that help shape a society's current culture can be acute when there is little interaction between societies.

Current trends have allowed greater interaction between societies so that modes of thinking, expressing, and even living have spread quickly across borders. The mass media has become a powerful instrument for universalizing certain elements of modern life, especially among the younger generation who listen to the same type of music, watch virtually the same TV programs, and enjoy the same games.<sup>9</sup> However, it is not only the young generation which is exposed to these factors: millions of homes are reached by Cable News Network (CNN) each hour of each day; think tanks and networks dish out ideas, views, information to hundreds of thousands of opinion- and policymakers; traders, brokers, investment bankers have broadened their reach that there exists between them an almost seamlessly interconnected market where they swap information instantaneously and tend to react simultaneously to local or global (the distinction is increasingly blurred) events and developments.

Thus, while differences continue to exist between societies, many similarities are emerging. Styles and fashions tend to be more widespread and wisdom becomes more conventional quickly. Through the mass media, pundits can have more influence than policymakers while stars and athletes can have more global popularity than local politicians. As interaction becomes more intense, similarities increase relative to differences that will remain.

Mass culture breeds greater uniformity, so do discipline and control. Indeed, strong exercise of authority has been an alternative way in achieving greater uniformity and cohesion in thought and expression. Whether compliance arises out of deep respect for authority or fear of showing disrespect and criticism, most citizens in an authoritarian society prefer to play safe and generally toe the official line. There are advantages, not least for the authoritarian leaders, but greater uniformity in thought and expres-

sion is not radically different from the quick conventionalization of wisdom through the mass media. The treatment of dissidents and those who fall out of line may be very different but even this difference is likely to narrow overtime if every society continues to be engaged with other societies within an increasingly smaller global village.

Through mass media or authoritarian control, there is a discernible tendency toward greater convergence of culture (modes of thinking, expressing and living) and operative values within each society from either West or East. In fact, the same tendency toward greater convergence of values can be observed between societies from West and East mainly through media and other globalizing trends. Thus, the twain (West and East) are meeting.

## **MOVING FORWARD TO PROGRESS**

The leveling of big differences between Western and Eastern cultures and values can lead to either widespread decadence or progress.

Thus far, economic growth has spread from West to East. In the past three decades, many economies in the East, particularly in East Asia, have experienced unprecedented economic growth which has brought enormous material prosperity, greater economic self-confidence, and accumulation of vast reserves.<sup>10</sup> On the basis of every quantitative indicator of economic wellbeing, many Eastern economies have done very well. East Asia has reached that point where it can be considered a region that is at par with North America and Europe.<sup>11</sup> There is also an increasing hype about China becoming the economic superpower before the first quarter of the next century.

But does sustained economic growth necessarily lead to social progress?

There is no doubt that sustained economic growth leads to economic development but it is questionable whether economic development ultimately leads to social progress. Eastern history tells of many decades of material prosperity and high levels of cultural attainment<sup>12</sup> but the same

history points to the West as the vanguard of progress. In order to utilize current levels of economic attainment as the base for genuine social progress, Eastern and Western economies will need to foster the values and culture that is most conducive to long-term economic development and social progress.

The first of these values is entrepreneurship or the spirit of enterprise which leads many individuals in society to take initiatives, find new directions, and sail toward untried, untested, and unknown regions.<sup>13</sup> It is this spirit that breeds creativity and thrives in an environment of freedom, where individuals can be themselves using their talents and energies.

In recent decades, the West has fostered the spirit of enterprise in ways that multiplied inventions and innovations as well as opened up new frontiers due to productivity. Although there is controversy surrounding productivity increases in the East<sup>14</sup> on the basis of well-recognized contributions to management science and process engineering from the East, the spirit of enterprise can not be claimed exclusively by the West. In this regard, the trend toward convergence has been helpful to the East which has shown openness and flexibility to incorporate the spirit of enterprise into its value system but it also knows it has a lot of catching up to do.

The second of these values is self-restraint or the spirit of sacrifice for the broader good of society. This value motivates many persons in society to practice self-control so as to contribute to a firmer cohesion and greater order in the community. A sense of social responsibility blocks the selfish pursuit of narrow interests and greed. An operative concern for the common good leads to specific and sometimes heroic acts of altruism, generous service and provision of personal, private resources for a common cause. It is the spirit that breeds selflessness and puts less stress on individualism and more on communitarianism.<sup>15</sup>

In recent decades, Eastern economies have been guided by the spirit of sacrifice to enable them to substantially narrow the gap between them and the more developed ones of the West. They had sought for and obtained greater harmony in industrial relations; asked for less debate and

more understanding; run a light ship where all hands were expected to work as hard as possible and contribute more than what was required; and exhibited toughness in keeping their macroeconomic balances in good order so as to end up with high rates of savings and high levels of reserves. In exchange for order and harmony, they tried to deliver welfare and greater equity. For the most part they succeeded and in some cases were exceedingly well.<sup>16</sup> Still, the East needs reminders that it does not have a monopoly on communitarianism and it should continue to draw some lessons from the West on the deepening of the community spirit in society lest success gets into its head. However, the East has placed a far higher premium on sacrifice for the common good and has moved forward accordingly in the past few decades.

To move forward on the road to genuine progress, the East and West will have to stress both the spirits of enterprise and of sacrifice for the common good. The economies, whether from East or West, that succeed in doing so shall continue to do well and to move on toward progress. Given the increasing tendency toward congruence, there is a greater likelihood for the economies of the East to draw lessons on how to further operationalize the spirit of enterprise from the West and vice versa.

Both East and West will have an even more fundamental task of ensuring progress and avoiding long-term decadence. They will need to ensure consistency between the operative, relative values at any given time with the timeless, universal and absolute values. After all, absolute values flow from the basic humanity of everyone, the final measure of whether economic growth and economic development can lead to people not only having more resources but also becoming more humane. Decadence eventually occurs if development is limited only to relative values; progress is ensured if development is also extended to the latter values.

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### ENDNOTES

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