ASIAN VALUES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

A CONFUCIAN COMMUNITARIAN PERSPECTIVE

WM. THEODORE DE BARY

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Wm. Theodore de Bary

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To Brett, Paul, Cathy, and Bea

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Asian Values and Human Rights

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"Asian Values" and Confucianism

When I was first asked by the National Endowment for Democracy to speak on "Asian values" at a conference entitled "The Future of Democracy in Asia," the sponsors themselves admitted that they had only a vague notion of what Asian values were all about, and hoped I might give them a clue. Unfortunately, fifty years of studying, teaching, and writing about Asian civilizations and Asian humanities did not help much in answering the question. "Asian values" is a new concept in current political parlance, and one could not help wondering what this new usage was all about.

From the recent debates on multiculturalism one might suspect a reference here to the Asian component of the term Asian-American, which has come to represent the infusion into American life of cultural values from one or another group of Asian extraction, now claiming recognition as minorities in a new multicultural America. Values ordinarily connote the core or axial elements of a culture, the traditional ground (mostly seen as moral but not exclusively so) on which rest the culture's most characteristic and enduring institutions. Asian American, however, refers to a set of several ancestral cultures, each the product of a particular homeland in Asia whence came the immigrant group, and each proud of its own distinctive traditions. Paradoxically then, the minorities included under the rubric Asian-American find their only unity (if it is not to be found in the common

experience of victimization) in the joint claim to diversity. Nothing there of common ancestry or core Asian values.

True, there is a special sense in which scholars from different parts of Asia, on coming to America, have contributed to the translation and interpretation of their own culture in Western terms, while at the same time doing so from a new Asia-wide perspective, which sometimes has lead to the recognition of shared values among Asians. This scholarly recognition itself, however, is part of a larger world trend, the undoubted importance of which is limited neither to Asia nor America, nor to any ethnic or scholarly group.

In historical fact, while the diverse cultures of Asia are each to some degree multicultural (that is, the products of long cultural interactions), there was, until modern times, no consciousness among them of a shared Asian identity. Even as a defensive reaction to pressures from the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Pan-Asianism has mostly been adjunct to modern nationalism and instrumentally subservient to it, rather than constituting anything like an Asian people's cultural bedrock. Traditionally the distinct civilizations of Asia did not identify themselves with a common continental culture, whatever the religious bonds they may have shared with other Asian peoples. Even Samuel Huntington, that adept descryer of clashing civilizations on the contemporary power scene, has found no common "Asian Culture" or "Asian Civilization," but only—up to this point, at least—irreducible differences among the major Asian civilizations.

Such being the case, one naturally suspects that the expression Asian values, a relatively recent construct, is meant to suit other ideological purposes, as was the case in pre–World War II Japan, with its proclamation of a "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere," imagining that other Asian peoples would identify with this Japanese formulation of a hybrid Asian ideology resistant to Western domination.

Today the most likely source for such a concept is Singapore, a

city-state with a Eurasian culture and ethnically mixed Asian (but predominantly Chinese) population. Singapore has a genuine need to formulate some value consensus among diverse—and potentially divisive—ethnic and religious groups that will serve as a common denominator for public morality, for the civil conduct of public affairs, and for the work ethic that is needed to sustain a high level of economic growth.

This understandable need and concern in Singapore is conditioned by other limiting factors, however. Prime among these is a belief in ruling circles that only strong, steady leadership can keep communal peace, and that authoritarian government, providing firm policy direction and social stability, is the necessary condition of continued economic growth. It is here, then, that the Singaporean conception of Asian values has become identified with authoritarian rule and the two together brought into collision with modern human rights concepts and practices.

That Singapore should be taken as a model for Hong Kong is hardly surprising, given the similarities in their geographic situations and their shared Sino-British political and cultural backgrounds. But that the tiny city-state of Singapore, hardly an imperial power, should now be seen as the fountainhead of inter-continental resistance to the human rights movement is suggested by a report from Africa. This *New York Times* report suggests that authoritarian regimes on that continent, seeking to emulate the economic success of Singapore and other East Asian nations, have adopted what is called an Asian model of development,[1] giving priority to the strengthening of state authority, central control, and social discipline, rather than to the development of democratic institutions.

What is most striking in this report is its further identification of the Asian model of development with Confucianism, an idea that could only have come from Singapore itself. Before the latter's rise to economic and political prominence, Confucianism had often been considered a drag on economic development and

modernization. While this early stigmatizing of Confucianism as backward and retrograde had begun to yield, in the sixties and seventies, to a revisionist view of East Asia's (especially the so-called Little Dragons') "post-Confucian" culture as a powerful human resource for modernization, it was Singapore's Lee Guan-yew who most visibly dramatized the combination of authoritarian direction, high-speed economic progress, and the promotion of Confucian values. (Taiwan could well have qualified for the same role, since its economic, technological, and social successes were no less impressive than Singapore's and its continuity of Confucian culture was even better attested, but in these same years, Taiwan, rather than pitting Confucian values against democracy and human rights, was moving in the other direction—away from one-party tutelage by the Kuomintang and towards a more representative electoral democracy.)

Thus, if "Asian values" remains a problematic concept in this context, the expression "non-Western," prejudicial though its negative connotations may be for other cultures, could actually apply here. When authoritarian regimes in far-off Africa declare themselves cousin to similar states in Asia, it cannot be that they spring from the same ethnic or cultural roots but that a common cause is defined negatively in resistance to certain Western democratic values that they see as needlessly complicating the task of economic development.

Neither genuinely Asian, nor necessarily the development model for all of Asia (considering the success of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in combining economic growth with progress towards liberal democracy), this authoritarian model is dressed up in supposed "Confucian values," a notion that may have a certain specious plausibility considering the widespread tendency, earlier in this century, to identify Confucianism with autocratic and authoritarian rule in the imperial dynasties—a view widely propagated in both China and the West after the collapse of the Manchu dynasty in 1911.

What has lent further credence to this association of Confucianism with authoritarianism is the more recent reversal of Communist China's long-standing hostility to Confucianism—typified earlier by the Cultural Revolution's targeting of it as the ghost of the past hampering revolutionary change. Since the death of Mao, however, and the overthrow of the so-called Gang of Four, Confucianism has been discreetly rehabilitated by the more moderate Deng and Jiang regimes—with considerable assistance from Singapore—as a better long-term support for an established government than the revolutionary, class-struggle morality that had inspired its rise to power, but later had torn the country apart in the days of Mao.

At the height of the Cultural Revolution, when Confucianism was under the most violent attack, this repudiation of Chinese culture seemed to me not the last word in this debate. As I said in the early 1970s:

> The Chinese have thought of the Way (or Dao) as a growing process and expanding force. At the same time, following Mencius, they have felt that this Way could not be real or genuine for them unless somehow they could find it within themselves, as something not external or foreign to their own nature.[2] The unfortunate aspect of their modern experience has been the frustrating of that healthy instinct, through a temporary loss of their own self-respect and a denial of their right to assimilate new experience by a process of reintegration with the old. To have seen all value as coming solely from the West or as extending only into the future, and not also as growing out of their own past, has hindered them in recent years from finding that Way or Dao within themselves. The consequences of that alienation and its violent backlash have been only too evident in the Cultural Revolution. We may be sure, however, that the process of growth is only hidden, not stopped, and that the new experience of the Chinese people will eventually be seen in significant part as a growth emerging from within and not simply as a revolution inspired from without.[3]

Nevertheless, it is understandable that the present regime, following the more moderate policies of Deng Xiaoping, feels some nervousness about too abrupt a reversal in its legitimizing ideology. Its totalitarian party structure and its claim to one-party rule—to the monopolization of politics that it still guards jealously—are based on the idea of the Communist Party's unprecedented historic success in reunifying the country militarily, establishing firm control, and revolutionizing it economically. Lest it needlessly jeopardize this precarious claim to legitimacy, the current leadership is still somewhat reserved in its sponsorship of the Confucian revival and careful to channel it in directions considered conducive to harmony, stability, and continuity.

Meanwhile, critics of the Deng regime, many of them still motivated by the libertarian ideals of the May Fourth Movement out of which the Chinese Communist Party itself was born in 1921, and by the militant anti-establishmentarianism of the Cultural Revolution in the late sixties and early seventies, are only confirmed in their negative view of Confucianism when they see it adopted by the current, repressive regime. All the more are they persuaded of this when they see advocates of a distinctively Chinese form of socialism cite Confucianism as the essence of the Chinese tradition, and invoke it as the native cultural ground on which to reject human rights concepts as alien, culture-bound, Western impositions on China. The modern "liberationist" movement (and its heirs at Tiananmen) who had, as an article of faith, taken the emancipation of the individual to be a prime goal of the revolution, were dismayed but probably by this time not surprised to find the Deng regime suppressing human rights as being incompatible with the traditional Confucian values of harmony and social discipline. This fit the picture of a reactionary Confucianism they had been given earlier.

It was not, however, the Confucianism of Chinese scholars carrying on Confucian studies abroad, free from the depredations of the Cultural Revolution, nor was it the view of human rights

held by others conversant with both Confucian tradition and Western human rights thinking for whom the two were not incompatible. When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations in 1948, participants in the process included representatives from the Republic of China, schooled in Western law but also disposed to include Confucian humanistic sentiments in the language of that Declaration.[4]

Ironically one of these representatives was Wu Teh-yao, later president of Tung-hai University in Taiwan, who still later became the director of the Institute of East Asian Philosophies, which promoted the Confucian revival in Singapore in the eighties. Men of this generation, liberally educated in both China and the West, included Dr. Hu Shih, a one-time president of Beijing University and subsequently head of the Academia Sinica in Taiwan; the jurist Dr. John C. H. Wu; Dr. T. F. Tsiang, China's permanent representative at the United Nations, and many others who saw Western and Confucian values as convergent in these respects, not necessarily at odds. Indeed Hu Shih, out of the Chinese experience, added to the list of human rights. Witnessing how his countrymen in the People's Republic were forced to speak against their own consciences, he proposed adding, to the right of freedom of speech, the freedom not to speak.

This earlier Chinese judgment has been confirmed by at least two subsequent developments. Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea—all countries whose civil cultures have been deeply influenced by Confucianism—have subscribed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and generally have observed its provisions (in the cases of Taiwan and South Korea, with the record of observance improving as democratic institutions have evolved). For the People's Republic, however, the record is mixed. On the one hand the government has formally subscribed to the Universal Declaration, and its constitution has made legal provision for human rights. This was without any stated reservations as to how compatible these might be with Confucian val-

ues—a tacit admission, it would seem, of the difficulty of constructing a Confucian or Chinese rationale for opposing them. On the other hand, as is well known, the People's Republic of China has frequently been charged by international bodies with violations of human rights in China and Tibet. Officially the response to such charges has been simply to reject them as interference in the internal affairs of China. It is then left to others, less formally but with implicit official approval, to argue the case that the West's conception of human rights is too individualistic, and out of keeping with China's communitarian traditions based on Confucianism.

At this point the rhetoric of nationalism and of China's resistance to Western imperialism comes powerfully into play, now in the form of allegations that Western culture-bound concepts of human rights are being imposed on China. To deflect and discredit charges that individual human rights are being violated in China, sweeping counter-accusations are made that "rampant individualism" in the United States and the West has produced a pattern of gross self-indulgence and social decay that Asian nations cannot afford and must guard against by tough law enforcement.

Although spokesmen for authoritarian regimes like to define the human rights problem as one of the "individualistic West" versus "communitarian Asia," this formulation only obscures the issue. The very real social problems attributed to the "individualistic West"—violence, crime, drug and sex abuse, and breakdown of family life, to name only the most obvious—attend the modernization process wherever it goes on, in East or West. Thus it is less a question of Asian versus Western values than a problem of how the forces of a runaway economic and technological modernization are eroding traditional values in both Asia and the West. Since these erosive effects are felt particularly by the individual and the community in the form of damage to one's sense of personhood, a decline in individual self-respect, and a loss of the sense of belonging to any stable, viable community, it is

natural for these trends to become matters of deep anxiety and concern. The solution of these problems is only prejudiced, however, when they are misconceived as conflicts between East and West, or in ways that further belittle the individual and degrade the community, which is what happens when human rights issues are treated primarily as questions of law and order and the upholding of state authority.

As the rhetorical heat rises, in the crossfire of charges and countercharges no middle ground is left for a rational resolution of human rights issues. Still, much as one would like to escape this confrontational mode and lower the temperature of the debate, it is questionable whether one should try to allay mutual defensiveness or escape a recriminatory atmosphere at the cost of ignoring real issues. The Clinton administration, having first blown hot on human rights, has now blown cold, and is even worse off for having beaten an ignominious retreat. Political realism may dictate this, since governments can go only so far in pressuring others without exposing themselves to charges of interference in others' domestic affairs. Yet there is a more subtle reason that sets a limit to what can be accomplished through government channels, a factor no less real for being intangible: diplomacy, by its very nature, requires tact; it cannot succeed if the other party is discountenanced and left humiliated. In this case one may well ask whether it was not Clinton, rather than the Chinese, who lost face, but in the wake of this recent human rights fiasco, one wonders whether other approaches are not needed, especially non-governmental ones, to matters of such delicacy. Non-governmental organizations can speak clearly for themselves in ways that diplomats cannot. Scholars, journalists, editorialists, and publicists can, in settings less fraught with tension, argue more intently and probe more deeply into the underlying issues.

Through dialogue, and even open debate where that becomes possible, questions of Confucianism and human rights can be

clarified better than they have been so far, so as to move beyond the level of the shouting match. In the process one could hope to recognize both shared human values, significant cultural differences, and limiting economic factors that condition the effective realization of certain humane values.

At this point, however, I should note a distinction long made by serious students of Confucianism (as of other traditions as well) between ideal values and their implementation in historical practice. Both must be taken into account in any fair assessment of a tradition's relevance to modern life, as when it is claimed by proponents of "Asian values" that Confucianism has a special pertinence to the modernization process and to the practical formulation of human rights concepts in Asia. Because of the special Confucian concern for the defining of human moral relations in particular social contexts, we need to think of traditional values as transmitted on different social levels and in diverse institutional forms, rather than as constituents of an unvarying, monolithic system. Current political controversy and ideological polemics rarely take such distinctions and particularities into account, but they are essential to meaningful discourse and are not to be dismissed as just fussy academic distinctions.

In the response to "Asian values" claims it has sometimes been thought sufficient to find in Asian traditions, and mostly in classical Confucian writings, some evidence of values akin to those associated with human rights concepts. For this purpose quotations have been drawn from the *Analects* of Confucius, or in the case of Buddhism from the sutras or the pronouncements of the early Indian ruler Asoka, to illustrate their humanitarian sentiments.[5] This book too will necessarily refer to the body of classical Confucian literature in order to establish the original premises of the tradition more precisely than has usually been the case when Confucian values were invoked. Still, such classic statements serve only a limited purpose. They can illustrate traditional ideals or axial values—which are by no means in-