

The Political Context and Consequences of East Asian Economic Growth

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Over the past couple of years, there has been an extended discussion of the question of "Asian values," that is, whether Asia constitutes a distinct and unified cultural area separate from the West, and what implications such a cultural area would have for the politics of East Asia. The argument has been made that the West, and particularly the United States, is plagued by a series of social problems and falling economic competitiveness brought on by its runaway individualism and democratic political culture. In Asia, it is said, there is greater respect for family, community, and political authority. States in this region will not evolve into Western-style societies, but will retain their own "soft" authoritarian institutions and will, for that reason, remain more competitive in the global economy. Most states in the region have shared common experiences of rapid and successful economic growth, which have strengthened the view that there is something distinctive to the region as a whole.

I believe that this point of view is incorrect, and that the cultural unity of Asia has been dramatically overstated for political reasons. In fact, Asia is gradually democratizing like other parts of the world, and will continue to do so as economic development proceeds. This is not to say that the path towards democracy will be smooth, or that the capitalist and democratic institutions created

in this region will look identical to those in Europe and North America. But Asia is and will be part of the larger process of modernization taking place around the world.

While it is no longer “politically correct” to be a proponent of “modernization theory,” the latter has stood the test of time relatively well, and nowhere more so than in Asia. Postwar modernization theory held that political democratization and liberalization would follow as a consequence of economic development.¹⁾ In a seminal article published in 1959, Seymour Martin Lipset noted the empirical correlation between a high level of economic development and stable democracy.²⁾ While that correlation has been endlessly debated since then, it was strengthened considerably with the democratizations that have occurred since

1) The basic texts outlining early postwar modernization theory include Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society*(Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958): the various works of Talcott Parsons, especially *The Structures of Social Action*(New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937), (with Edward Shils) *Toward a General Theory of Action*(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), and *The Social System*(Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951). In this tradition were the nine volumes sponsored by the American Social Science Research Council between 1963 and 1975, beginning with Lucian Pye’s *Communications and Political Development*(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), and ending with Raymond Grew’s *Crises of Political Development in Europe and the United States*(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

2) Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *American Political Science Review* 53(1959) 69-105.

the mid-1970s, and today is more valid empirically than it was when first enunciated thirty-seven years ago.³⁾

The correlation between development and democracy is nowhere better illustrated than in Asia. The states of the region have established stable democratic institutions roughly in the same order that they developed economically, beginning with Japan and extending now to South Korea(which held its first completely free election in 1992) and Taiwan(which was the first Chinese society to democratically elect a president in May 1996). There have been a number of failed pro-democracy movements in China, Thailand, and Burma, but even these cases tend to demonstrate the link between development and democracy: in the Chinese and Thai cases, particularly, the leaders of the pro-democracy movements tended to be relatively well-educated, "middle-class," and cosmopolitan, the sort of individual that was created during earlier periods of rapid economic growth.

While modernization theory argued that there was a correlation between development and democracy, it was less clear on what the causal connections were between the two phenomena. I have argued elsewhere that the linkage between the two cannot be understood in economic terms.⁴⁾ That is, the fundamental impulse toward liberal democracy comes out of a non-economic desire for "recognition". The consequences of economic modernization are

3) For evidence, see Larry Diamond, "Economic Development and Democracy Reconsidered," *American Behavioral Scientist* 15(March-June 1992): 450-499.

4) See *The End of History and the Last Man*(New York: Free Press, 1992), particularly Part II; also, see my "Capitalism and Democracy: The Missing Link," *Journal of Democracy* 3(1992): 100-110.

therefore indirect: they raise living and educational standards and liberate people from a certain kind of fear brought on by life close to subsistence. This permits people to pursue a broader range of goals that were always there, but latent, in earlier stages of development. Most important is the desire to be recognized as an adult with a certain basic human dignity, a recognition that comes through participation in the political system. Poor peasants in the Philippines or El Salvador can be recruited by landlords to take up arms and form death squads, because they can be manipulated relatively easily by their wants and are used to obeying traditional sources of authority. It is much less easy to persuade educated, middle-class yuppies to obey the authority of a leader simply because he is wearing a uniform.

Modernization theory came under heavy attack in the 1960s and 1970s from two sources. The first were Marxist critics who argued that capitalist democracy was not the proper goal of political and economic development, and that modernization theorists were apologists for an unjust capitalist global economic order. The second group of critics might be labeled cultural relativists, who argued that modernization theory was Eurocentric and did not take account of the diversity of ends dictated by the world's different cultures. While the Marxist critique is less prominent today as a result of the collapse of communism, the relativist critique remains very powerful, and has intimidated many people from arguing that there is a universally-valid development path leading to capitalism and democracy. Despite the relationship that has existed between development and democracy in the past, many today would argue that Asia will not continue to democratize in the future, or that the form of democracy created there will be so

specifically rooted in Asian traditions as to be unrecognizable to Westerners.

The most prominent proponent of an Asian cultural alternative to democracy has been Lee Kuan Yew. Singapore under Lee developed a model of what might be called a “soft” or paternalistic form of authoritarianism, which combined capitalism with an authoritarian political system that suppressed freedom of speech and political dissent while intervening in its citizens’ personal lives in an often highly intrusive way. Lee has argued that this soft authoritarian model is more appropriate to East Asia’s Confucian cultural traditions. More than that, he has said that Western democracy would be positively harmful if practiced in a society like that of Singapore, since it would encourage permissiveness, social instability, and economically irrational decision-making.

Many Western authorities on democracy would agree about the relationship between Confucianism and democracy. Harvard’s Samuel Huntington, for example, has written that “Confucian democracy” is a contradiction in terms: “Almost no scholarly disagreement exists on the proposition that traditional Confucianism was either undemocratic or anti-democratic...”⁵⁾

In my view, the degree of incompatibility between Confucianism and democracy asserted by either Lee or Huntington greatly overstates the obstacles that this ethical system poses to the spread of a political system that is recognizably democratic in a Western sense. The most important incompatibility between democracy and Confucianism is the latter’s lack of support for individualism or

5) Samuel P. Huntington, “Religion and the Third Wave,” *National Interest* no. 24(Summer 1991): 29-42.

a transcendent law that stands above existing social relationships and provides the ground for the individual conscience. While this is a very important difference, it is not clear that a Confucian society cannot create workable democratic institutions that meet democracy's essential requirements.

Let us begin with the ways in which Confucianism is obviously compatible with democracy. First, the traditional Confucian examination system was a meritocratic institution with potentially egalitarian implications. In a modern form, the examination systems implemented in many Confucian societies as gateways into their higher educational systems and bureaucracies are arguably very significant paths to upward mobility that reinforce the relatively egalitarian income distributions that prevail throughout much of Asia. Second, and related to the examination system, is the Confucian emphasis on education itself. Finally, Confucianism is a relatively tolerant ethical system, as are most Asian religions. Confucianism has been able to coexist with religions like Buddhism and Christianity; while this record of coexistence is not perfect (witness the periodic persecutions of Buddhists in China), its record is arguably better than that of Islam or Christianity.

But the compatibility of Confucianism with modern democracy goes deeper than this, in ways that are less often recognized. Huntington describes Confucianism as if it were comparable to Islam, being essentially a doctrine that unified the political and ethical spheres and legitimated the state's authority over all walks of life. But the notion that Confucianism simply strengthens the group against the individual and the state against all subordinate organizations or institutions is a vast oversimplification of the real impact of Chinese Confucianism. The scholar of Confucianism Tu

Wei-ming distinguishes between what he calls “political Confucianism,” which legitimates a hierarchical political system culminating in the emperor, and what he calls the “Confucian personal ethic” which regulates day-to-day life.⁶⁾ Political Confucianism was very much tied to the Chinese imperial system and its supporting bureaucracy of gentlemen-scholars. This system was abolished with the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911. Despite efforts of the Communists in Beijing and other Chinese governments overseas (like that of Singapore) to appropriate the imperial system’s legitimacy, its continuity has been fundamentally disrupted. Tu argues that the more important legacy of traditional Confucianism is not its political teaching, but the “personal Confucian ethic,” which regulates attitudes towards family life, work, education, and the other virtues that are valued in Chinese society. It is these, and not inherited attitudes toward political authority, that account for the economic success of the overseas Chinese.

But one could go much further than this, and argue that the true essence of traditional Chinese Confucianism was never political Confucianism at all, but a very intense familism that took precedence over all other social relationships, including relations with political authorities. That is, Confucianism builds a well-ordered society from the ground up rather than the top down, by stressing the moral obligations of family life as the basic building block of society. Beyond the traditional Chinese family, or *jia*, come obligations to lineages and larger kinship groups; the state

6) Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Ethics Today: The Singapore Challenge* (Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1984), p. 90.

and other political authorities are seen as a kind of family of families that unites all Chinese into a single social entity. But the bonds within the immediate family take precedence over higher sorts of ties, including obligations to the emperor.

It is important to note that in this respect, Chinese Confucianism is very different from the version that evolved in Japan when neo-Confucianism was imported into Japan after the Song dynasty. The Japanese modified Chinese Confucianism in certain strategic ways to make it compatible with their imperial system. In importing neo-Confucianism, the Japanese were careful not to have its political dictates impinge on the prerogatives of the emperor and the political class ruling Japan.⁷⁾ Hence, in contrast to Chinese Confucianism, one's obligation to the *daimyo* was superior to one's obligation to one's father.⁸⁾ In Chinese Confucianism, the family(or lineage) is a bulwark – often a very powerful one – against the power of the state; in Japan, the family is a much weaker rival to political authority. Hence Huntington's characterization of Confucianism as inevitably supporting state power against subordinate social groups applies much more readily to Japanese than to Chinese

7) See Michio Morishima, *Why has Japan "Succeeded?" Western Technology and the Japanese Ethos*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

8) For more detail on the Tokugawa-period debates on this subject, see Martin Collcutt, "The Legacy of Confucianism in Japan," in Gilbert Rozman, ed., *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and Its Modern Adaptation*(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p.33; and I. J. McMullen, Rulers or Fathers? "A Casuistical Problem in Early Modern Japan," *Past and Present* 116(1987): 56-97.

Confucianism – despite the fact that Japan, and not China, has been democratic for past 45 years.

This contrast between Chinese and Japanese Confucianism has resulted in several characteristic differences between the political culture of the two countries, that should have implications for their ability to practice Western democracy. Because bonds within the family are so strong within a traditional Chinese society, ties between people unrelated to one another are correspondingly weaker. There is in a Chinese society, in other words, a relatively high degree of distrust between people who are not related to each other. The Chinese may be characterized as family-oriented, but they not group-oriented as the Japanese are frequently said to be. The competition between families makes Chinese society frequently seem more individualistic to Western observers than Japanese society, and is the basis for the famous remark that while the Japanese are like a piece of granite, the Chinese are like a tray of sand, with each grain representing a single family.

Because of the primacy of the family, political authority in China has always been weaker than in Japan, and hence political instability closer to the surface. Chinese families have traditionally been suspicious of government authority, and many Chinese family businesses (both in the PRC and among the overseas or *Nanyang* Chinese) go through elaborate evasions to hide their affairs from the tax collector and other officials. Nationalism and national identity have traditionally been much weaker in China than in Japan: there is little Chinese sense of the “we-against-all-outsiders” that has at times characterized Japanese nationalism. Loyalty to family, lineage, and region

frequently take precedence over the mere fact of being Chinese in business relationships or even political loyalties. Many people have remarked that the level of citizenship is lower in China than in other societies: provided the state leaves them alone, most Chinese do not feel particular obligations to the larger society around them. And there is certainly no generalized obligation to do good to strangers simply because they are human beings, as there is in Christian culture.⁹⁾ The Chinese have less of a sense of natural unity than do the Japanese, so that instability is, in a sense, more psychologically threatening.

In a paradoxical way, the weaker Chinese deference to authority creates a greater need for an authoritarian political system in Chinese societies. Precisely because state authority is less respected in China, the danger of social chaos emerging in the absence of an overt, repressive state structure is greater there than in Japan. The fear of China fragmenting and becoming dangerously unstable was clearly one of the factors motivating the Chinese communist leadership to crack down on the pro-democracy movement in Tienanmen Square in June 1989. Fear of disintegration is what continues to make them reluctant to liberalize the political system significantly. One is led to suspect that the emphasis on political authoritarianism in Singapore and other Southeast Asian states is less a reflection of the fact that they are neatly self-disciplined societies, as they would have outsiders believe, than that they enjoy a rather low level of spontaneous citizenship and might come apart in

9) W. J. F. Jenner, *The Tyranny of History: The Roots of China's Crisis* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1992), p.113.

unpredictable ways in the absence of coercive political authority. In Japan, by contrast, it is not necessary for the state to legislate against not flushing public toilets or writing on walls because the society itself has absorbed and internalized these rules.

The generalization, then, that Confucianism is somehow deeply inimical to Western democracy, is a tremendous oversimplification. Chinese Confucianism, in particular, does *not* legitimate deference to the authority of an all-powerful state that leaves no scope for the development of an independent civil society. If civil society is weak in China, it is not a result of a statist ideology, but due to the strong familism basic to Chinese culture, and the consequent reluctance of the Chinese to trust people outside of their kinship groups. The problem of institutionalizing democracy in China in the future will not be that the Chinese are culturally too deferential to state authority, but rather the opposite: they have too weak a sense of citizenship to cohere spontaneously or make the necessary sacrifices for the sake of national unity. Like other familistic societies in Southern Europe or Latin America, there will be a need to bring the morality of the "street" more in line with the morality of the family.

The statist, group-oriented attitudes towards authority that Huntington believes are characteristic of Confucianism *per se*, are more properly characteristic of Japan and Japanese Confucianism, and were indeed manifest in Japan in an extreme form during the 1930s. Because of the experience of the war, nationalism and statism have been de-legitimized, and a workable democracy implemented in its place. Traditionally deferential attitudes towards political authority continued to be evident, however, in the long-unchallenged rule of the bureau-

cracy-LDP-business triangle in the postwar period. But as noted earlier, it is not clear that they will continue to pose an insurmountable barrier to a more participatory, Western form of democracy involving contestation of power between two parties.

The ways in which Confucian culture, both Chinese and Japanese, differ significantly from the Christian-democratic culture of the West, have to do with the status of the individual. While Chinese familism may look individualistic in some respect, it is not the same as *individualism*. That is, individuals do not have any source of legitimate authority on the basis of which they can revolt against their families and the web of actual social ties into which they are born. Christianity provides the concept of a transcendent God whose Word is the highest source of right. God's laws take precedence over all other social obligations — remember that God required Abraham to be willing to sacrifice his son — and this transcendent source of morality is the basis on which an individual Western conscience can revolt against all forms of social obligation, from family all the way up to the state. In modern liberalism, the Christian concept of a universal God is replaced with a concept of an underlying human nature that becomes the universal basis of right. Liberal rights apply to all human beings as such, just as did the Christian God's law, transcending any particular set of real-world social obligations. While few of today's American human rights advocates at Asia Watch or Amnesty International would describe themselves as believing Christians, they share their Christian culture's emphasis on universal rights and, consequently, individual conscience as the ultimate source of authority.

This, it is safe to say, does not have a counterpart in any Confucian society, where, to repeat, there is no obligation to treat other human beings equally simply because they are human beings. It is this difference that is at the root of contemporary disagreements between Americans and Asians over human rights policy.

While there is not an obvious “natural fit” between Confucianism and liberal democracy, and certain clear-cut differences, it is not obvious that Confucianism presents any insurmountable or lasting obstacle to democratization. We should remember that many experts once thought Confucianism presented insuperable obstacles to capitalist economic modernization as well. While Huntington argues, correctly, that modern liberal democracy grew out of Christian culture, there were many forms of Christianity inimical to liberal tolerance and democratic contestation (including, at one point, the Catholic Church itself) that had to be overcome before modern democracy could emerge. The obstacles posed by Confucian culture do not seem greater than those of other cultures, and when compared to Hinduism or Islam, would appear to be much less significant.

