

Geography 484
Southeast Asia
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Lecture #9b
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The “Asian values” debate

- Cultural relativism as plank (Asian societies more hierarchical, less individualistic than the West)
- Importance of the “strong state”
- Importance of the strong family unit
- Lee Kuan Yew’s deployment of “Asian values”
- Mahathir’s appropriation of “Asian values”

Mill on enforced industrial labor

“Again, uncivilized races, and the bravest and most energetic still more than the rest, are averse to continuous labour of an unexciting kind. Yet all real civilization is at this price; without such labour, neither can the mind be disciplined into the habits required by civilized society, nor the material world prepared to receive it. There needs a rare concurrence of circumstances, and for that reason often a vast length of time, to reconcile such a people to industry, unless they are for a while compelled to it. Hence even personal slavery, by giving a commencement to industrial life, and enforcing it as the exclusive occupation of the most numerous proportion of the community, may accelerate the transition to a better freedom than that of fighting and rapine.” (1962, 40)

Mill on the need for despotism

“The state of different communities, in point of culture and development, ranges downward to a condition very little above the highest of the beasts...a people in a state of savage independence, in which everyone lives by himself, exempt, unless by fits, from any external control, is practically incapable of making any progress until it has learnt to obey. The indispensable virtue, therefore, in a government which establishes itself over a people of this sort is, that it make itself obeyed. To enable it to do this, the constitution of the government must be nearly, or quite, despotic.” (1962, 38-9)

Mill on India and colonialism

“Thus far, [I have spoken] of the [neo-British] dependencies whose population is in a sufficiently advanced state to be fitted for representative government. But there are others which have not attained that state, and which, if held at all, must be governed by the dominant country, or by persons delegated for that purpose by it. This mode of government is as legitimate as any other, if it is the one which in the existing state of civilization of the subject people, most facilitates their transition to a higher state of improvement.” (1962, 345-6)

US Cold Warriors on Asia

“By tradition and preference Asiatic people turn to authoritarian government. In contrast with us, they lack historical experience of liberty and personal experience of individualism...They are particularly susceptible to the seizure of political power by force or assassination and to the concealed aggression of communism.”

NSC 48, 31 August draft

US Cold Warriors on Thailand

“We need not...feel self-conscious about our support for an authoritarian government in Thailand based almost entirely on military strength...[because] aside from the practical matter of Thailand’s not being ready for a truly democratic form of government...the United States derives political support from the Thai government to an extent and degree which would be hard to match elsewhere.”

- Alexis Johnson, 1958

Mill on Free Trade

“But though Great Britain could do perfectly well without her colonies...there are strong reasons for maintaining the present slight bond of connexion...It at least keeps the markets of the different countries open to one another, and prevents that mutual exclusion by hostile tariffs, which none of the great communities of mankind, except England, have yet outgrown.” (1962, 342)

Huntington on development and democracy

“The primary problem is not liberty but the creation of a legitimate public order... Authority has to exist before it can be limited, and it is authority that is in scarce supply in those modernizing countries where government is at the mercy of alienated intellectuals, rambunctious colonels, and rioting students.”

(*Political Order in Changing Societies*, pp. 7-8)

Huntington on the 1960s US

“...some of the problems in the of governance in the United States today stem from an excess of democracy... Needed, instead, is a greater degree of moderation in democracy... [T]he effective operation of a democratic political system usually requires some measure of apathy and noninvolvement on the part of some individuals and groups... Democracy will have a longer life if it has a more balanced existence.”

(*The Crisis of Democracy*, pp. 113-115)

Fisher on Chinese and Southeast Asians

In contrast to the “response of the Chinese—in an altogether less exhausting climate—which manifests itself as an almost instinctive compulsion to work oneself to the bone in order at all costs to survive, the more typical attitude of the South-east Asian peasant, at least until recently, has been no less obviously related to his experience that, in the words of the Siamese proverb, ‘there is fish in the river and rice in the field’ and that, this being so, it is generally wisest to take things easily in this humid tropical climate, where to obtain a reasonable modicum of comfort does not call for any great abundance of material possessions.”

Fisher (1964, p. 762)

Fisher on “lazy” Southeast Asians

“...there is another side to this picture, and although it is impossible to pronounce with scientific accuracy upon the more elusive aspects of racial character, it would be even less scientific to ignore the widespread comments of foreign observers, fellow-Asians as well as Westerners, regarding the existence, if not the cause, of the characteristic insouciance and the addiction to an adagio tempo of living which prevail among these extremely likable people.”

Fisher (1964, p. 7)

Fisher on the Vietnamese exception

The “toughness of the Vietnamese, particularly the northerners, may be explained in terms not only of Sinicization but also of long-standing pressure of people on the land comparable to that of China proper, and perhaps also in part of a climatic regime which is unique to South-east Asia in possessing a recognizable cool season.”

Fisher (1964, p. 763)

Mahathir’s appropriation of “Asian values”

- General context
 - Bumiputra program
 - Opposition to “Washington consensus”
 - “Look East”
- Opposition to labor unions, human rights criticisms, etc.

“Asian values”?

- Are there core values shared by all in Singapore or Malaysia?
- Are there core Asian values?
- Are there values worth all Southeast Asians defending that can be constructed under this rubric?

“Asian values” vs. cultural change

- Culture as fluid and changing
- Conservative cultural forms as modes of connection with West
 - Museum culture
 - Traditional music and art
- “Modern” cultural forms as modes of protest against imperialism, authoritarianism, etc.

A cultural core?

- What is “traditional” is always changing to some extent
- Cultural forms are not apolitical but represent the projects of differing groups within society, with differing interests
- Different groups within a given society respond positively or negatively to different aspects of globalization, depending upon their social position and interests

Implications

- Proposing cultural core that needs to be protected against imperialism or globalization is problematic
- Implications for Asian values debate?

Paradoxes of Thai popular music

- “Traditional” music increasingly dependent on tourists
- Protests against capitalism and existing power relations utilize modern styles

Paradoxes of Indonesian art

- “Traditional” art dependent on tourism (and thus on the economic aspects of globalization)
- Art which protests against the economic aspects of globalization makes use of cultural globalization
