



## China and East Asia vs. The West

*Controversies, Clashes and Challenges*

Li, Xing

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DEPARTMENT OF DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING  
AALBORG UNIVERSITY  
FIBIGERSTRAEDE 2  
DK 9220 AALBORG Ö  
DENMARK

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**China and East Asia vs. The West:  
Controversies, Clashes and Challenges**

by

**Li Xing**

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FAX. +45 98 15 32 98

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The motivation for writing this paper is to look at the confrontation of long and well established Asian societies attempting a "great leap forward" to modernity while on the other hand being submitted to the pressures of materially-based Western superiority. The paper will debate the recent controversial issues between the East represented by China and East Asian states and the West represented mainly by the United States on development, democracy and human rights.

When the ascendance of East Asia was first emerging as an interesting phenomenon, Western scholars wrote with detached interest about the role of Asian cultures and the role of the state in economic development. Now the rise of the region has become less of a novelty but more of a threat to some scholars. Samuel Huntington's essay "The clash of civilizations?" is a reflection of a Western point of view regarding the East Asian challenge as essentially a clash between two civilizations signifying a shift of its attitude towards East Asian cultural, social and political development.

For the last two centuries, the West has been the main producer of world wealth and the dominant force in international relations. The traditional modernization paradigm implicitly claims that the Western advance, success and dominance in the past two centuries has proved that modernization means Westernization. Japan's economic success is thus regarded as the result of de-Asianization and Westernization. Modernization theory in the West also claims that it has discovered universal laws governing economics and politics, believing that such laws would direct countries of all kinds towards a common destiny. This is a belief that has been pervading American foreign policies for decades.

However, the rise of East Asia and the emergence of China have drawn the world attention to a kind of model or approach to economic development, the so-called "Asian model" which is claimed to be different from the West. Controversies and clashes between the Eastern and Western position and approach toward modernization and economic development have highlighted disagreements on other social and political aspects, such as democracy and human rights.

It is interesting to note at the outset that the notion of an "Asian model" is apt to conceal more than it reveals about the societies involved as well as their cultural values and political systems. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the capitalist path of Asian countries does have specific similarities especially with regard to the role of the state in its relation to the market and civil society.

Although this paper will focus more on the Chinese case, it also covers common characteristics shared by most East Asian countries. The interesting dissimilarity is that while China has had a socialist system for a few decades and still is under the political control of a communist party, the polity of the region of East Asia was successful in neutralizing the communist challenge and social movements with right-wing regimes and with the support of

the United States. However, the social-economic evolution of East Asia has shown a similarity whereby authoritarianism is generally the form of governance.

### **East-West<sup>1</sup> Controversy: Modernization and Development**

After the Second World War, the United States stood at the centre of the world with its technology and science unchallenged and its economic power unsurpassed. The United States projected its society and polity as the "arsenal of democracy", the only reliable model for efficient modernization and orderly social changes. At the same time, the policies of successive American governments and political leaders became characterized by international activism. This was partly because the Soviet Union had emerged as a new social-economic model of modernization and partly because the success of the Chinese revolution challenged the major assumption underlying the American global position supported by the modernization theory which justified its global role.

During the Second World War, the United States firmly supported Chiang Kai-shek's regime which it knew to be corrupt and unpopular. It had allied itself not only with the wrong side but also the losing one.<sup>2</sup> In 1949, the Chinese Nationalists fled to exile on the island of Taiwan while the Chinese Communists won the civil war and founded the People's Republic of China. This "loss" of China to Communism had a tremendous impact on American polities. From the president and government officials down to the media and ordinary people, Americans simply could not understand how a hopeful Chinese Nationalist government with modern US military support could be defeated by a Communist-led insurrection. There may have been a chance, after the Second World War and the Chinese communist victory, when an American government could have actually coexisted and developed normal relations with Communist China. But the American government immediately responded to the "loss" of China by military containment and isolation of the Communist regime under the assumption that the containment of China could prevent the spread of revolution. How can one explain such a total transformation and the trauma it produced?

One interpretation attributed the "loss" of China to the defeat in the "battle of ideas". In the words of Edwin Reischauer:

We exerted far more military effort in China than the Russian; we gave economic aid, while they were plundering Manchuria; but the Communists

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of "East" is very broad. In this article China and East Asia are narrowed to represent "East". The notion of "West" normally refers to North America and Western Europe. In most cases, the "West" in this article refers to the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Segal, *The Race War*, (London: the Trinity Press, 1966), p. 339.

outdid us on the third level [the ideological] and won. The ideological war went to them, in large part by default, as more and more Chinese came to the conclusion that communism represented the only or at least the best hope for a united and strong China.<sup>3</sup>

Another explanation was that the United States had rejected the crucial realities of the contemporary world: the survival of communist power in China; the perceived inevitability of revolution to transform those societies suffering from poverty and despair; and the expectation of revolution as a mass response to the traditional, but now unendurable, inequalities existing throughout much of the world.<sup>4</sup>

The geographic loss of China was of secondary importance to the United States. More important was the ideological defeat over modernization and development which its experience represented. In order to avoid further losses in the field of ideology, Washington adopted the strategy of global containment. The Korean War further aggravated the tension between Communism and Capitalism, each represented by the Soviet Union and China on one side, and the United States on the other. The policy of containment directed the orientation of American-Asian policies in the 1950s and 1960s.

The lessons drawn from the Chinese Revolution pushed the United States to adopt foreign and economic policies which were to foster developmentalist, authoritarian and anti-Communist states wherever possible. In Europe, being afraid that mass poverty would eventually bring about Communist expansion, American post-war policy used the "Marshall Plan" to revive Western European industries within the shortest possibly time. In East Asia, the central objective of American post-war policy was basically the same as its goal in Europe: to revive the Japan-centred capitalist regional economies including South Korea and Taiwan. In order to achieve this aim, organized labour activities and opposition forces in these countries were suppressed.

Western conventional theorists firmly believed that revolution would destroy the possibilities for liberal modernization development. To avoid revolution, it was posited that liberal modernization ideology must penetrate into all levels of society and pro-Western educated elites must be built up. They regarded the American dilemma in China during the 1940s as a result of its inability "to find a social and political group.... which had standing and

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<sup>3</sup> Edwin O. Reischauer, as quoted in James Peck, 'Revolution Versus Modernization and Revisionism: A Two-Front Struggle', in *China's Uninterrupted Revolution*, ed. by Victor Nee and James Peck (New York: Random House 1975), p. 69-70.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Segal, op cit., p. 370-372.

power in the Chinese scene and which at the same time had some kind of affinity to the United States and all it stands for."<sup>5</sup>

It is important to have an historical understanding of the disintegration of Chinese pre-capitalism and why the Chinese communist movement could prevail in a society where the cultural heritage had always been dominated by Confucianism. China was once the most developed civilization of the world, not only the equal of Roman Empire, but far ahead of medieval Europe. From 1000 to 1500 AD China reached the peak of its civilization, and no other countries could compare with it in terms of agricultural productivity, industrial skill, commercial complexity, urban wealth, or standard of living, not to mention bureaucratic sophistication and cultural achievement. On the ideological level Confucius (551 - 479 B.C.) was hailed as the first teacher in China. He was considered to have heuristically reinterpreted the values in the code of conduct of the old aristocracy and conscientiously universalized them into an ethical system.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Marxism had been considered to be incompatible with the spirit of Chinese traditions and values. In the 19th century, the Chinese nation was reduced to the status of an underdeveloped nation. However, unlike other ancient civilizations, such as the Roman Empire which disappeared long ago, Chinese civilization, Indian civilization and some other civilizations in Asia have endured all kinds of turbulence and avoided the fate of extinction.

Nevertheless, the Weberian thesis maintained that despite favourable conditions for rationality in traditional China, Confucian humanism, as opposed to Protestant Calvinism, was inimical to the development of the spirit of capitalism. The reason given by Weberian culture theorists for East Asian backwardness pointed the finger directly at Confucianism. But, if the Weberian hypothesis was considered to be the explanation of China's decline in modern time, then, how can we explain the success and advance of ancient Chinese civilization? What are the main elements behind this ideological system?

Does Confucianism conflict with liberalism or the modernization spirit? Chinese as well as foreign intellectuals have offered a variety of explanations to the decline of China. Some argued that a mighty civilization and a self-sustaining society with a self-sufficient culture easily came to view itself as the "centre of the world" - the Middle Kingdom. Consequently, Chinese traditional civilization, confronted with the industrial West and its military power was unable to adjust itself. Some saw the fall of China as inevitable because the old ways were inadequate to modern time, thus ascribing China's failure to a cultural factor

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<sup>5</sup> George Taylor, as quoted in James Peck, op cit., p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Cho-yun Hsu, 'Applying Confucian Ethics to International Relations' in *Ethics & International Affairs*, 5 (1991), p. 19.

as the "requirements of modernization ran counter to the requirements of Confucian stability."<sup>7</sup> Other scholars asserted that circumstances rather than Western imperialism made China the worst accidental case in history: China was simply unable to adapt to Western power as expressed in modern science, industrial organization, and technology. However, the negative effects of Western expansion and imperialism were obviously left out of consideration. One noted observer, arguing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1966, said:

I don't think [the Chinese] were victimized by us or even by the British. I think they were victimized by circumstances of history; that the world civilization which is spreading around, beginning in and expanding from Europe and now expanding with us and others, found China to be the last remaining, separate, distinct, isolated country which had its own culture and hasn't joined up. And this is the background, therefore, of real "cultural conflict."<sup>8</sup>

Chinese intellectuals were themselves divided on this issue in the 19th and early 20th century. Puzzled by the lack of proper explanations and theories, they were ready to grasp any theory which could counter the Western interpretations or convictions. During the early period of 20th century, Marxism-Leninist theory of capitalist imperialism provided a partial theoretical framework as well as a psychological answer for the failures of traditional Chinese culture and for the humiliation suffered at the hands of the West.<sup>9</sup> Some Chinese observers saw imperialism as the cause of modern China's failure, which created "the need for an explanation of history in terms of evil and justice."<sup>10</sup> It was also during this period that Chinese intellectuals representing the forces of social progress in a feudal society reigned by the Manchu minority, concluded that Confucian system based on obedience was the main obstacle to modernization and political reform. During 1960s and 1970s, the same scenario occurred again, and Confucianism was once again regarded as an obstacle to revolution and modernization. Based on this, Mao Zedong called on the younger generations to abandon the "old" and establish the "new".

The rise and decline of Confucianism fits neatly with China's evolution and development. Today, the regime is trying to reconcile Confucian thinking with Marxism in an

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Wright, as quoted in James Peck, *op cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> John K. Fairbank, as quoted in James Peck, *ibid.*, p.73.

<sup>9</sup> James Peck, 'Revolution Versus Modernization and Revisionism: A Two-Front Struggle', in *China's Uninterrupted Revolution*, ed. by Victor Nee and James Peck (New York: Random House 1975) p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> John K. Fairbank, as quoted in James Peck, *ibid.*, p. 73.

attempt to fill the ideological vacuum caused by the liberalization of the economy. China has been particularly fascinated by the two models of Asian economic success represented by Singapore and South Korea. Hailing Confucianism as "a pillar of traditional culture and the pride of the Chinese nation", the government intended to seek ideological support in the form of a rehabilitation of Confucianism to appease the confrontation with civil society where dissents, touched off by the emergence of a rising middle class, have become a serious problem for the polity. It is thus during this particular time when communism's moral tenets are being demolished that the state feels the necessity to incorporate the Confucian traditional values in the social system - family piety, social solidarity and respect for elders and superiors.

To understand the success of East Asian industrialization and the comparative success of China's economic reform, one has to understand the influence of Confucianism and the traditional value system in their policy choices. On the surface, capitalism in many parts of East Asia operates in similar ways as in the West. They are all market-oriented and their goals are the same. The differences occur mainly in the way their economies are developed, managed, and regulated. The contrasts are obvious in three categories: (1) the individual's view of his or her freedom of action in the creation and conduct of business; (2) the structure of obligations in which such action takes place; (3) the appropriate role of government in fostering and controlling business development.<sup>11</sup> When it is suggested that capitalism in East Asia has a distinctive Confucian aspect, this does not mean reducing Asian economic development to a specific set of "cultural artifacts" or "national character". Confucianism should be understood in the way that its perspective provides a frame of reference within which broadly shared regional attitudes and practices that have influenced the development of capitalist institutions can be seen.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to the developmental approach and international political economy, the East Asian states are not totally liberal but rather mercantilistic. Political discipline and economic performance have always gone hand in hand in East Asia.<sup>13</sup> These regimes believe in strong state guidance in organizing society toward effective competition in the world economy. Here, the controversial issue between East and West is the relationship between market and state.

In the eyes of Adam Smith, capitalist market economies operate in terms of particular rules and logic. Capitalist systems generally share the characteristics of private ownership of

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<sup>11</sup> Gilbert Rozman, 'The Confucian Faces of Capitalism' in *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*, ed. by Mark Borthwick (Boulder, Colo : Westview Press, 1992), p. 310.

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert Rozman, *ibid.*, p. 310.

<sup>13</sup> Meredith Woo-Cumings, 'The New Authoritarianism' in East Asia in *Current History*, 578 (1994), p. 413.

property and means of production and they encourage private initiative to respond to market (supply and demand) forces. In theory, capitalist market economies allow true price mechanisms to operate: markets are the primary determinants of product values. No matter how human beings work for their own interests, the "market" through the "invisible hand" is able to adjust the relations between man and society and finally lead to societal harmony. Based on the development model of the United States and major Western European nations which entered the stage of industrialization and modernization earlier than the rest of world, liberal economic theory posits that a high degree of state interference in the economy and in the private sector is dysfunctional.

However, the successful performance of East Asia in the past decades presents two challenges: First, it calls into question the socialist and Leninist notions, which maintain that capitalism leads to class struggle and political instability; likewise it shows that centralized political absolutism without capitalism comparatively leads to stagnation. Second, these countries' performance also challenges the Anglo-American "free enterprise" ideological position, which maintains that state intervention in the economy is inevitably inefficient. The experience of East Asia suggests that the market mechanism must have explicit political guidance. Historically oriented analyses of concrete development experiences show that, over time, the demands for state action in order to successfully achieve economic development (industrialization) increased because the odds against such a process turned increasingly harsh (world market pressures, etc.). In this century, no process of economic development has been successful without comprehensive political action involving massive state intervention in the economy. In the industrialized countries, the experience of the Great Depression also provided impetus for a larger role of the state in alleviating market failure. Past experience has thus taught us: the laissez-faire world of the 1920s had disastrous economic consequences, while the post-war era of stable but negotiable exchange rates and national controls over capital movements generated steady expansion.<sup>14</sup> The growing realization that the state can and does influence market forces and thereby significantly determines people's fate is a major factor in the emergence of political outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

In a word, the East Asian states wield power over society and market, and they are able to hold foreign interests at bay by means of their formidable gate-keeping power. China's initial success of its economic reform programs explains the East Asian development formula that combines political stability, control of the gates against the imperialists, and rapid growth.

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Wade, *Governing the Market*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 349.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 10.

It is a "Great Leap Forward" without the cost.<sup>16</sup> Authoritarianism in East Asia can be seen as integral part of development strategy which has the strength not only for consolidating societies in developmental flux but also for creating entrepreneurial classes to compete in the world market. East Asian authoritarianism must not be interpreted as something genetically encoded in Confucian civilization, whereas it should be seen as a tried-and-true political arrangement in East Asian modernization process.<sup>17</sup>

The early advances of East Asian NICs have recently been regenerated by a new generation of developing dragons - Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. These Dragons are leading the world in economic growth and are projected to be gradually coming out of Third World poverty and approaching First World prosperity. Many scholars have an optimistic outlook for the Asian-Pacific economy based on the trend of economic and political development in East Asia and the prediction of a Pacific Century. Chinese scholar Edward Chen states that, "By the Pacific Century, we mean a shift of the world's centre of economic activities away from the two coasts of the Atlantic to the two coasts of the Pacific."<sup>18</sup> The predictions of a Pacific Century are widely accepted and many people indeed believe that it has already started. Economic success has brought new consciousness, new nationalism and regionalism as well as new self-confidence to East Asian societies.

### **East-West Controversy: Democracy and Human Rights**

An ideological orthodoxy dominates official Western aid policy and development thinking. Conventional thinking bases its position on the assertion that 'democratic good governance' refers to a model of a liberal-democratic political system. This kind of regime protects human and civil rights, combined with a competent, non-corrupt and accountable public administrations with honest and efficient civil servants. Such a political regime is supposed to be functional for competitive and free market economies. This view reflects the crucial but often unspoken assumption that although the formula is essentially Western in origin, it has universal relevance for all cultures and societies in the modern world.<sup>19</sup>

This point of view is of course not new. It echoes the central aspects of modernization theory of the 1960s claiming that the Western model of economic and political liberalism were the "right model" to be emulated by the rest of the world. What is new is the proposition that

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<sup>16</sup> Meredith Woo-Cumings, *ibid.*, p. 415.

<sup>17</sup> Meredith Woo-Cumings, *ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>18</sup> Edward K.Y. Chen, 'East and Southeast Asia in the World Economy: Issues, Problems and Prospects' in *Copenhagen Papers* 4 (1989), p.19.

<sup>19</sup> Adrian Leftwich, 'Governance, democracy and development in the Third World' in *Third World Quarterly*, 14 (1993), p. 605.

democracy is a necessary prior or parallel condition of development, not an outcome of it.<sup>20</sup> The collapse of Communist regimes in the late 1980s is claimed to confirm the liberal economic theory that non-democratic states are unable to produce sustained economic growth and stable societies. Likewise such political systems are seen as the essential obstacles to economic change. Political liberalization is thus emphasized to be the condition for economic development in the Third World. The collapse of Communism and the consequential shift in the structure of international politics offered liberalism an opportunity to link economic development with political liberalization. This was the thinking behind the establishment of the new European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in 1991 to help restructure the Eastern European and former Soviet economies as well as a guideline for American linkage of MFN (Most Favour Nation) trading status to China's human rights record.<sup>21</sup>

The end of Cold War released the Western fear of losing Third World allies to counter communist threat in a competitive bipolar world system. This paved the way for policies of linking modernization to democracy regarding Third World economic development. The argument, however, can be made that the West puts too much emphasis on the necessity of modernization and democracy but neglects the social costs and consequences brought about by the modernization process. In fact modernization means industrialization which entails the destruction of traditional ways of life at the cost of enormous personal and social suffering.

In this connection it is appropriate to recall that the original Western capitalist development was far from a democratic and human process. Modernization theorists particularly overlook the exceptional violence of eighteenth and nineteenth-century British industrialization.<sup>21</sup> The violent consequence of social costs was the destruction of old ways of life, and the personal as well as societal sufferings as the following quotations make clear:

For the field labourer, the loss of his common rights and the vestiges of village democracy; for the artisan, the loss of his craftsman's status; for the weaver, the loss of livelihood and of independence; for the child, the loss of work and play in the home; for many groups of workers whose real income improved, the loss of security, leisure, and the deterioration of the urban environment.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Adrian Leftwich, *ibid.*, p. 605.

<sup>21</sup> James Peck, *op cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1964), p. 445

The physical suffering in the great industrial cities almost defies description. Cities cloaked in soot and smoke, impregnated with filth, lacked even the most elementary public services. People entirely unused to nonagrarian life were forced into bleak and overcrowded slums.<sup>23</sup>

There are few vigorous, well-built, healthy persons among the workers.... They are almost all weakly, of angular but not powerful build, lean, pale, and of relaxed fibre... Nearly all suffer from indigestion, and consequently from a more or less hypochondriac, melancholy, irritable, nervous condition. Their enfeebled constitutions are unable to resist disease, and are therefore seized by it on every occasion. Hence they age prematurely, and die early.<sup>24</sup>

What modernization theorists have done is to take those very elements that directly contributed to the social costs of the British Industrial Revolution and turn them into the inevitable prerequisite for creating a modern, rational, industrial society.<sup>25</sup> Evidence from the West indicates that the foundations of most modern advanced industrial economies were laid under non-democratic or highly limited democratic conditions - as in Britain, Germany and in Meiji Japan. Moreover, most post-1960 'success' stories of economic growth in the Third World - Brazil, South Korea, Taiwan and, more recently, Thailand and Indonesia - have not occurred under conditions remotely approximating continuous and stable democracy: quite the opposite.<sup>26</sup>

Any Third World country which is suffering great social and political costs under a process of struggling for industrialization can be an easy target for criticism for being undemocratic or a human rights violator. Here, several important questions should be raised: Would Western countries be industrialized had they been "democratic"? What was the situation of human rights and democracy in Western countries in the early years of their initial industrialization? Are Third World countries today able to achieve industrialization without having to pay similar social costs? Is it proper to compare the present standard of Western liberalist modernization and democracy after an evolution of almost 200 years with that of most Third World countries whose economic development levels are still very low? An increasingly strong

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<sup>23</sup> James Peck, *op cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* (Moscow, 1973), p. 144.

<sup>25</sup> James Peck, *ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> Adrian Leftwich, *op cit.*, p. 612-613.

argument is that the forced 'premature' implementation of democracy in developing countries at an early stages may actually hamper development when different interest groups emphasize different needs while the only one choice is between rapid economic growth and democracy.

The notions of "modernization" and "modernity" belong of course to the Western conceptualization of development. Their use as ideal-types relates to the experience of present-day developed capitalist social formations.<sup>27</sup> Considering the social and political factors, "modernization" and "democracy" in Third World countries must not be judged by the criteria of a finished product i.e. the established industrial social formations. A comparative analysis with the implementation of the earlier industrial revolution and industrialization in Western countries and Japan would be more enlightening.<sup>28</sup>

Most East Asian policy-makers maintain that democracy on its own does not necessarily leads to development. In this view, what a country needs at its initial developmental stage is discipline more than democracy. Of course it ought to be pointed out that the corollary is not per definition true. Undemocratic and authoritarian regimes do not automatically lead to economic development. Thus, a developmental state appears to be the precondition for rapid industrialization. The concept of developmental state refers to a regime form whose political and bureaucratic elite has a genuine developmental determination and autonomous capacity to define, pursue and implement development goals. Without the devotion of a developmental state, whether democratic or not, no Third World country is likely to achieve a development breakthrough, not to mention modernization. The situation in Taiwan and South Korea during the past three decades demanded an authoritarian regime in order to achieve political stability and long-term predictability of the system.

China's state doctrine and politics as well as those of other East Asian countries are generally based on an organic view of society. This is also a component of Confucian teachings. A good and capable leader is not acknowledged by his political legitimacy alone but by his moral standard and wisdom as well. Confucianism envisioned a well-organized society as being patterned after a well-organized family. The virtues of the Asian family is the patriarchal family. This institution embodies a clear power structure which is hierarchical and based on authority. It is a pivotal institution for socialisation in which the family is the building block of society. In particular, it implies a sense of obligation and commitment to a

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<sup>27</sup> Jacques Hersh, 'North Korea: Ideal-type Anomaly?', in *Economic Crisis and Response in North Korea*, ed. by Taik-young Hamm, (Seoul: Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University, 1994) - forthcoming.

English revised version: Jacques Hersh: *North Korea: Ideal-type Anomaly?* (Denmark: Aalborg University, Development Research Unit, working paper Nr.42, 1994) p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Hersh, *ibid.*, p. 7.

broader community. In the words of former Singaporean Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, the main characteristic of East Asian societies is that the social relations are important than personal interest:

Eastern societies believe that the individual exists in the context of his family. He is not pristine and separate. The family is part of the extended family, and then friends and the wider society. The ruler or the government does not try to provide for a person what the family best provides.<sup>29</sup>

Confucianism condemned individualism and self-interest considering any one who demanded individual rights as a selfish 'small man'. Even when the imperial system broke down in the early 20th century releasing a great deal of cultural iconoclasm among Chinese intellectuals, it was still very rare to find consistent defenders of self-interested individualism. It was commonly accepted that the state granted rights and determined their limits.<sup>30</sup> More interestingly, we can find that in their mass demonstrations in the spring 1989, Chinese students were actually demanding the right to be heard and the removal of corrupt officials. It can be argued that what they really wanted was non-corrupt, clean, good and honest government, not really formal "democracy" in the Western version such as multi-party system, direct election, legal opposition, etc.. It is also important to notice that the vast peasantry of China who are the first and main beneficiaries of the reform program were largely unmoved during the student demonstration. Therefore, the notions of good government stressed by Confucianism is overlapping with the concepts of democracy and human rights.

The importance attached to order and the overall interest of society as a living entity leads East Asian leaders to attribute moral superiority to the 'community' over 'individual'. This view is also shared by some non-Confucian Asian countries. Thailand's King has expressed the essence of this perspective by placing emphasis on duties rather than rights. He encapsulated East Asian societies as follows:

A nation is made up of various institutions in the same way as all the organs which make up a live body. Life in a body can endure, because the organs, large or small, function normally. Likewise, a nation can endure, because its various institutions are firm and are fully discharging their respective duties.

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<sup>29</sup> Fareed Zakaria, 'Culture Is Destiny. A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew', in *Foreign Affairs*, 73 (1994), p. 113.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Ferdinand, 'Socialism and Democracy in China' in *Socialism and Democracy* ed. by David McLellan and Sean Sayers (London: Macmillan Academic and Professional LTD, 1993) p. 166.

You must all realize that the nation is the life, the blood and the property of everyone.... To uphold and safeguard the nation is the duty... of every party. Each and everyone must work together...., sharing common aims and objectives. Should any group fail in its duty... the entire nation may collapse and be destroyed.<sup>31</sup>

A leading Singaporean business figure added weight to the East-West differences by portraying it in terms of contrasting attitudes over the rights of individuals versus those of the community. In an address to lawyers on the day when the American young man was caned in Singapore, he observed:

The Western cliché that it would be better for a guilty person to go free than to convict an innocent person is testimony to the importance of the individual. But an Asian perspective may well be that it is better that an innocent person be convicted if the common welfare is protected than for a guilty person to be free to inflict further harm on the community.<sup>32</sup>

In East Asia and China, the lack of so-called "universal" democratic consciousness stressed by the West is obvious. The very term "democracy" in Chinese language was imported from the West. Many Chinese people do not even know how to give a clear explanation of what "democracy" really means. It denotes a certain degree of implied connotation of an attitude that China has things to learn from the outside world. In the recent past it has been bound up with the more general debate which has re-emerged as to how far China can rely upon its own cultural and scientific traditions in order to catch up to the advanced countries and how far it must import ideas and technology from the outside. Seen in this light, debates over democracy in China cannot be divorced from broader cultural questions and from the issue of how far China could, or should, allow itself to become dependent upon the external world.<sup>33</sup>

China since 1991 has shared similarities with many East and Southeast Asian countries in the discourse on democracy and human rights confronted as they are by the way the West has been promoting Western-style democracy and human rights in international relations. With the end of Cold War, Western states have increased their pressure on the implementation of

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<sup>31</sup> King Bhumibol Adulyadej, *Collection of Royal Addresses and Speeches During the State and Official Visits of Their Majesties the King and Queen to Foreign Countries 1959-1967*. (Bangkok: Office of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary, 1992), p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Ho Kwon Ping, as quoted in *Asiaweek*, May, 25, 1994, p. 38.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Ferdinand, *op.cit.*, p. 173.

democracy in ASEAN states as well as in China and threatened to make their economic assistance and relations conditional. Within ASEAN, countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore are most vulnerable to such pressures because foreign capitals and markets play a larger role in their economies. It can be expected that the East-West controversy on democracy and human rights will continue to go through a considerable period of discord, adjustment and tension.

### **The American Dilemma**

To some Western countries the issues of democracy and human rights are not purely related to ideological conceptions but are tools of foreign policy.

From June 14 - 25, 1993, the United Nations prepared to convene a World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. The Clinton Administration had signalled its intention to push for more pressure on human-rights issues at the meeting. The United States along with its Western allies, hoped to create an office of a special U.N. high commissioner for that purpose. However, delegates from 49 Asian countries met in Bangkok a few weeks earlier to frame their own definition of fundamental human rights. The message that came out of this gathering affirmed the special importance of what a draft report called "the right to live in an environment of social and political order."<sup>34</sup>

Does this mean that Western democracy and its emphasis on human rights are starting to lose their appeal? This answer should be no. On the map of the world, Western democracy is actually going through a great expansion. It has won the Cold War and triumphed over the Soviet empire; it has conquered South America; it has arrived in South Africa. Western influence is also penetrating into the very corners of East Asian societies. And yet with the end of the Cold War Americans are surprised to hear growing criticism of their political, economic and social system, and at the same time one can sense a certain world-weary disillusion setting in the United States.

In terms of international relations, the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s mark the triumph of Wilsonian idealism. During the Woodrow Wilson Administration after World War I, the United States emerged as a key player in international affairs adhering to principles which reflected "American thought". These principles held that world peace depends on the spread of democracy, that states should be judged by the same ethical criteria as individuals, and that national interest consists of adhering to a universal system of law. However, victory in the Cold War has made these traditional principles far more difficult and complicated to implement. In Asia, Wilsonian idealism has very few disciples. There is no such sense of collective security or that cooperation should be based on shared domestic

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<sup>34</sup> *Time*, June 14, 1993.

values, even on the part of the few existing Western democracies. Here comes the question: Do American allies both in Europe and Asia still share the same principles and values now that the Cold War is over and the communist threat is gone? The post-Cold War geopolitical changes have placed the United States in a dilemma. Washington is torn between on the one hand adhering to its values and principles and on the other implementing suitable foreign policies which other countries can accept. The new challenge facing the United States as realized by former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, is that, "With respect to Europe, America shares a community of values but has not yet been able to devise a common policy or adequate institutions for the post-Cold War period; with respect to Asia, it is possible for American to define a desirable overall strategy but not a community of values."<sup>35</sup>

Can the United States then afford adherence to its so-called "universal value" of democracy and human rights in dealing with Asian affairs? Many developing countries in East Asia are accused of human rights violations by Washington and some international human rights organizations. However, many of these countries do not emphasize political or civil rights as advocated by the West but stress national and developmental priorities. China argues that the fundamental essence of human rights for the time being is that people should have enough food and shelter, and that it is possible, at least in the short term, to combine economic liberalization with political authoritarianism. Even though phenomenal economic growth may be making China the most corrupt and polluted nation in East Asia, for the time being, the system seems to be working.

It is clear that the United States cannot abandon its traditional position on human rights and democracy. But Washington ought not to use its advocacy of values of democracy and human rights as the principal and criteria on which all aspects of its East Asia policies are based. This was the case of American foreign policy on China. The vivid memory of "Tiananmen-1989" remains fixed in the minds of American congressmen and the public media. In American public discourse "Tiananmen" has become a metaphor for Deng Xiaoping's China. "Human rights", "democracy" and "dissident" are increasingly becoming slogans replacing balanced and comprehensive China-policies which emerged in the late 1970s. However, five years after the event on Tiananmen Square, China's economic reform has not slowed but moved towards a deeper stage. Increasing awareness of the complexity between the political and economic levels and China's immense social problems is becoming more and more realized by opposition circles both within and outside the country. As an American analyst puts it, a change of attitude among overseas Chinese intellectuals has become noticeable:

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<sup>35</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, (New York: Simon&Schuster, 1994), p. 831.

Many brilliant Chinese "dissidents" who fled from China after the Tiananmen tragedy began to analyze Mr Deng's true motivation in allowing the tragedy to occur from the perspective, and with resources of American universities. Had he betrayed the good of the Chinese people so gravely as to have lost "the Mandate of Heaven"? Or had he bent, under stress, to harsh necessity in resorting to an ugly show of power, so as to sustain structural transformation of all of China, set in motion during the preceding decade?

Many of the most gifted of these children of modern China now recognize Mr. Deng's genius to have been to appreciate China's capability to achieve very rapid economic reform as a precondition for moving on toward eventual political reform.<sup>36</sup>

In the context of international affairs the fate of China cannot but have a determining influence on the shape of the world in the next millennium. For most of its history, China has been a more developed, sophisticated and civilized society. Former US president Roosevelt once envisioned China as one of the "four policemen." But after World War II China got lagged down by the turmoil of civil war. Now, among all the major powers in the world, China, although facing many problems, is seen as the most ascendant. The United States has been a world power since World War II, Russia is becoming a staggering giant, Europe's strength lies in its unity and Japan is an economic giant but political dwarf. China, with its economic growth rate closing to 9-10 per cent every year, and a strong sense of national pride is increasing its power. The conventional wisdom is that the world economy these days is tri-polar, revolving around the United States, Japan and the European Community. This is obviously true in terms of financial markets, such as stock investment and currency trading. But in terms of global trade, market size and sheer economic bulk, China is becoming a fourth pole in the international system. This is particularly true when one looks at "Greater China" consisting of the PRC, Hong Kong and Taiwan. However, there is also the possibility that China would not be able to manage the economic and political takeoff, and things could go wrong. The country has to cope with enormous social problems, such as the crisis of political legitimacy, unbalanced development, emerging inequality, a crisis of national identity as well as environmental problems. But, until now its reformed system seems to be working.

Given this background how should the West react? Two American statesmen have advised the US to deal with China and other East Asian nations in a manner that combines ideology with national interests, values with cultural background and reality with history. They

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<sup>36</sup> Robert W. Barnett, 'America and China: The goal Is Human Welfare' in *International Herald Tribune*, May 10, 1994.

warn Washington of the disastrous consequences if the above elements are neglected. Henry Kissinger observes that:

For China, a country historically pre-eminent in its region - indeed, in the world known to it - any attempt to prescribe its institutions and domestic practices would cause deep resentment. General sensitivity is magnified by the Chinese view of the West's involvement in its history. Ever since the Opium Wars of the early nineteenth century forcibly opened up the country, the West has been viewed by the Chinese as the agent of an endless series of humiliations. Equality of status, a fierce insistence on not bowing to foreign prescription, is for Chinese leaders not a tactic but a moral imperative.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, former President Richard Nixon in his last book *Beyond the Peace* wrote that:

While most Americans give China high marks for its free-market economics, they rightly criticize the government's continuing denial of political freedom to the Chinese people. However, cutting back our trade with China by revoking China's most-favored-nation status would be a tragic mistake. We cannot improve the political situation in China through a "scorched earth" economic policy. Revoking China's most-favored-nation status would hurt the free-market reformers and entrepreneurs who hold the key to China's future. Not only would it devastate the mainland's economy, it would lay waste to the surrounding region as well. No other nation in Asia supports our linking MFN status to human rights.

Today China's economic power makes US lectures about human rights imprudent. Within a decade, it will make them irrelevant. Within two decades, it will make them laughable. By then the Chinese may threaten to withhold MFN status from the US unless we do more to improve living conditions in Detroit, Harlem and South Central Los Angeles.<sup>38</sup>

It is not without a certain irony to remember that these two anti-communist personalities themselves alienated China for many years and even engaged the US in the Indochina War.

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<sup>37</sup> Henry Kissinger, op cit., p. 830-831.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Nixon, *Beyond the Peace*, (Bookreview in *Time*, April 27, 1994)

The decision of the Clinton Administration to delink China's human rights record from its MFN trade policies signified the fact that the US was no longer able to implement one-sided policy, but had to balance trade and human rights. The recent success of US pressure on improving China's intellectual property protection explained why pressure worked for intellectual property but not for human rights. Regarding the issue of intellectual property, the American business community was united in support of Washington pressures, whereas it lobbied vigorously against using sanctions to improve China's human rights. The irony is obvious: the theft of intellectual property was seen as harmful to business prosperity, whereas human rights was viewed as irrelevant to profits. This inconsistency has signalled to China that the so-called "universal human rights" is not such a value which the United States would bear sacrifice for, but a political weapon.

During the APEC summit meeting in Bogor, Indonesia, the US focused on a commerce-oriented policy in order to keep good relations and ever increasing trade with Asian nations rather than stuck to its avowed concerns for human rights. "Business first" has taken a priority in White House foreign policies. The controversial point here is that when Asian countries are criticized for having factory workers putting in long hours for low wages, it is forgotten that this is precisely one of the motives why US international companies have moved in. It is certainly true that in some Asian countries export goods such as textiles, toys and other light industrial products are produced under poor conditions and workers are paid low wages. But this export sector is only a small part of their national productions. Does the US also worry about the workers' rights in the other sectors unaffected by international trade?

### **Conclusion**

China and other East Asian states are now in the process of transforming from weak to strong nations. They will have the opportunity to do what they want instead of being commanded to do things. East Asia is beginning to show confidence in its culture as a worthier beacon than that the West can offer. History shows them that no country in the world has been able to achieve industrialization without social, political and personal sacrifices and costs, and that modernization cannot be achieved without a basic national consensus and social stability, whether by force or not. Current Western insistence on free market and democracy as the keys to Third World development seems to belong to the ideological realm. Western liberals should not sneer when East Asians talk about an Asian form of democracy but try to challenge it on the basis of the strength of democracy and economic liberalization. The West must be consistent in its policy towards Asia and avoid shifting its principle of universal democracy back and forth according to the changing situation and its own self-interests. Moreover, the West also has to consider the proper way of dealing with East Asia in a manner they can accept and support. The structure of traditional agricultural societies in this region has been

broken in the course of rapid industrialization. Industrialization in the West through several hundred years of capitalism is happening here in East Asia in about 40 to 50 years. Thus, one can imagine the magnitude of social changes brought about by within this tight time span. The West should encourage dialogue with East Asia in order to help develop a comprehensive understanding of democracy and human rights based on the evolution of their social and economic development rather than based on the "wishes" or "guidance" of the West.

East Asia has opened up remarkably in the past few years as Taiwan, South Korea and Thailand are democratizing more steadily. Still, no country in the region is likely to adopt political systems identical to those in the established Western democracies. But free speech, free press and political pluralism have taken root as quickly as manufacturing technology did in the 1960s and 1970s. Westerners consider liberal democracy's ultimate strength to be its capacity for political change, which most East Asian countries have yet to demonstrate. This is a strong challenge to be faced.

The relationship between the capitalist West and the rest of the world has, for many centuries, been lopsided against the non-European world. From the success of the British nineteenth-century industrial revolution, which led the West to monopolize military strength and economic power, to American hegemony after the Second World War, the world has long been governed by Western values and systems. The scenario of "the decline of the West" is unlikely to be true in the foreseeable future. Europe and the United States are and will continue to be the pivot of world politics and economy in the near future.

But, the question remains whether the world will continue to be fully dominated by Western values and systems, or whether other patterns of values and systems will emerge to share the position of leadership. No matter how East Asia will eventually transform itself, Asian-style values and social norms that are relevant in the current world are being widely accepted. The East Asian experience of national economic development can, for instance, be a valuable source of inspiration for Third World economic development. Many East Asian cultural values and norms have been world-widely accepted, for example, family consciousness and working attitude. Such attitudes also existed in the puritan capitalist phase of the West. Even in the next century, major East Asian countries will not likely be able to catch up with the West economically, and the West is still far richer and stronger. At the same time it is also clear that East Asia will continue to challenge the traditional world system which is mainly based on the Western power of influence and ideology. Their weight and involvement in global affairs will continue to increase and will surely take a more prominent place in the world of the 21st century.

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