

Asian values revisited¹

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Abstract

With Asia's economy still booming in the second half of the 1990's "Asian values" were announced by some politicians (Lee Kuan Yew, Mahatir, Ishihara, Mahbubani etc.) and contrasted with "Western values". Soon a controversial debate within Asia ensued (Kim, Fidel Ramos ea.), into which also the western democracies joined. The "West" however reacted rather defensively to the new assertiveness of some Asian statesmen, inspite of the fact that the authors of this debate put into question the western dominance in global value setting which has been in existence since the French revolution. But has this debate withstood the test of time, the challenges posed by the recession in Asia and by the ever increasing globalization? Hardly. The crisis has destroyed the notion that "Asian values" had been the main cause and guarantor of Asia's exorbitant growth rates.

While in the West Christianity forms the essential basics of culture, in Asia there is a multitude of coexisting - and frequently confronting world religions. There is no other continent which in cultural and political terms is so contradictory and potentially conflict ridden like Asia. "Asianism" as a concept was surely also intended as an instrument to integrate multiethnic Asian societies with weak internal cohesion. At the same time it served to neutralize the human rights issue.

In the meantime the debate has become quieter and more dispassionate. In the developed West the notion gained acceptance to abandon "Eurocentrism". At the same time there is recognition that "Asian values" are not exclusive. Also in Europe the family plays a special role. A debate on values is needed for societal integration - also in the "West" which should become more aware of the need to reassert the origins of its own spiritual foundations. Following September 11th the west is well advised to continue the dialogue on values with Asia.

¹ Update and expanded version of an article first published in: Außenpolitik IV/1996, p. 326 "Beginnt das pazifische Jahrhundert?" I would like to thank Julia Prati for the translation of the updated and expanded version of this article

Introduction

The debate over “Asian values” – once conducted so heatedly – has in recent times subdued; nevertheless its originators have radically challenged the western “monopoly of interpretation”, which had persisted uncontested since the French Revolution. After the end of the East-West conflict and in the light of a booming economy, especially in eastern Asia, the initiators of the debate on “Asian values” wish to create a pan-Asian identity as a counterpart to the identity of “the West”. Furthermore the recent handover of Hong Kong and Macao symbolized the final removal of the last colonial remnants present in Asia. The immediate response of “the West” to the new self-confidence manifested by numerous Asian political leaders was of a decidedly defensive nature.

European politics must be on its guard against an excessively Eurocentric perception rooted in history. At the beginning of the First World War the “Western” empires had over 85% of the land on this planet at their disposal. Bearing this in mind it is easier to understand why some of the nations and ethnic groups which viewed themselves for centuries as exploited and domesticated by the European powers now want to go their own way.² This not only applies to Arabic countries in which Islam has a formative influence, but above all to Asia too, from which persistent anti-Western resentment has emanated for years. The economic and political upswing in large parts of Asia provoked great astonishment in Europe – as in the United States. The latter are directly affected by the values debate – that is at least in the near future: The US, perceived in Asia as an outpost of Western culture and Western thinking, is suffering from a long-term process of internal disintegration, which has also been described as a “disuniting of America³”. As a traditional “melting pot”, the “dominant power” of the “West”, the USA currently experience within their society the gradual displacement of their “European” culture (for example, in the curricula of the schools and universities). This happens as Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and American Indians are demanding greater influence, leave the previous majority culture, set up their own schools, and provide their own television programs.

Is Europe’s formative political and cultural influence at its end? Must Europeans in particular prepare for the “Asian century⁴? One of the reasons for such a line of argument was the fact that the growth rates of the Asian economies have been in some cases overwhelming. The World Bank estimated that seven out of the fifteen leading economic powers in the year 2020 will be Asian – with China ahead of the USA in first place⁵. Nevertheless, the question as to how long this rapid economic growth can and will continue at this pace was already raised at an early stage. The American economist Paul Krugmann caused a stir among political and economic leaders, particularly in Southeast Asia, with his article – widely read in Asia – entitled “The Myth of Asia’s Miracle”.⁶ Nevertheless in his highly regarded work, “Megatrends Asia”,

² Cf. Hans Maier, *Eine Kultur oder viele? Politische Essays*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1995, pp. 35–36

³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America*, New York/London: Norton 1992

⁴ Karl Kaiser, “Vorbereiten auf das ”Asiatische Jahrhundert””, In: *Die Zeit*, 2/2/1996

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Paul Krugmann, “The Myth of Asia’s Miracle”, In: *Foreign Affairs*, vol 73, No 6, 1994, pp 62–78

best-selling author and “trend forecaster” John Naisbitt claimed that Asia’s influence is increasing dramatically at the expense of Europe and the USA: “As we move toward the year 2000, Asia will become the dominant region of the world: economically, politically, and culturally. We are on the threshold of the Asian Renaissance.”⁷ And he added: “Asia was once the centre of the world, and now the centre is again returning to Asia.”⁸ However the question is: Has the debate on values conducted at the time successfully overcome the challenge which arose from the Asian recession and from globalisation? Hardly. This recession destroyed the notion that “Asian values” represented the principal cause or that they could act as a guarantor for the exorbitant rate of economic growth registered in the region.

There can be no doubt : Asia’s – especially Southeast Asia’s – dynamic political and economic policy development has radically reshaped Asia’s political and cultural landscape. Asia has good reason to face the USA and the Europeans with greater self-confidence. The fact that almost all heads of governments of the 15 EU member states convened with their colleagues from ten Asian countries at the first European-Asian summit meeting in March 1996 in Bangkok symbolized the greater importance Europe attaches to Asia. An undoubtedly important aspect from the Asian viewpoint was the accompanying political signal of countering the political and economic influence of the USA in Asia through a stronger relational network with Europe.⁹ Nevertheless, European politics must face up to the fundamental questions raised by the Asian values offensive.

Risk of Eurocentrism

Despite the Asia Concept developed for instance by the German government and the European Union (EU) and even though about 50% of the world’s population lives in Asia, Europeans have still failed to fully “rediscover” the significance of Asia. Eurocentrism must be overcome in western societies. This becomes evident, when one takes a glance at the historical relations between Europe and Asia. Germany’s Emperor William II once spoke of the “yellow peril”. Karl Marx claimed that the Asians could not represent themselves but had to allow others to represent them instead. This explains his reference to an “Asian mode of production”.¹⁰ Although Max Weber¹¹

⁷ John Naisbitt, *Megatrends Asia. The Eight Asian Megatrends That are Changing the World*, London 1977, p. 4f

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10

⁹ Nevertheless, this summit, which at that point in time still provoked some astonishment, raised some voices of a not very flattering nature – particularly to European ears. Some Asian media simply interpreted the summit as a continuation of Western imperialism, now to be realised with the help of trade relations. In the Far Eastern part of Asia especially there is a growing call for a separate Asian way, and every effort was made prior to the summit to ensure that the human rights discussion would not become a disruptive factor for the harmony of this meeting

¹⁰ Cf. Florian Coulmas, “Asianismus – Das neue asiatische Selbstbewusstsein”, In: *Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, 17/2/1996

¹¹ Max Weber, *Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen, Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, vol 1 and 2, Tuebingen: Mohr 1978

does not base himself on the assumption of a single Asian societal order – he mainly draws a distinction between Confucianism and Taoism in China and Hinduism and Buddhism in India, Japan and other countries – he sees a fundamental difference in every respect to the European model of society which produced capitalism. Accordingly, Asian societies were not able to establish capitalism through their own effort. In Max Weber's opinion, however, capitalism in Asia is a model imported from the West. Not until the encounter with "the West", he claimed, did the economic upturn and the increase in prosperity occur – and that is after the concepts of the state and its functions, of rule of law, of property rights and of scientific rationality had been adopted from the West. Which nevertheless should not suggest that "Asian values" did not contribute to this success. On the contrary, the acquisition of western concepts left significant traces in the Asian political culture. Thus something to the effect of a cultural hegemony of "the West" was established. However, the adoption of western concepts was by no means solely imposed by colonizing powers, but was additionally pursued by the liberation movements. For instance the Chinese "Fourth of May-Movement" of 1919 – to all intents and purposes an absolutely nationalistic organization – supported slogans such as "Complete westernisation!" and "Destroy the quarters of Confucius and Co.!"¹² The doctrine of Confucius, which today has been officially revitalized, was once labelled a "man-eater ideology" (Lu Xun)¹³ and has often been held responsible for the backwardness of China and the humiliation suffered at the hands of the western powers.

The difficulties involved in defining "Asian" values also apply to the European context. Nevertheless, despite language differences Europe is much more homogeneous due to the largely Christian-influenced culture. The term "Western" always encompasses the United States of America too. Since the 15th century it was mainly the Europeans, joined by the North Americans since the 18th century, who exerted a politically determinant influence up until the outbreak of the Second World War. Nevertheless it is evident that the cultural landscape of the USA differs from that of Europe in many respects. The term "Westernness" has numerous indicators, dimensions and implications: "It is the sum of the integral elements of a Jewish-Mediterranean-Christian civilisation, which began in Asia Minor and Egypt several millennia before Christ, was given more distinct contours by Greece and Rome through the claim to cultural and technical supremacy over the rest of the known world, and which, also decisively influenced by the cultural ascendancy of the Islamic world in the European Middle Ages,

¹² Citations from Karl-Heinz Pohl's script, *Chinesische und asiatische Werte – Die Chinesische Welt als zentraler Kultur- und Wirtschaftsraum*; Lecture held in Erfurt in July 2001; for further information on the "Fourth of May-Movement" cf.: Francois Godement, *The New Asian Renaissance from colonial to the post-Cold War*, London and New York 1997, p. 25 ff; Lau Kwok Keung, "Eine Interpretation der konfuzianischen Tugenden und ihrer Bedeutung für die Modernisierung Chinas", In: Silke Krieger/ Rolf Trauzettel (eds), *Konfuzianismus und die Änderung Chinas*, Mainz 1990, p. 250 ff

¹³ Ebda.; see also: Rudolf G. Wagner "Neue Eliten und die Herausforderungen der Moderne", In: Carsten Herrmann-Pillath/Michael Lackner (eds), *Länderbericht China. Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft im chinesischen Kulturraum*, Bonn 2000, pp. 132

felt strong enough at the beginning of the modern age to make universalistic claims and to imperialistically safeguard this self-assessment step by step".¹⁴

Due to the Christian faith the key question in the West relates to the personal responsibility and guilt of individuals. Even if Asian criticism of Western thinking mainly emphasizes individualism in its exaggerated form Western thinking has no uniform view of the responsibility of the individual. It is fair to assume that in the USA more importance is attached to the role of the individual and less to that of the state than in, for instance, Germany, where, as a rule, both a collectivistic image of man as well as an exaggeratedly individualistic understanding of personal responsibility are rejected. Divergent perceptions of the role of the state exist, therefore, which play very different roles in individual European countries – for example, in the field of economic activities. France, for instance, presents a contrast to Britain, Germany or the USA. The so-called Western values, however, are strongly determined by the basic demand of the French revolution. Freedom, justice and solidarity rank as the main "Western basic values". Next to individual rationality "Westernness" also includes the separation of church and state and, in the final analysis, the "capitalist mode of production", even though this is not undisputed in pluralistic states.

It is precisely this Westernness which freed Asia from its backwardness, as even the state founder of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, explains: "We would have been a backward economy with a backward society. But we do not want all of the West".¹⁵ It is obvious that the question of human rights is a constant source of friction between representatives of "Western" and a number of representatives of "Asian" values. It should not be forgotten that in Europe too – and this particularly applies to Germany – democracy was often not able to assert itself until the twentieth century, but a development towards the rule of law began at a relatively early stage. In Europe too, therefore, democracy, legal certainty and human rights first established themselves during the course of a lengthy process which met with considerable cultural, religious and traditional opposition along the way. Just a few reminders in this context: the "Magna Charta Libertatum" of 1215, the "Habeas Corpus Act" of 1679, the "Bill of Rights" of 1689, the basic rights of Virginia of 1776, the (French) declaration of human and civil rights of 1789 (and 1791), the German St. Paul's Church constitution of 1849, or the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany of 23 May 1949.

As indicated, the claim to universality by "Western values" became – after the end of the East-West conflict which had such a formative influence on world politics for decades – one of the decisive problems of international politics – especially in connection with the search for a "New World Order", as proclaimed by the former US President George Bush in his state-of-the-nation address on 17 January 1991. The question arises as to whether the "West" could and should retain its monopolised claim to paradigms of civilisation.

¹⁴ Manfred Mols/Claudia Derichs, "Das Ende der Geschichte oder ein Zusammenstoss der Zivilisationen?", In: *Zeitschrift fuer Politik*, 1995, 42(3): 225–249

¹⁵ Fareed Zakaria, "Culture is Destiny. A conversation with Lee Kuan Yew", In: *Foreign Affairs*, 1994, 73 (2): 109–126, here p. 125

With his “end of history” thesis, Francis Fukuyama¹⁶ took part in this discussion as did Samuel P. Huntington with his famous article “The Clash of Civilizations?”¹⁷ The latter contends that the clash of civilizations will dominate world politics. Accordingly, the conflicts will not be primarily of an ideological or economic nature, but culturally determined, even though nation-states will remain the most powerful global players.¹⁸ Huntington claims that the next world war, if there is one at all, will be a war between civilizations.¹⁹ These claims provoked a host of statements in the field of science and politics, particularly in Arab countries and in Asia. Huntington’s theses caused great controversies also in the western world, yet they acquired a new significance after 11 September.

What is “Asia” from a cultural viewpoint?

The rapid economic growth – particularly of the “Small Tigers”, which provoked great astonishment in Europe and stupefied many outside of Asia, was ascribed to specific “Asian values”. Is an “Asian century” which defines itself through confrontation with the West about to begin? – this was asked quite frequently in Europe.²⁰ However, the more the debate on Asian values developed, the more it became evident that in using the blanket concept of “Asian values” the social, cultural, and political heterogeneity of Asia was not being taken into account. In contrast to Europeans, with regard to language and to political culture Asians share no intensive similarities. While in the West Christianity represents the essential basis of culture, in Asia world religions have always coexisted with other religions, if not in contraposition to one another. A unified writing system had not developed, nor had common cultural developments – comparable with the Gothic or the Renaissance – taken place. Doesn’t the discussion on “Asian values” overlook these empirical data? There is no single continent that is in itself so culturally and politically heterogeneous or prone to conflict.

What do the terms “Asia” and “Asian values” actually mean? Whereas, for example, Latin America – on account of the use of the Spanish and Portuguese languages in at least all of the larger countries – is relatively homogeneous in cultural terms despite considerable variety. The question of Asia’s common cultural bond requires a different approach. Excluding the traditionally Islamic region (from Turkey to Pakistan), Asia presents a host of religions and religiously inspired *Weltanschauungen*. In many countries the situation is complicated by the fact that the missionary activity did not involve the classic, standardising European combination of church and state, enabling overlapping of different religions and syncretism or the retention of popular beliefs.

¹⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *Das Ende der Geschichte. Wo stehen wir?* Munich: Kindler 1992

¹⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”, In: *Foreign Affairs*, 1993, 72 (3): 22–49; also see: *Ibid*, *The Clash of Civilizations*, New York 1996

¹⁸ For a more thorough explanation of this theses see: Gerd Langguth, “Germany in the Age of Globalisation”, In: *The Washington Quarterly*, 1999, 22(3): 92 ff

¹⁹ Same author, “Kampf der Kulturen”, In: *Zeit-Punkte* No. 4, 1995, *Nach uns die Asiaten? Die pazifische Herausforderung* pp. 12–15, here p. 14

²⁰ See: Adolf Kimmel (ed), *Vor dem pazifischen Jahrhundert?*, Baden-Baden 1996

A look at the Asian map confirms these cultural differences:

- *Hinduism*: The Indian subcontinent with India and Nepal has a mainly Hindu character. A strong minority exists in Indonesia (Bali).
- *Islam*: Malaysia (along with Brunei), Indonesia, and Bangladesh are the Asian countries with the largest Islamic population, with Indonesia and its roughly 200 million inhabitants representing the most populous Islamic state in the world.
- *Buddhism*: In the case of Buddhism the situation is more complex. It has above all a formative influence in Indochina. In Thailand and Bhutan, Buddhism is the state religion, and in Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Sri Lanka the majority religion. Other currents of Buddhism determine religious life in Tibet (Lamaism) and Mongolia.
- *Shintoism*: In Japan, there is a parallelism of Buddhism and Shintoism, the traditional Japanese religion. In addition to the community of Buddhism and Confucianist doctrines in Korea there is a substantial Christian section of the population.
- *Christianity*: The Philippines with their mainly Christian character are a special case. Australia and New Zealand, which tend to belong to the Western-Christian world in cultural terms, must also rank as part of the Asia-Pacific region.
- *Confucianism*: It is impossible to define the religious character of China, Japan and Korea in terms of majority and minority concepts. In China, there is a juxtaposition, even down to the level of individual persons, of traditional Chinese popular beliefs, Buddhism and Confucianism,²¹ which, however, is to be viewed more as an ethical or moral view of the world. There is a similar situation in Singapore, where the population is to a large extent of Chinese descent. Furthermore, there are also Christians in China.

Sweeping statements on Asia, therefore, are bound to be misjudgements in view of the fact that it is the continent with the greatest variety in geographical, cultural, religious, language, and political terms. Consequently, it is much more difficult to define "Asian values" than European ones, since the discussion on values in each Asian country varies due to the heterogeneous religious background. The limitation of the discussion on values to Confucianism alone, which often occurs in the European discussion, is a clear oversimplification. Perhaps one should recognize that the Western concept of individualism, strongly shaped by Christianity, is foreign to the majority of Asian countries. As collective entities, families, movements, organizations, sometimes even companies bear a much greater significance for Asians. Yet with growing prosperity and the emergence of an established middle class this too will change; increasingly self-confident citizens will press more and more for their political rights.

The arguments of the advocates of "Asianism"

The hand-over of the British Crown Colony Hong Kong on 1 June 1997 and, finally, the withdrawal of the Portuguese from Macao in 1999 symbolized this

²¹ Cf. *inter alia* Silke Krieger/Rolf Trauzettel, *Chinas Konfuzianismus und die Modernisierung*, Mainz: von Hase & Koehler 1990

process. Despite the – admittedly, now very thinned out – military presence of the USA the motto “Asia for the Asians” is increasingly fulfilling itself. This encouraged a discussion on “Asianism”. The “Commission for a New Asia” constituted in Kuala Lumpur in 1993, which consisted of prominent persons from thirteen Asian countries, asserted that “we (the Asians – the author) must restore our self-confidence, our faith and our pride”.²² The founder of the *Asia Times* – a newspaper which was printed simultaneously in Bangkok, Hong Kong and Singapore until it folded in 1997 and turned into an online publication—, the Thai Sondhi Limthongkul, even called for an “Asian nationalism”.²³ Many other examples of the Asian we-feeling could confirm the discussion on the Asian renaissance, whose aim is to point to the Asian culture and to economic and political achievements full of pride. Asia is to be depicted as the “cradle of civilisation”. There are, of course, varying perceptions in the Asian identity discussion. The main spokespersons of a moderate line include the Korean politician and prominent champion of human rights, Kim Dae Jung, and the former Philippine head of state, Fidel Ramos,²⁴ who has repeatedly countered the “Singapore school” of state founder Lee Kuan Yew with his “no development without democracy” thesis.²⁵ The “hawks” among the Asian politicians, on the other hand, contend that Asian pride can only be brought about through heavy criticism of the West, in particular of the USA.

After its initial outbreak approximately five years ago the Asian crisis has in the meantime subdued. Even its most renown advocates, such as the Malaysian Premier Minister Mahathir and Singapore’s Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, have adopted a less provocative approach. Essentially, they focus on negative phenomena (such as delinquency, drugs, gambling, outgrowths of individualization), which are occasionally viewed as the western ill but which are abundantly found in all of Asia as well – including the omnipresent corruption (if one refrains in particular from considering Singapore in this case). Which arguments do the critics of the West use? There are four main recurrent theses:

1. **“The West is decadent”**: The main accusation is the allegedly growing decadence of the West. Lee Kuan Yew counters with a “well-ordered society” aimed at ensuring “that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedom”. And, finally: “This freedom can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy”.²⁶ The special sense of family fostered by Confucianism and the need to respect older generations are repeatedly emphasized – and the fact that the individual in Asian societies lives in the context of his family.²⁷ Nevertheless, Lee Kuan Yew stressed in a speech given in Munich in June 1996 that there was a risk that even in Singapore the traditional values would soon be hollowed out by economic development.²⁸

²² Coulmas, op. cit.

²³ Ibid, cf. also *Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, 7/6/1996; *Der Spiegel*, No. 15, 8/4/1996, p. 146 f

²⁴ Fidel V. Ramos, *To Win the Future. People Empowerment for National Development*, Manila 1993

²⁵ Cf. Wolfgang Moellers, “Lektionen aus Fernost”, In: *Das Parlament*, pp. 52–53, 18/25 December 1992

²⁶ Zakaria, *Interview with Lee Kuan Yew*, op. cit, p. 111

²⁷ Ibid, p. 113

²⁸ Cf. Michael Vatikiotis, “Family Matters – Modern day tensions strain Southeast Asia’s social fabric”, In: *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1/8/1996, pp. 38–41

The qualification and employment of women had weakened the cohesion of the family, to which so much importance had been attached in Singaporean society. Furthermore, it was difficult today to completely control the penetration of Western values, for example, through television and the media. The citizens of Singapore were fond of travel and, in addition, were confronted with other ideas abroad.²⁹ The exaggerated individualism of the West contrasted with the families and community orientated ethics of an Asia with a Confucianist character, and the subordination to the community had – in Lee Kuan Yew’s opinion – enabled Asia’s upswing in the first place and had been one of the foundations for Singapore’s success.

The Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad takes an even tougher line. Together with the Japanese politician Shintaro Ishihara³⁰ he published a book in 1995 entitled “The Voice of Asia”³¹ which outstrips all comparable statements through the aggressive character of its content. With reference to the “end of the western world” announced by Oswald Spengler, Mahathir quite simply accuses the West of “hedonism”: “Materialism, sensual gratification, and selfishness are rife. The community has given way to the individual and his desires. The inevitable consequence has been the breakdown of established institutions and diminished respect for marriage, family values, elders, and important customs, conventions, and traditions. These have been replaced by a new set of values based largely on the rejection of all that relates to spiritual faith and communal life. Hence, Western societies are riddled with single-parent families, which foster incest, with homosexuality, with cohabitation, with unrestrained avarice, with disrespect for others and, of course, with rejection of religious teachings and values”.³²

2. “The West is arrogant”: The ignorance and arrogance of the West towards Asians is then addressed. A country like the USA – Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore’s ambassador to the U.N. argues – which were confronted with “massive social decline”, for example, through the disintegration of family structures, should act humbly in Asia. However, instead of travelling abroad with humility the Americans had self-assuredly preached about the benefits of unrestricted individual freedom and inconsiderately ignored the visible social consequences. Western values were not faultless. Some were good, some were bad. However, the West had to be viewed from the outside to see this clearly. And to recognize how the West was working on its own decline with its own hands.³³

Mahathir goes even further by fiercely criticizing Christianity which he indirectly equates with the Europeans: “They sent missionaries to the countries of the Pacific, for example, to convert people to Christianity and civilize them. Of course, this was ridiculous because we had an advanced civilisation centuries before Europe. Europeans never felt they had to convert to Eastern

²⁹ 16 *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19/6/1996

³⁰ Shintaro Ishihara became known to the German public through his book: *Wir sind die Weltmacht – Warum Japan die Zukunft gehoert*, Bergisch Gladbach: Luebbe 1992

³¹ Mahathir Mohamad/Shintaro Ishihara, *The Voice of Asia – Two Leaders discuss the coming century*, Japan: Kodansha Internat. 1995.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 80.

³³ *Zeit-Punkte*, op. cit. p. 18.

religions when they enjoyed the fruits of Eastern civilizations, yet they had this notion that Christianity was indispensable to progress. Even today Westerners generally cannot rid themselves of this sense of superiority”.³⁴ And, finally: “The West has a long history of aggressive wars fought in an ongoing campaign to Westernize the world: no Asian country has ever invaded another country to “Easternize” it”.³⁵

Nevertheless, Christianity *per se* is not held responsible for many of the misdevelopments: “What is at the root of this sense of superiority? Some may say it is intolerant Christianity, but I don’t think the fault lies there. Indeed, superiority over others is not compatible with the teachings of Christianity. Rather it comes from the perception that white people are better than coloured people. It is a racial and a cultural phenomenon, not a matter of religion”.³⁶ Mahathir works on the basis of extremely sweeping assumptions, which imply that Europeans generally feel a sense of superiority over Asians: “Europeans felt they were a superior people with a superior culture and had a duty to civilise the world, which meant, first of all, converting people to Christianity”.³⁷

3. “The West has double standards”: Kishore Mahbubani criticises the “double standards” applied by the West: “Oddly, for all this paranoia, the West seems to be almost deliberately pursuing a course designed to aggravate the Islamic world. The West protests the reversal of democracy in Myanmar, Peru or Nigeria, but not in Algeria. These double standards hurt”.³⁸ He also points out that the stance adopted by the West on Bosnia has caused tremendous damage.³⁹ Nevertheless, Mahbubani is too much a foreign policy expert not to know that particularly the presence of the USA in Asia represents an important factor of political and military stability. He claims that the withdrawal of the West was not being welcomed everywhere and that there was still no substitute for Western, especially American supremacy. A Western withdrawal, he adds, could cause just as much damage as Western dominance”.⁴⁰ And, an almost conciliatory Mahbubani remarks that the West was still the site of the great qualities and achievements of human civilisation. Many Western values illustrated the spectacular advancements of mankind: the belief in scientific research, the search for rationally guided solutions, and the willingness to question assumptions.⁴¹

4. “Democracy versus development”: A repeated line of argument is that an alien system cannot simply be superimposed on a country. Asked whether development in Asia and Singapore is also possible without democracy Lee Kuan Yew replied in an interview given in December 1994 that he would say that development without democracy was possible if the reference was to

³⁴ Mahathir, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 74 f.

³⁸ Kishore Mahbubani, “The Dangers of Decadence”, in: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 4, 1993, pp. 10-14, here p. 12. Zeit-Punkte, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

³⁹Cf. also in this context Mahathir Mohamad, “Bosnia and the West”, in: *Eastern Economic Review*, 7/9/1995, p. 38

⁴⁰ Kishore Mahbubani, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18; cf. also Kishore Mahbubani, “The Pacific Way”, In: *Foreign Affairs*, 1995, 74(1): 100–111; also in: *Zeit-Punkte*, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–18

democracy based on the American or German model. Elections, conflicting views, and regularly changing parties were not absolutely essential in politics. However, if society's aim was industrialisation, innovation and creativity the productive forces needed to be fostered in every generation. Minds were required to create new products, new services and new artistic forms.⁴² In this respect the opposite of a planned society or a planned economy was required.

Mahathir also warns against a Western-style democracy: "When citizens understand that the right to choose also involves limits and responsibilities, democracy doesn't deteriorate into an excess of freedom or, in extreme cases, virtual anarchy. These are the dangers of democracy gone wrong, and in our view it is precisely the sad direction in which the West is heading".⁴³ And he adds: "Democratic fanatics are no better than religious fanatics".⁴⁴ In sharp contrast, the Korean politician Kim Dae Jung responds to Lee Kuan Yew's theses: "Culture is not necessarily our destiny. Democracy is".⁴⁵ He emphasised Asia's rich cultural heritage and the fact that Asia had a great deal to offer to the rest of the world. Its rich heritage of democratically orientated philosophies and traditions would make a significant contribution to the development of democracy worldwide. At the same time, he pointed out that Lee's view of Asian culture mainly served his own justification. In reality, the family-centred societies of East Asia had long since begun moving towards a self-centred individualism as an inevitable result of industrialisation. The moral decline was not rooted in the shortcomings of the Western cultures as such, but were attributable to industrial society as a system. The ailments of industrial society were not to be cured via the setting up of a police state, but via an ethical education, via the communication of intellectual values, and via the encouragement of high standards in culture and art. Although there was no objection to Lee's claim that an alien system could not be simply superimposed on every society the question is whether democracy was a system which really is so alien to Asian cultures that it could not function there. Kim Dae Jung comes to the conclusion that there were no ideas which advocate democracy more fundamentally than the doctrines of Confucianism, of Buddhism and of Tonghak. Asia's democratic philosophies were undeniably just as profound as those of the West.⁴⁶ Accordingly, the fundamental ideas and traditions democracy requires existed in Europe as well as in Asia. Although Asians had developed these ideas long before the Europeans the latter had been the first to develop a concept for a comprehensive and effective democracy based on free elections.

Motives for the Asian values offensive

There are various reasons for the discussion on values in Asia:

⁴² Interview with Lee Kuan Yew in *Zeit-Punkte*, op. cit., pp. 19–21, here p. 20

⁴³ Mahathir, op. cit., p. 82

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 83

⁴⁵ Kim Dae Jung, "Is culture destiny? The myth of Asia's Anti-Democratic Values – A Response to Lee Kuan Yew", In: *Foreign Affairs*, 1994, 73(6): 189–194 (also in *Zeit-Punkte*, op. cit., pp. 22–24)

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 191

First, there is an enhanced “we-feeling” among Asians vis-à-vis the rest of the world and, in particular, the United States and Europe. Nevertheless, this discussion should not be overrated, since it was mainly taking place in a number of ASEAN member states, above all in Malaysia and in Singapore. In contrast, this subject in Japan and in Indonesia – where a different political consciousness exists on account of the greater importance of these countries – is viewed with greater detachment.

A further significant reason for the values offensive is the fact that leading circles are trying to counter the desire for democratisation in their own countries by generally attributing “hedonism” and “decadence” to the democratic societies in the West. The values discussion, however, is also being used to distract attention from the question of democracy.⁴⁷ The simple fact that Mahatir let his proxy and former close companion Anwar Ibrahim, who felt particularly committed to “Asian values”,⁴⁸ be thrown into jail speaks volumes in itself.

A third aspect is that some Asian societies are experiencing a rapid social and cultural change which they must cope with internally first. A country such as Japan, in which the enormous thrusts of modernisation already began in the final third of the 19th century, can cope with this rapid change much better than other societies which were first exposed to rapid modernisation during the last thirty to fifty years. The values discussion, therefore, is also an effort of the Asians to preserve their own identity and to foster the integrational capability of Asian societies – some of which, especially Malaysia, are ethnically extremely fragmented. In this context, negative experiences, for which the western colonialisation is made responsible, caused by Western colonialisation also play a part: A “breakdown of civil society” in the West is criticised: “Guns, drugs, violent crime, vagrancy, unbecoming behaviour in public” are the arguments.⁴⁹

A general motif could be the notion held by some Asian statesmen that globalisation⁵⁰ – which, by the way, is increasingly affecting Europe as well – actually intensifies the tendency to “Westernisation”. On the other hand the need to convey values to the younger generations in particular arises in Asian countries and especially in ethnically mixed societies, in which loyalty to statehood seems not yet to be fully guaranteed.⁵¹

⁴⁷ The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* summed up this aspect as follows in a leader: “Not only opposition forces in Asian countries, therefore, have long since seen through the Asian values discussion conducted by some governments for what it is: an attempt to justify undemocratic rule through reference to culture and history. When the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahatir and Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew argue that the Asians were community orientated and not individualistic they are thus urging their citizens to subordinate themselves to the interests of the community, which are defined by benevolent rulers” (Petra Kolonko, “Asiens Werte”, In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9/9/1996)

⁴⁸ See: Anwar Ibrahim, *The Asian Renaissance*, Singapore – Kuala Lumpur 1997

⁴⁹ Lee Kuan Yew in the Zakaria interview, op. cit., p. 111

⁵⁰ For additional information on the impact of globalisation on Europe cf.: Gerd Langguth, “Germany in the Age of Globalisation”, In: *The Washington Quarterly*, 1999, 22(3): 91–108

⁵¹ Regarding this context cf.: Jon S. T. Quah, *In Search of Singapore’s National Values*, Singapore 1990

Western insistence on the indispensability of democracy – some conclusions

The accentuation of Asian values and consequently of the more important role of Asia in the world – after the end of the East-West conflict, which dominated world politics until that time – is also a reaction to the emergence of block formations in the Western world (European Union, North American Trade Association (NAFTA)), and even more so as the economic and political power of ASEAN is often viewed as quite limited. The concept of “Asian values” is a tool for integration, since many Asian societies are multi-ethnically structured, since their cohesiveness is often lacking and since possibilities of political unrest are high due to ethnic controversies. Today over forty percent of all Muslims are domiciled in southern and eastern Asia. Thus the question concerning “Asian values” remains of great importance, despite that the values debate is presently being predominantly conducted with regards to Islamic and Western values.

1. “Democracy” can not be held back over time: More recent developments in Europe, Latin America, Africa, but also Asia demonstrate the appeal of democracy and of the rule of law. An interesting aspect is that human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch⁵² or Freedom House⁵³ maintain in their annual reviews that there has been an improvement in the overall human rights situation worldwide. On the basis of an estimated global population of 5.7 billion people, Freedom House claims that 1.1 billion people – i.e. almost 20% – live in “free societies”, roughly 2.4 billion – about 40% – in “partially free societies”, and 2.2 billion people – just under 40% – in “unfree societies”. 61% of the 191 countries on this earth have democratically elected governments.⁵⁴ Considering that, according to these statistics, only 42% of all countries had democratically elected governments ten years earlier the progress is astonishing. Democracy is advancing in Asia too – the examples of India, Japan, and, more recently, Korea and Taiwan attest this fact. In the British Crown Colony Hong Kong⁵⁵ conditions based initially on the rule of law and subsequently on democracy also developed – albeit at a relatively late stage of the colonial regime. After the handover of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China on 1 July 1997 the transitional constitution “Basic Law” was respected and the freedom of press, for instance, maintained. Yet the new administration – and for this it was strongly

⁵² Cf. *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, 13/1/1996

⁵³ Cf. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19/12/1995

⁵⁴ In the annual report of 1997 “Freedom House”-published annual estimates: counting 81 “free” countries (out of 191 countries) the year 1997 broke the record of the previous year (79 “free states”), 57 countries were classified as “partially free”; the number of “un-free countries”, 53, remained the same as the previous year. In the Asian-Pacific region “Freedom House” recognized “encouraging” tendencies, since presently in 24 out of 38 countries (two-fourths) democratic systems exist – 17 countries in this group were classified as “free”, 11 as “partially free” and further 11 as “un-free” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19.19.97)

⁵⁵ See: Jamie Allen, *Seeing Red. China’s Uncompromising Takeover of Hongkong*, Singapore 1997

criticized in Hong Kong – bowed to some of Beijing’s wishes so that a tendency towards a revitalization of democracy is not yet to be seen. Hong Kong and in particular Taiwan confront above all China with a challenge of democracy.

2. “Democracy” and “Efficiency” are compatible: Democratic ways of life and legal certainty are by no means limited to Western culture. Democracy which safeguards respective cultural identities can be achieved worldwide. It should not be forgotten that the assertion of democracy and of human rights was also a long and often painful process in Europe too. It is also undeniable that a modern democracy has extremely complicated decision-making structures. The criticism to be heard in Asia of the efficiency problems confronting democracy should not be ignored; all modern industrial societies face questions relating to their “governability”. However, the argument of democracy versus development is a misguided confrontation. Parliamentary democracy and effective political leadership are not contradictions in of themselves – why should Asia then differ? From a European viewpoint a dialogue on values must be conducted with cautious self-confidence. Nothing indicates that the inherited European idea of the harmony between individual freedom and social responsibility would be unable to meet the challenges of the future. However, it is often intellectually more difficult to advocate the idea of democracy, since there can be no closed concept of democracy – such is in the nature of a pluralistic approach. Nevertheless, a number of basic principles must exist, like human dignity, which cannot be questioned.

3. Exclusive Asian values don’t exist: The undeniable problems of integration of the young generation are the consequence of an – often highly accelerated – process of modernisation and industrialisation. Lee Kuan Yew himself has pointed to problematic tendencies in Singapore. Especially for this reason, however, a value-bound education in all modern societies, above all in transformation societies, is indispensable and particularly important. Asian values can on no account be described as exclusively Asian values. For example the particular role of the family is repeatedly raised in Europe too. The reason for the strong emphasis on the family in Asian societies becomes evident when one recalls that many individuals do not trust in the effectiveness of social safeguards (i.e. retirement provisions), and do not want to become fully dependent on a civil service which is often quite corrupt. Therefore they rather rely on a network of family members and personal connections. Despite the emphasis on Asian values, the number of children diminishes in rapidly developing societies, as the number of divorces increases. International interactions provide exchanges of information on increasingly wider scale – not only through the internet –, and younger generations in particular want to assume an important role in this global exchange. In addition, with increasing prosperity in Asian societies more middle class structures, traditional advocates of political participation and involvement, do arise.

4. Industrialisation leads to democratisation: Surely also today cultural traditions have a long-lasting impact and are strongly formative for the

political and economic culture of a society. Francis Fukuyama,⁵⁶ Lawrence Harrison⁵⁷, and Samuel P. Huntington belong to the advocates of the school of thought of the theorists of tradition. In their works theorists of change such as Daniel Bell⁵⁸ and Ronald Inglehart⁵⁹ pointed out that the rise of the industrial society is closely linked to cultural change, which in turn relativizes the traditional value system. Both views complement each other, since empirical analyses have shown the existence of a correlation between the economic upturn of societies and specific cultural changes, in particular with regards to the elite of governments. What is more, these analyses lead to the conclusion that in moments of economical growth the masses long for democratic institutions and support them as soon as they are created.⁶⁰ Dictatorial or authoritarian systems may escape the calling for democracy if they abstain from allowing industrialization and modernisation to occur. But not even in North Korea the radical policy of the government of isolating its people from the outside world can prevent attempts of fleeing from the dictatorial regime.

5. Does globalisation lead to a new hegemony of the West? The values discussion in the international context will become more important as countries find isolationism increasingly difficult. The emergent “world interior policy” will create a situation in which two conflicting tendencies will become visible: on the one hand conservative powers, which defend their own power with the help of traditional values and religious beliefs. On the other hand progressive forces striving for democracy which will be able to develop in countries where democracy is either nonexistent or where it is in a process of development. These forces will refer to the achievements of “Western” democracies and to human rights. On the other hand, to the extent in which in this age of economic globalisation and of increasing international integration the world grows together, political currents, which cut themselves off from foreign influences, will win in attractiveness. This tendency is visible not only in European societies, which must cope with the vehement impact of immigration, but also in Asian societies, of which the majority were subdued for an extended period of time to colonial heteronomy and for which the dispute over western influences is also a question of their own identity. At the same time the debate on Western values – with which often also a subliminal Anti-Americanism is veiled – is also an important factor of internal politics, especially in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies. The challenge of globalisation is seen actually as a new cultural hegemony from the west.

⁵⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *Konfuzius und Marktwirtschaft. Der Konflikt der Kulturen*, Munich 1997

⁵⁷ Lawrence Harrison, *The Pan-American Dream: Do Latin-America's Cultural Values Discourage True Partnership?*, New York 1997

⁵⁸ Daniel Bell, *Die nachindustrielle Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main 1975; *Ibid.*, *Die kulturellen Widersprüche des Kapitalismus*, Frankfurt am Main 1991

⁵⁹ Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, Princeton 1990

⁶⁰ Ronald Inglehart, “Kultur und Demokratie”, in: Samuel P. Huntington/ Lawrence E. Harrison (eds), *Streit um Werte. Wie Kulturen den Fortschritt prägen*, Hamburg-Vienna 2002 (Original edition: *Culture Matters*, 2000), p. 142

6. The number of ethnically defined conflicts is increasing: It is understandable that the Huntington theses meet with such a strong response in Asia, although they include a number of observations which are empirically irrefutable. Despite the growing integration in the world and the reciprocity of cultural influences an ethnicisation of politics is taking place which will not stop at Europe (witness e.g. the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, the break-up of former Czechoslovakia, the growing importance of regions in nation-states – see in this respect the violent conflict in Northern Ireland, in the Basque region or on Corsica). The political developments in Africa should also be mentioned. Huntington's theses can also be couched in the political science question of which role the nation-state can still play today – and, in particular, the USA as the only remaining superpower. Western hegemony is diminishing, but it is not over yet – even though many countries criticise the fact that the Western powers still have a determining influence in major international institutions, such as the UN, World Bank, GATT/WTO, despite the new WTO Director General being originally from Asia. Everything possible must be done in order to prevent the Huntington scenario of a “clash of civilizations” from becoming reality. After the attack of 11th September Huntington's theses found confirmation insofar as a horrible crime was committed in the name of Islamic fundamentalism, which in turn was interpreted as an act of war by the Al-Qaida network as well as by the USA. A war scenario of this sort had not been foreseen in the Western world.⁶¹ One must however bear in mind that the majority of scholars of Islam do not approve of this terrorist act. But unfortunately too often the significance of the existing inter-cultural dialogue remains one of lip-service. On the other hand, it can not be denied that religion – including Christianity – has always been misused, to ensure dominance. This includes the political manipulation of wide masses of poor people, a practice well known to Islamic fundamentalism. To advert attention from their own economic collapse, Islamic fundamentalism needs the image of “the West” as the great enemy – whereby one should not imply that the political practices of Western countries are generally wiser or more sacrosanct.

7. Individual rights are not replaceable with “collective rights”: The discussion on democracy and human rights must be viewed in the context of the values discussion. The allegedly “individualistic”, “Western” way of putting human rights into practice are countered in the discussion by “social” human rights. The Human Rights Commission of the United Nations, which convened in Geneva in April 1996, referred in this sense to a “right to

⁶¹ An example for the limited prediction capabilities of social-science scholars and the underestimation of the cultural dimension of international politics is Eberhard Sandschneider, who shortly before the 11th of September explained why a clash of civilisations hadn't occurred as follows: “Die eigentliche Herausforderung der Gegenwart besteht nicht in einem kulturellen oder religiösen Wertekonflikt mit kriegerischen Konsequenzen, sondern in einer Mischung aus unterschiedlichen Konflikttypen, von denen ökonomische Verteilungskämpfe zunehmend an Bedeutung gewinnen könnten.” (Today's real challenge is not represented by a cultural or religious conflict over values bearing war-like consequences, but it is a mix of different kinds of conflicts, from which the battle on the distribution of economical goods may quickly acquire importance)” (Eberhard Sandschneider, “Asiatische Herausforderung? Kritische Anmerkungen zu der Debatte um “asiatische Werte””, in: *Polis* Nr. 32, Schriftenreihe der Hessischen Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, Wiesbaden 2001, p. 12)

development” which should be incorporated into the definition of universal human rights. Up to now, however, it is not clear what the content of such wide-spanning rights, on which a number of developing countries pin great hopes, should be. The more a collectivistic understanding of human rights develops, the more the applicability of the rule of law is relativised for the individual. The effectiveness of human rights is always reflected in the individual case, above all if members of minorities are involved. The problem of a relativisation of the concept of human rights is rooted not so much in its extension as in the fact that above all authoritarian governments no longer want to acknowledge the universal validity of the classic rights of the individual. Even if a corresponding “Western” universality claim could be inferred: the universality of the classic individual freedoms must be retained.⁶² Human rights have long since ceased to be internal affairs of states, even if this is often questioned. The example of European history and the development process of the human rights idea represent the foundation for the support for the realisation of universal human rights policy.

8. The values discussion leads to a need for a confirmation of the West’s own identity:⁶³ The question is whether the universality of human rights, which was expressed in the “Declaration on Human Rights” of 1948, is solely an expression of a “Western”, “enlightened” conception of humanity and if “the West” continues to pursue the universal recognition of human rights or if it surrenders itself to a relativistic conception of norms, in order to avoid the accusation of a Eurocentric shift in the debate on human rights. As much as “the West” wants to persist in its demand for universal enforcement of human rights – is there an alternative? – it must also respect the existence of other traditions and identities. Perhaps a thorough values debate in Western countries would be not so inappropriate either.

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⁶² Cf. on this aspect *inter alia*: Martin Kriele, *Befreiung und politische Aufklärung, Plädoyer fuer die Wuerde des Menschen*, Freiburg-Basle-Vienna: Herder 1980

⁶³ This maybe said also of the Federal Republic of Germany, that with unification and consequently with the clash of a “eastern” and a “western” political culture confronted particularly the younger generation with a forced transition of values: Gerd Langguth, *In Search for Security. A Socio-Psychological Portrait of Today’s Germany*, Westport, Connecticut – London 1995, pp. 11–38

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