

"THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF ASIA :

A Contextual Pedagogical Essay

ABSTRACT

Political theory is rich in Asia . The West has just not recognized it. An encounter with this political thought permits us to comparatively examine the development and definitions of such core western concepts as democracy, freedom, and equality. In this essay, we find that Asian political thought emerged from a different historical context than in the West. This context was one of the three chronological waves of classical Asia 's "galactic polities, its agonizing subjugation to Western colonialism, and its modern search for an authentic, independent political voice. Plied through these three contextual Asian waves, such Western-derived concepts as democracy, freedom, and equality undergo a re-naming and re-framing in enriching ways for both the East and the West.

Introduction

The purpose of this course (and convention paper) is to call attention to the fact that political theory is rich in Asia , despite its heavy religious content (until modern times). Indeed, the encounter with political ideas in Asia is just as profound as it is in the West. In fact, since these ideas in Asia are heavily fertilized by their Western colonial legacy, the West has much to learn about itself in these distant borders to its material and intellectual reach.

This essay will briefly highlight the three contextual and chronological waves to the development of the political thought of Asia . The first wave is the traditional or classical era before the Western

contact. Here we will look to see what from this period endures, as a mark today of Asianness. The second wave is a scrutiny of the trauma of the colonial experience. The vast majority of Asian societies, either directly or indirectly, came under Western colonial control or under spheres of Western influence. How to react to this intrusion precipitated a major crisis, but also resulted in a rich intellectual ferment. In this ferment were the first articulations of Asia 's nationalisms. The third wave is the modern period from the end of World War II to the present, when Asia was set free on its own independent course. This produces the question: whither modern Asia ? Is Asia no different from a common globalizing world, or does something distinctively Asian remain?

In these three waves, we will examine Asian concepts of the state and of statecraft as well as of military grand strategies and views on social equity and gender. The focus will be on India and China , since these two ancient polities form the twin pillars of Asia . Japan will also be given considerable attention, along with some references to Korea . Southeast Asia will be considered not so much individually as much as a region that has always been a tempestuous battleground between Indian and Chinese ideas and institutions, with a liberal sprinkling of Islamic influences as well. Throughout, comparisons will be made to equivalent Western developments and ideas, *especially on the evolving relationship between religion and politics and on the core ideas of democracy, freedom, and equality.*

Classical Asia

Asia has provided an arena for all of the world's value systems. Hinduism is the oldest. Its earliest forms were similar to the religion and ideas of the ancient Greeks. Perhaps the Indo-Aryan invaders of the Indian subcontinent effaced the same Triple Goddess overrun by Jason and his Greek Argonauts in the Black Sea town of Colchis . In any case, Hinduism emerged as a religion and political culture of conquest. Buddhism later arose as a sort of Lutheran reformation to Hinduism. It held distinctly gentler political ideas. This gentler faith, however, was literally obliterated by Muslim invasions into the subcontinent.

(Buddhism went on to thrive in China , Japan , Korea , and Southeast Asia .) These new invaders oscillated between two approaches in their new dominions. One was to exterminate opposition and force Islam via the sword. The other was to cooperate with local power groups and rule by accommodation. As it spread to Southeast Asia , Islam became more moderate and diffuse in its ideas and beliefs.

In China , Confucianism developed its own order among society, nature, and the cosmos. This ordering principle, of the dual forces of *yin* and *yang*, was an early portrait of a historical dialectic similar to the writings of Heraclitus, Hegel, and Marx. While Confucianism propounded a rigidly hierarchical sociopolitical order, the "turning of the wheel" from Buddhism and the "reversion of the Dao" from Daoism introduced the idea of reciprocity. Mencius politicized the role of the Emperor by entrusting him with the Mandate of Heaven; but, in tying this mandate to reciprocity, he also gave the people the right of revolution. Daoism added the mystical and the magical to this mix. For all its order, this ancient Chinese system gave birth to a romance of protest with sage-knights acting as Robin Hoods. These folk heroes later inspired modern revolutionaries like Mao Zedong.

In this Asian drama, as in Europe , there has been a gradual growth of secularism. But modern secularism has never been completely successful in India , and religion has never died in China . In India , religion represents a complete value system. This heavily religious value system, however, did not preclude lengthy and systematic treatment of political questions. The epic *Mahabharata* contains long political essays on statecraft, kingship, and military strategy. One ancient text, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, introduces all of Machiavelli's ideas about political survival over a thousand years earlier than *The Prince*. There was a more robust tradition of secularism in China , partly because Confucianism never really addressed the question of God. Buddhism filled this in. The Legalists attempted to place law as a higher social ordering principle than cosmic rhythms of *yin* and *yang*. But dynastic rulers preferred the

ambiguities of the cosmos to the concrete constraints of the law. In China , too, as in all of Asia , religion stayed on top, fusing society and politics to the sanctity, sanctions, and political protection of the gods.

More than on top, in Japan the *Yamato* clan proclaimed themselves to be gods. In their success, they have provided Japan with the longest single line of kings in world history, and a sense of nationalism and ethnic identity that runs very deep. Though "divinely ruled, the Japanese never saw themselves as holding the gateway to heaven. They were, then, not averse to borrowing, and they looked to Confucianism and Buddhism to order their state and meaning system. Ironically, integrating this borrowing into indigenous Shinto beliefs became men's work. The further development of Japanese culture--its novels, ceremonies, and *haiku* poetry--was left to the creative talents of women. While gods reigned, warriors ruled and warred in Japan , and a strong knightly code of *Bushido* bound the political culture of the warrior-ruler-knights, the *samurai*.

Meanwhile, great kingdoms arose in Southeast Asia, mostly on borrowed Hindu ideas transmitted by Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka (Ceylon). There was the Kingdom of Ten Thousand Elephants in Laos , Borobuddur and Bali in Indonesia , and the Khmer Empire in Cambodia . The latter's capitol, Angkor Wat, is still the largest religious building complex ever built. Political ideas and institutions in this porous, vulnerable region were mostly Indian (the Chinese influences in Vietnam were the notable exception), but the societies of much of Southeast Asia were ethnically *Malay*, and were mainly held together by its customary *adat*, or customs. These customs set up three social classes (a ruling aristocracy, free land holders, and slaves) bound together in a network of mutual obligations and responsibilities. In this *adat*, property and authority could just as easily be held and passed from women as from men. When the Muslims came to Southeast Asia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, they had about run out of their political tether, and lacked the vehemence that they displayed in India . They superimposed the

veneer of their sultanates on Malaya and Indonesia , but were content to have them upheld by Hindu and Buddhist political principles and by the Malay social *adat*.

Colonial Asia

The conquests of Western imperialism shattered all this. Most of Asia was directly colonized. Even those who escaped direct rule--like the Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, and Thai--were still pulled into a global political and economic international system dominated by Western imperial powers. Since Asian polities had unbroken institutional histories for two millennia (in some cases), punctuated by their own moments of glory, how both to accommodate with, and account for, this Western imposition and superiority required deep soul-searching among Asians.

Nowhere was this more deeply felt than in India , which became the crown jewel of the British Empire of 50 colonies worldwide. Some Indians embraced Western civilization. The British Viceroy, Lord Thomas Macaulay, was partially successful in creating "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect.❖ Later, these scions were called "Brown Sahibs.❖ In furtherance of this, the British invested in a modern university system for India . Among other accomplishments of this system, the Bengali intellectual, Rabindranath Tagore, writing in the King's English, won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913.

Following in the wake of the British *raj* were legions of Christian missionaries who preached their "gospel,❖ and practiced their social gospel with institutions of social reform. Beyond a nationwide network of schools, they set up hospitals, orphanages, homes for widows, leprosariums, demonstration farms for peasant laborers, and social services for outcastes. Many Hindus, while leary of the "gospel,❖ eagerly took up this cause of social reform; and, in the *Brahmo Samaj* of the nineteenth century, launched their own social gospel of reform of some of the ills and neglects of Hinduism. Muslims displayed a split

reaction to the Empire. Since they were India 's last rulers, some resisted, and went down to defeat in the Mutiny of 1857. Others, like Sir Sayeed Ahmad Khan, articulated a path of accommodation with the British, insisting that Islam had no objections to at least the *political* culture of the West. Indeed, as a monotheistic "religion of the Book," Islam was the more natural ally to this culture than polytheistic Hinduism. Still others were not so sure of either the Hindus or the British. It was Mohammed Iqbal--poet, theologian, and political theorist--who gave eloquent voice to a separate destiny for Muslims in the subcontinent.

Although never a directly ruled colony, the reaction in China was even more extreme. Tienanmen Square in Beijing was an architectural declaration that it was the gateway to Heaven. British gunboats brought a string of military humiliations that shattered this gateway. A man who dreamed that he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ proclaimed a new portal and led the bizarre Taiping Rebellion of the 1850s and 1860s. The movement also preached equality for women, and, at first, democracy. In its suppression, it might have been dismissed as one of those oddities of history, were it not for the subsequent influence the rebellion had on Mao Zedong and other revolutionary modernizers.

Meanwhile, the Qing Dynasty, China 's last, made earnest attempts at reform. Western education replaced classical texts for imperial civil service examinations. Principles of constitutional democracy and parliamentary elections were introduced, as were modern railroads and military academies. In 1911, the mixture of protest and reform exploded into a nationalist revolution and a nearly 40-year interregnum of chaos. Intellectually, the boiling cauldron of this ferment was known as the May Fourth Movement. In the humiliation of the demands of the upstart Japanese for the Shandong Peninsula at the Peace Conference at Versailles in May 1919, Chinese intellectuals desperately sought a prescription for modern power: in the pragmatism and liberalism of John Dewey and the Americans, in militarism from Germany and Japan, in language reform and mass education, in physical culture and the emancipation of women,

in the assassinations and communes of anarchism, and even in the communism of Karl Marx and in Bolshevism from Russia.

There was ferment in Southeast Asia as well. Peasants, in a series of protests after World War I, decried the collapse of a traditional social and political order that used to safeguard their livelihoods and provide a sense of place and security from kings that upheld the Mandate of Heaven (in Vietnam), the will of Allah (in Malaya and Indonesia), the *mandala* pattern of politics and international relations (in Thailand and Cambodia), and a transferal of merit from Buddha (in Burma and Laos). After an initial, if reluctant, accommodation with Western power and political institutions, these peasants and emerging intellectuals cast about for their own terms of modern survival. The Cao Dai sect in Vietnam, which worshipped an all-seeing cosmic eye as interpreted by Victor Hugo, Jesus Christ, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Joan of Arc illustrated this perplexity. The mood of resignation to these confusing, but powerful outside forces was captured by the popular nineteenth century epic poem in Vietnam, *Kim van Kieu*. This poem was a creative remake of an old Chinese story of a filial daughter who stays true to her undeserving father in a life of untold suffering, but steadfast devotion. These peasant protests, then, grew out of frustrations over their devotion to a traditional order that no longer deserved their respect.

Commodore Perry's visit to Japan in 1853 found the Japanese at a moment in their history when they were ready for an opening from the outside. Their mature feudal order had reached a point of stagnation. A knightly class of *samurai* undergirded an aristocracy that held the Emperor hostage, even as this monarchy as an institution provided continuity, identity, and a sense of cosmic place for all Japanese. In the name of restoring the Emperor to real power (*sonno joi*), aristocratic modernizers overthrew this *samurai* dominated regime in what was called the Meiji Restoration. The Meiji Constitution established a liberal parliamentary system in the name of the Emperor. But for all this constitutionalism, the Japanese actually modernized through a military path of war with China first (1895)

and then Russia (1905). Along with these impressive manifestations of modern power, the continued hold of *samurai* values, for all this Meiji "liberalism," was nurtured by the education of all Japanese school children in The Story of the 47 Ronin, where final loyalty was still given to extreme professions of honor, in the name of the Emperor. It was a path that tumbled Japan into World War II, its greatest national disaster.

The ferment touched off by European imperialism in Asia was not exclusively one way. Europeans who had sustained contact with Asian societies were often surprised at what they saw. Despite their political weaknesses, these societies revealed sophisticated and well articulated cultures. A host of scholars called "Orientalists," many of whom had served as colonial administrators, began to translate back for European audiences the "pearls of the Orient": the philosophic Upanishads and the twin epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, from India, and the Analects of Confucius and the Dao de Jing of Lao Dze (Lao Tzu) from China. The most ambitious of these projects was the

Nineteenth Century "Golden Bough" series of translations into English, sponsored by Harvard University, of most of Asia's finest traditional works. This impact, however, was more than just informative. Ideas from these translations worked their way into the transcendentalism of the New England *literati* (particularly on Ralph Waldo Emerson's "over soul") as well as into the philosophic systems of Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche, and even into the novels of Herman Hesse, among others.

At first flattered by this attention, modern Asian intellectuals began to resist this characterization of a separate Orientalism as tantamount to a civilizational dismissal similar to the "separate but equal" legal doctrine in the United States that served to perpetuate racial discrimination. Whether intellectual traditions produce culturally distinct ideas or whether universal ideas form and recombine themselves around different intellectual traditions is a pervasive issue of epistemology. For the study of political

thought in Asia, however, the unfortunate effect of Orientalism has been to dismiss political thought in Asia as being too closely tied to religious constructions to be worthy of separate analytical scrutiny.

Modern Asia

World War II brought disaster to Europe . Even in victory, the power of Britain and France collapsed; and, with it, their empires unraveled. In independence, not always easily gained, Asia was now free to find itself, and define politics in ways authentic to a free Asia and to the particular set of traditional legacies and aspirations of each of its societies. In this mix of the traditional and the colonial, what set of political ideas and institutions would serve independent Asian nations still having to fend for themselves in an international system of Western creation and continued dominance? In Asia 's postwar trajectory of growing economic prosperity and rising global political influence, answers to this question have produced rich and innovative contributions to the ongoing development of political thought *per se*.

After World War II, all of Asia wanted to regain what they saw as their lost importance in the world. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India , expressed these hopes for all Asians when, in his exultant Independence Day speech on August 15, 1947, he declared, " India has a rendezvous with destiny.💎 Colonialism, he argued, had drained the wealth and energies of Asia , and now it would just flow back. Although it certainly did not do this right away, in the opening years of the twenty-first century, this rendezvous for recapturing an Asian global importance seems well within reach.

The Indian subcontinent, however, has been plagued by serious differences both as to how to attain an independent India and as to what it would look like. The towering figures in this agony were Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi was the moral father of modern India . After traveling around India for four years following his return from South Africa at the age of 41 in 1915, Gandhi discovered his three themes of **poverty, unity, and independence**. As he made the continuation of British

rule untenable, he worried about an India "in pursuit of Lakshmi (or wealth) freed from the moderating restraints of religion. Thus, even as he determined to entrust the future course of India to Nehru, he was troubled by the younger man's Hamlet-like agnosticism.

Nehru epitomized Macaulay's "Brown Shahib" and his highly cerebral autobiography, The Discovery of India (1946), was really an articulation of his own divided soul. His professed admiration for the ancient Hindu scriptures and epics was profoundly philosophical, and somewhat idealized. He preferred to highlight the moments of unity and power, and gloss over the divisions and wars of India's past. He could not bring himself to take this philosophical appreciation to a spiritual awakening. For Nehru, the influences of a secular English liberalism were too strong for this. To him, the best of India lay in its moments of unity around a *chakravartin*, or universal emperor, like an Ashoka, Harsha, or Akbar. Because of India's deep religious and social divides, he felt that this unity could only come, in modern times, under a secular India united by Western principles of liberal democracy. The Congress Party was founded with this as its core credo. Unfortunately, Nehru dulled his economics by embracing the socialism of the British Fabians and the Russian Bolsheviks (he expressed a continual admiration for the accomplishments of the five-year plans of the Soviet Union). Under Nehru's leadership as Prime Minister, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, remained aloof.

Though Gandhi and Nehru were the giants, there were other voices in the subcontinent. Ironically enough, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the father of modern Pakistan, shared Nehru's secularism, even as he insisted on a separate Muslim state. Others in Pakistan called for this state to be subservient to the Islamic *sharia*. This division has brought the country to the brink of implosion over the never healing sore of Kashmir and the recent reverberations of Islamic radicalism from Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Muslim world. There have been dark voices in Hinduism as well. The terrorism of B.K. Tilak before World War I and the fascism of Subhas Chandra Bose in World War II found expression in the Hindu

communalism of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Nehru's co-prime minister in the first two years of independence. Patel died of a heart attack, but these several divisive strands collected into the Hindu nationalism of Mr. L. V. Advani and the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is now a co-equal national rival to the secular Congress Party. Both countries, India and Pakistan, confront each other as nuclear powers; and another *chakravartin*, in this tense subcontinent, is nowhere in sight.

In China, the first coherent voice to articulate a path to modernization, out of the swirling strands of the May Fourth Movement, was Sun Yat-sen's *san min chuyi* (three people's principles) of people's livelihood, people's rule, and people's nationalism. The last was to uphold China's traditional mandate of heaven. The first was translated into rural life as "land to the tiller" (a theme that the communists later tried to call their own). For the second principle of democracy, Sun called for a transition to constitutional democracy in China through three stages of tutelage. In practice, Sun's political party, the Guomintang, could not pull it off. It lurched instead between the Christian social gospel of the New Life Movement and an Italian-like fascism of Blue Shirt discipline, all the while continuing in a reluctance to share power. Even as Sun's ideology failed in China, it became the basis for the subsequent economic miracle on Taiwan. It also described the long path taken by South Korea to economic prosperity and a lagged following of this prosperity to full democracy.

Another failure was the Hu Shih liberals who embraced linguistic reform and American-style democracy. This faction was discredited by President Woodrow Wilson's treachery at the Treaty of Versailles (in acquiescing to the granting of the Concession to Japan on the Shandong Peninsula), even as it went on to discredit itself domestically by joining with the left-wing branch of the Guomintang in the strategic historical error of siding with the Japanese in their puppet state of Manchukuo.

It was the communists who were the ultimate victors in both the Civil War with the Guomintang and in the articulation of modern China. Though the form of government came straight from Lenin, Mao

Zedong formulated a novel strategy of revolution--people's war--and introduced several innovative political projects and organizations, most of them disastrous. It was Deng Xiao Ping, the architect of China's unprecedented current economic growth, who re-introduced to China a pragmatism worthy of both Machiavelli and Adam Smith. His signature question was: "Who cares if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice?◆ The credit for this pragmatism, however, lay in the Four Modernizations of Deng's earlier protector, Zhou Enlai, who quietly made a career of fixing many of the excesses of Mao's zeal. It was an uneasy Gandhi-Nehru like relationship, but China suffered for it--and might have suffered more, without it.

The truly novel definition of modernity in Asia came from Japan . Utterly defeated in World War II, and under foreign occupation afterwards (1945-1952) for the first time in its history, the new Japanese constitution, in Article IX, outlawed war as an instrument of foreign policy and forbade the country to have anything but a minimal "Self-Defense Force◆ as a military institution. As a sovereign state, in what was called the Yoshida Doctrine, Japan placed its security in the hands of the United States , and dedicated its own energies exclusively towards economic prosperity. Since then, in the Post-Cold War era, several intellectual and political voices have grown restive under this arrangement. One popular political writer, a former mayor of Tokyo , titled his recent book, Just Say No--to the United States .

Southeast Asia has continued to lament its strategic weakness. For nearly all Southeast Asian nations, modernization has been accompanied by outbursts of indigenous violence. It was convulsive in Indonesia in 1965 and again in 1998-99. Burma , Thailand , the Philippines , Malaya , Vietnam , Cambodia , and Laos all were wracked by insurgencies. Except for Malaya, the United States intervened in all of them, massively so in Vietnam . In these struggles, each country sought to define its own modern national identity in the attempts to fashion integrative polities that could overcome the separatist groups and ideologies fueling the insurgencies. With most of these convulsions over by the new millenium, these

countries have endeavored to integrate regionally. Their organization, ASEAN, represents an interesting counterpoise in international relations to the more developed European Union.

Conclusion: cultural grounding of concepts

This consideration of the political thought of Asia as it responded to the three contextual challenges of the classical, colonial, and modern periods brings us to the question of an Asian distinctiveness regarding modern Asian conceptions of democracy, and its companion ideas of freedom and equality. Although the constitutions of many Asian states, those of India and Japan in particular, bear the imprint of Western ideas and institutions, the sources of these ideas emerge from different cultures and historical experiences, Asian ones. At root, while there is nothing in Asian experience or culture to preclude democracy itself, what may require a different definition in Asia is the fundamental difference between Asia and the West over the balance between the individual and the family. In all Asian countries, family and its ties to the state and its loyalties come before the freedom to chart individual destinies. In the West, on the other hand, individuals are encouraged to cut loose from family ties to freely chart their individual lives with no inequalities in status both within the family and in the larger society (at least in theory). This different balance requires a different definitional relationship of freedom and equality to democracy. No one has made this distinction clearer than Lee Kwan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, who has insisted that democracy in Asia must still be subordinate to family discipline, and therefore made no apologies for the public caning of Western adolescents for vandalism in the streets of his city.

Hence, to discuss *democracy* in Asia, we need to bring other words and concepts into play. Really, democracy in Asia should be set in a discussion of *statecraft* and *political authority*. These problems or issues, in Asia, were focused on creating order and preserving social hierarchy, though all Asian political systems did recognize that statecraft and political authority were best served by reciprocity and the

legitimizing of their actions in ways that earned public approval and support. There are contextual grounds, then, for democracy in Asia , but not on the same egalitarian foundations as in the West. Lucian Pye, for example, talks of democracy in Asia as best arising out of its historical context under what he calls Paternal Authority and its politics of Dependence.

Similarly, the Western centerpiece of *freedom* needs to be re-cast in Asia . Rather than all of the human rights guaranteed to individuals in the West through constitutional Bill of Rights and the like, freedom in Asia is defined differently in at least three different ways. First, in Asia , freedom is more of a group concept than an individual one. Indians could pursue *swaraj* (self-rule) against the British, but to its greatest champion, Mahatma Gandhi, for individuals this meant more communal responsibilities to autonomous little communities (*ashrams*), not individual human rights. Thus, second, freedom for the individual boils down to relative degrees of autonomy from the multi-layered obligations of these all-encompassing social structures. Daoist Knights-errant and Hindu Kshatriya warriors had the freedom of the battlefield and of strategy, but only within the parameters of their larger duties to the Heavenly Mandate and the cosmic dharma of their souls. High caste widows in ancient India had the freedom of avoiding the dejected status of widowhood or the humiliation of re-marriage by committing *suttee* (self-immolation on a funeral pyre). Third, the fullest expression of freedom in Asia is religious. In China , Buddhism offered release, or *nirvana*, from the world and its politics. Daoism cultivated a freedom of the soul within the external responsibilities and rituals of Confucianism. And in India , the householder (the responsible citizen in Western parlance) could honorably flee to the forests, after discharging his many social and political duties, and seek *moksha*, the release that comes from enlightenment. Until the insertion of Western politics and ideas, freedom, in Asia , did not lie in politics.

Finally, the over-arching Western ethos of *equality* has had a strong impact on all Asian societies. Indeed, this idea became the linchpin to undermining the Western imperium itself. But even with this

wave of Western egalitarianism, Asian societies retain an even more profound rootedness in hierarchy. Western ideas of equal treatment and equal dignity have weaved their way into the fabric of all Asian societies. But the "rightness" of hierarchy remains. Gandhi, for example, called Untouchables, *Harijans*, or "children of God," but still supported the moral virtue of caste itself. Echoes of the old Confucian hierarchy remain strong in China as do patterns of the *Samurai* ritual and hierarchical obligations in Japan, particularly in its unique corporate culture. Thus, equality in Asia, with this hierarchical persistence, is better rendered as *equity*, which is a word that gives more room for social ladders in a formulation of fairness and justice.

The only point of this brief concluding discussion of these three core concepts is that heretofore political thought has developed almost exclusively around Western political experience. The cultural settings of such seemingly universal terms like democracy, freedom, and equality achieve richer meaning and nuance when analyzed comparatively through their evolution in other cultures, like those in Asia.