

Research Note 【研究討論】

## Do East Asians Uphold Asian Values? 東亞人是否持守東亞價值觀？<sup>§</sup>

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In this research note we examine whether East Asians embrace the so-called "Asian values" closely associated with the Confucian moral tradition. "Asian values" are supposed to stand for what Asians cherish in common. However, it is questionable whether such values actually exist.<sup>1</sup> In this research note, we primarily focus on Confucian values because they lie at the heart of the "Asian values" debate. Hence, we here use "Asian values" and Confucian values interchangeably.

One of the key issues related to the "Asian values" debate concerns the compatibility or incompatibility of the Confucian moral tradition with liberal democracy.<sup>2</sup> The advocates of "Asian values" reject the universal applicability of liberal democracy and propose Asian-style democracy compatible with the Confucian moral tradition. Before assessing the validity of such an argument, it is necessary to find out whether contemporary East Asians still uphold Confucian values. In this research note, we seek to explore whether Confucian values enjoy wide and deep popular support, especially across Confucian East Asia by analyzing data from the two waves of the Asian Barometer Survey conducted in the last decade.

## I. Confucian "Asian Values"

The "Asian values" debate indicates that so-called "Asian values" are largely associated with the Confucian moral tradition. Even though there are many strands of Confucianism, "Asian values" appear to be primarily related to Neo-Confucianism, which originated in China and spread to Korea, Japan and

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1 Michael Freeman, "Human Rights, Democracy and 'Asian values'," *The Pacific Review*, 9, 3 (1996), pp. 352-366.

2 Samuel Huntington, *Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993); Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds.), *Democracy in East Asia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Schaohua Hu, "Confucianism and Western Democracy," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 6, 15 (1997), pp. 347-353.

Vietnam. Neo-Confucianism served as state ideology in China, Korea and Japan for a long period of time. Primarily focusing on China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore as well as Japan and South Korea, we explore the level of public attachment to Confucian values across contemporary East Asia with a Confucian legacy.

There appear to be many values associated with the Confucian moral tradition. Some identify elitist and illiberal elements while others emphasize egalitarian and even liberal ones. Because Confucianism is a highly complex system of thoughts, it contains a variety of values which may be even contradictory to one another. As Tu Wei-ming points out, the Confucian moral tradition does not constitute "one massive whole, exhibiting solid uniformity."<sup>3</sup> Hence, we limit our analysis to those Confucian values emerging from the "Asian values" debate, which are often used to justify illiberal political institutions and practices in the region.

As the official proponent of "Asian values," the Singapore government proclaimed a list of five "shared values." Richard Robinson summarizes the official ideology as follows: "There is a core of common claims: (1) that the focal point of social organization and loyalty is neither the state nor the individual but the family, and that it is the family that provides the model for the organization of authority and responsibility within the political system; (2) that the interests of the community or the group takes precedence over the vested interests of individuals. Hence, individual obligations to the community are emphasized over individual rights and freedoms; (3) that political decision-making is arrived at through processes of consensus rather than confrontations through representative political system; (4) that social cohesion and social harmony are priorities, achieved through moral principles and strong government; and (5) that economic

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3 Wei-ming Tu, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979).

growth and development is a concomitant of social cohesion and strong government and a right of every citizen and country."<sup>4</sup>

The defenders of so called "Asian values" consider the family as the basic unit of human organization. In the Confucian moral tradition it is imperative to preserve the family, which requires such norms and practices as ancestor worship, filial piety, and self-sacrifice for family. The advocates of "Asian values" further emphasize the Confucian family as the model of social and political order. Hence, hierarchical and collectivist familial values are extended to justify limited social pluralism and political paternalism. In the Confucian moral tradition familial values served as the cornerstone for social and political values.<sup>5</sup> Familial values such as filial piety and self-sacrifice for family are extended to justify loyalty to the ruler and self-sacrifice for the country.

Even if familial values are seen as the cornerstone of social and political values in the Confucian moral tradition, it is not yet evident whether ordinary people accept all these Confucian values equally. Because public attachment to Confucian values may vary depending upon their respective domains, we consider Confucian values to be multidimensional and analyze support for them separately. For the present analysis we focus on familial values and their related social and political values such as interpersonal harmony, social harmony, and political paternalism.

First, we considered filial piety and self-sacrifice for family to be key Confucian familial values. Second, we included as one of Confucian social values aversion to interpersonal conflict, especially conflict with those whom they know or interact with such as neighbors and co-workers. Third, as another Confucian social value we included limited expression of social differences.

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4 Richard Robinson, "The Politics of 'Asian values'," *The Pacific Review*, 9, 3 (1996), pp. 309-327.

5 Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985); Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Although both interpersonal harmony (aversion to interpersonal conflict) and social harmony (limited social pluralism) may be seen as social values, they need to be distinguished because the former pertains to one's immediate human environment while the latter more remote society as a whole. Lastly, we considered paternalistic rule by virtues to be one of Confucian political values. Of these four values familial values are private life values, and social harmony and political paternalism public life values. Interpersonal harmony can be distinguished from both types, although it seems less public than private.

## II. Data and Measures

We use data from two waves of the Asian Barometer Survey. The first wave (2001-3) included six countries and territories: Japan (survey year=2003 and N=1,428), Hong Kong (survey year=2001 and N=811), South Korea (survey year=2003 and N=1,500), China (survey year=2002 and N=3,183), Mongolia (survey year=2002 and N=1,144), the Philippines (survey year=2002 and N=1,200), Taiwan (survey year=2001 and N=1,415), and Thailand (survey year=2001 and N=1,546).

The second wave (2005-8) included thirteen countries and territories: Japan (survey year=2007 and N=1,067), Hong Kong (survey year=2007 and N=849), South Korea (survey year=2006 and N=1,212), China (survey year=2007/8 and N=5,098), Mongolia (survey year=2006 and N=1,211), the Philippines (survey year=2005 and N=1,200), Taiwan (survey year=2006 and N=1,587), Thailand (survey year=2006 and N=1,546), Indonesia (survey year=2006 and N=1,598), Singapore (survey year=2006 and N=1,012), Vietnam (survey year=2005 and N=1,200), Cambodia (survey year=2008 and N=1,000), and Malaysia (survey year=2007 and N=1,218). When presenting the results of analysis, we distinguished the two waves of surveys by putting a suffix (1 or 2) at the end of county name.

All Asian Barometer Survey data were collected through face-to-face interviews of randomly selected eligible voters in each participating country or territory.<sup>6</sup>

It should be noted that the Asian Barometer Survey included not only societies with the Confucian moral tradition (China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore as well as Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam), but also those without the Confucian moral tradition (Islamic Indonesia and Malaysia, Buddhist Thailand and Cambodia, and the Catholic Philippines). While focusing on the former (Confucian East Asian societies), we also compare the differences in the level of public attachment to our "Asian values" between them.

We selected a pair of questions from the Asian Barometer Survey to measure each value.<sup>7</sup> To present the results more succinctly, we first collapsed responses to both questions of each pair into two categories, positive and negative, and then computed PDI (Percentage Differential Index) scores by subtracting the percent of those giving negative responses to both questions from that of those giving positive responses. The positive scores indicate the prevalence of public attachment to each values dimension while the negative scores that of public detachment from it.

### III. Attachment to Confucian "Asian Values"

#### Familial values

In the Confucian moral tradition the family is the basic unit of human organization, an atom of human community. A set of values and norms is developed to maintain the family as the most cherished institution. They include

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<sup>6</sup> For further detail, visit [www.asianbarometer.org](http://www.asianbarometer.org).

<sup>7</sup> See appendix I.

ancestor worship, filial piety and family solidarity. The ideal Confucian person is not the self-centered, autonomous individual enshrined in the Western liberal tradition, but the family-centered, relational person. One is expected to fulfill his or her duties as children for their parents and obligations as members for the family. Such Confucian familial values contribute to a culture of hierarchical collectivism. Filial piety emphasizes hierarchical human relationships while self-sacrifice for family, the collective well-being over personal one. Are these values still widely upheld across contemporary East Asian societies?

As PDI scores in Table 1 indicate, those attached to Confucian familial values are more numerous than those detached from them across East Asia. Yet, the level of public attachment varies greatly from one country to another. Among Confucian societies China, Singapore and Japan displayed higher levels than Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. Despite high levels of socioeconomic development, Singapore and Japan appear to be distinguished from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea. Notable is that even in those countries with no Confucian moral tradition such as Thailand and Cambodia large majorities of ordinary people endorsed familial values such as obedience to parents and self-sacrifice for family. This suggests that filial piety and sacrifice for family may not be distinctive of Confucianism. To the extent that these values reflect traditionalism rather than modernity, cross-national differences in the public attachment may partially reflect the level of socio-economic modernization. Nonetheless, that large majorities of ordinary people in highly modern Singapore and Japan remain attached to these values strongly indicates a lingering legacy of Confucianism distinguished from traditionalism. Overall, familial values such as obedience to parents and self-sacrifice for family still remain more or less widely endorsed across East Asia. Only a few embrace egalitarian individualism by rejecting unconditional obedience to parents and the subjugation of personal interests to the collective good.

**Table 1 Attachment to and detachment from Confucian "Asian Values"**

<b>PDI scores</b>	<b>Familial values</b>	<b>Interpersonal harmony</b>	<b>Social harmony</b>	<b>Political paternalism</b>
<b>Strongly attached</b> ( > +30)	Mongolia_1	Indoensia_1	Thailand_2	Cambodia_2
	China_2	Singapore_2	Thailand_1	Mongolia_2
	Singapore_2	Vietnam_2	Mongolia_2	Vietnam_2
	Vietnam_2	Mongolia_1	Mongolia_1	Thailand_1
	Thailand_2	Japan_2	Malaysia_2	
	Cambodia_2	Cambodia_2	China_2	
<b>Moderately attached</b> (+11 ~ +30)		Korea_1		
	Japan_2	Japan_1	China_1	Mongolia_1
	Mogolia_2	HK_2	Taiwan_1	Thailand_2
	Philippines_2	Malyasia_2	Taiwan_2	Indonesia_2
	Thailand_1	China_2	Philippines_2	China_2
	Malaysia_2	Philippines_2	Singapore_2	Singapore_2
	China_1	China_1	HK_2	Philippines_2
	Korea_2	HK_1		Malaysia_2
	Indonesia_2	Thailand_1		
	Korea_1			
	Japan_1			
	Taiwan_2			
<b>Contested</b> (-10 ~ +10)	HK_1			
	HK_2			
	Philippines_1	Mongolia_2	Japan_1	Korea_1
	Taiwan_1	Thailand_2	Philippines_1	China_1
		Taiwan_1	Japan_2	Philippines_1
		Philippines_1	Cambodia_2	Korea_2
<b>Moderately detached</b> (-11 ~ -30)		Taiwan_2	HK_1	
			Indonesia_2	
			Vietnam_2	
<b>Strongly detached</b> ( < -30)	None	None	Korea_2	HK_1
			Korea_1	HK_2
				Taiwan_1
	None	None	None	Japan_2
				Taiwan_2
				Japan_1

Source: Asian Barometer Surveys 2001-3 and 2005-8

### Interpersonal harmony

In the Confucian moral tradition, excessive self-assertions are regarded as detrimental to achieving harmonious interpersonal relationships with friends,



acquaintances and colleagues. Group-regarding behavior is highly valued while self-regarding behavior is seen as disgraceful. An ideal community is assumed to consist of group-seeking members placing collective goals over their own desires, not of self-seeking individuals. The Confucian ideal of harmonious social life starts with fitting in with others. Unyielding insistence is discouraged for group ambience, and cooperative conciliation and self-concealment are regarded as virtues essential for interpersonal harmony.

As PDI scores in Table 1 indicate, those attached to the value of interpersonal harmony are more numerous than those detached from it in every country surveyed except Taiwan. Among Confucian East Asian societies Singapore, Japan and South Korea display highest levels, indicating a lingering Confucian legacy despite their high levels of socio-economic development. In China public attachment to aversion to interpersonal conflict is moderate. Most notable is that in Taiwan, another Confucian society, aversion to interpersonal conflict becomes a contested value. Noteworthy is that non-Confucian societies such as Indonesia, Mongolia and Cambodia display higher levels of attachment to the value, indicating that interpersonal harmony may not necessarily originate in the Confucian moral tradition.

### Social harmony

The Confucian moral tradition places collective harmony over individuality. The competition of ideas and groups is seen as generating unnecessary social conflict and undermining social order. As mechanisms for resolving social conflict the Confucian moral tradition emphasized the limited competition of social differences rather than free or open competition. Social conformity, if not uniformity, is encouraged for social harmony and order. Hence, in the Confucian tradition there is not much space for intermediary groups between the family and

the state.<sup>8</sup> A pluralist civil society, one of liberal principles, is seen as threatening to the Confucian ideal of paternalistic rule modeled on the family.

As PDI scores in Table 1 indicate, limited social pluralism is fairly accepted across much of East Asia. Yet, the level of public attachment to the value varies greatly from one country to another. In China, Taiwan and Singapore those attached to social harmony were more numerous than those detached from it. Even in Hong Kong and Japan there were slightly more people attached to social harmony than detached from it. By contrast, in South Korea those detached from this value turned out to be slightly more numerous than those attached to it. The Confucian ideal of social harmony remained entrenched in China, Taiwan and Singapore while rejected outright in South Korea. It appears to be contested in Japan. Notable is that non-Confucian societies such as Thailand and Mongolia displayed higher levels of public attachment to social harmony than Confucian East Asian societies, indicating that social harmony is not necessarily distinctive of the Confucian moral tradition.

To the extent that civil society requires support for a pluralistic social order, these findings suggest that a vibrant civil society would be more welcome in South Korea and Japan than in China, Taiwan and Singapore, although they all inherited the Confucian moral tradition. It seems that less profound a country's social cleavages, there is more chance that it embraces the open expression of social conflict. The extent of deep religious and ethnic cleavages appears to shape public support for social pluralism.

### Political paternalism

The Confucian ideal of state governance builds on the idea of family-state which emphasizes paternalistic authority relations and benevolent leadership. The

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Nosco, "Confucian Perspectives on Civil Society and Government," in N. Rosenblum and R. Post (eds.), *Civil Society and Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

moral basis of family-state is grounded on the twin Confucian virtues of filial piety and loyalty. The metaphor of the household is used to legitimate benevolent paternalistic rule. The Confucian ideal of state governance advocates paternalistic rule by virtues, not the rule of law in the liberal sense of the term. The ruler is expected to possess morality and wisdom rather than technical expertise or administrative skills. The ruler ought to serve as a virtuous example for the people; he should govern the people with morality needed to persuade them, not with coercion, force, or even law. Both the ideal of paternalistic rule by virtues justifies the custodian role of the state in defending public morals for society.

As PDI scores in Table 1 indicate, public attachment to paternalistic rule by virtues is not widely endorsed across much of East Asia. China and Singapore displayed only moderate levels of attachment to the ideal. In contrast, it is a contested ideal in South Korea. The public in Hong Kong is fairly detached from the value. In Taiwan and Japan the ideal of paternalistic rule by virtues is substantially discredited. Noteworthy is that even non-Confucian societies such as Thailand and Mongolia displayed higher levels of attachment to political paternalism than Confucian East Asian societies, indicating that the ideal of paternalistic rule is not necessarily distinctive of the Confucian moral tradition. The findings evidently indicate a declining appeal of political Confucianism across much of contemporary East Asia.

#### IV. Summary and Conclusion

In this research note we investigate whether contemporary East Asians uphold Confucian "Asian values." We selected four Confucian values which can be identified in the official ideology of the leading defenders of "Asian values." They included filial piety and self-sacrifice for family, aversion to interpersonal conflict, limited social pluralism, and paternalistic rule by virtues, all stressing

the value of collective harmony over individual autonomy. We used data from two waves of the Asian Barometer Survey, which covered as many as thirteen countries and territories in East and Southeast Asia.

Some key findings may be highlighted. First, not every value or ideal associated with Confucianism is widely and deeply endorsed. Public attachment to Confucian values of everyday life such as familial values and aversion to interpersonal conflict remain strong even in modernized societies such as Japan and South Korea. In contrast, the ideas associated with political Confucianism such as paternalistic rule by virtues are either contested or discredited. This finding suggests that various dimensions of the Confucian moral tradition need to be separated to better understand its political implications.

Second, "Asian values" associated with Confucianism appear to be more endorsed in non-Confucian societies than Confucian ones. For instance, public attachment to limited social pluralism and paternalistic rule by virtues was more widespread in Thailand and Mongolia than Taiwan and Japan. This finding suggests that the ideal of political paternalism or social harmony may not be distinctive of the Confucian moral tradition. Those "Asian values" associated with political Confucianism seem to be discredited outright in democratic East Asian countries. Similarly, filial piety and self-sacrifice for family may not be exclusively Confucian. That public attachment to familial values is widespread regardless of a Confucian legacy also suggests that some "Asian values" may not necessarily originate in the Confucian moral tradition.

Third, public attachment to "Asian values" varies even across the countries with high levels of economic and democratic development. For instance, in Japan filial piety and self-sacrifice for family, and interpersonal conflict remained widely embraced, limited social pluralism is contested and paternalistic rule by virtues discredited outright. In South Korea filial piety and self-sacrifice for family, and interpersonal conflict remained widely embraced, limited social

pluralism seemed discredited and paternalistic rule by virtues contested. In Taiwan filial piety and self-sacrifice for family, and aversion to interpersonal conflict are contested, limited social pluralism remains widely endorsed, and paternalistic rule by virtues discredited outright. These findings suggest that public attachment to Confucian values may reflect the influence of distinctive historical factors beyond socio-economic and political development.

Lastly, public attachment to social harmony is more or less weak across much of East Asia. It may indicate a growing tolerance of open competition of ideas and interests in society, which is essential for the development of a vibrant civil society. The traditional family-like view of ideal society sees a vociferous civil society as threatening to paternalistic rule by virtues. Yet, many contemporary East Asians no longer view the open competition of social differences as destabilizing social order. They seem to believe that social harmony can be achieved even through social diversity and conflict, not necessarily through social uniformity and conformity.

The Confucian moral tradition is associated with a variety of familial, social, and political values. Some values pertain to more personal or interpersonal relations of everyday life while others more impersonal social and political relations. As Tu Wei-ming distinguishes Confucianism as a way of life from Confucianism as a form of political ideology,<sup>9</sup> the analysis suggests that East Asians are attached to everyday interpersonal Confucian values while detached from political Confucian values. The political extension of family metaphor is not widely endorsed in contemporary Confucian East Asian societies. East Asians tend to distinguish between the virtues appropriate for the private sphere and those appropriate for the public sphere.<sup>10</sup> The mass public even in Singapore, the leading defender of "Asian values," displays only moderate levels of attachment

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

10 Francis Fukuyama, "The Illusion of 'Asian Exceptionalism'," in L. Diamond and M. Plattner (eds.), *Democracy in East Asia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

to political paternalism, which is often used to justify illiberal political institutions and practices. Notable is that in Japan and Taiwan political paternalism does not enjoy wide public support. Although the Confucian moral tradition treats the family as the prototype of state governance, the finding suggests that support for familial values is not translated into support for political Confucianism.

Overall, contemporary East Asian societies are changing. It is evident that advanced democratic East Asian countries are increasingly detached from Confucian values associated with the organic conception of society and polity. The influence of the Confucian moral tradition can still be found in their private life but far less so in their public life. Despite elite discourses of "Asian values," ordinary people are more detached from political Confucianism. Contemporary East Asians proved not to be undiscerning believers in political Confucianism. Socioeconomic development and rising levels of education seem to make ordinary people become increasingly critical consumers of political Confucianism. Affluent, literate and urban East Asians may be still Confucian in private life but not in public life. The extension of everyday Confucian values to social and political realms may not be automatic in contemporary East Asia.

## Appendix I

### Survey Questions

#### **A. Familial values**

1. Even if parents' demands are unreasonable, children still should do what they ask.
2. For the sake of the family, the individual should put his personal interests second.

#### **B. Interpersonal harmony**

1. When one has a conflict with a neighbor, the best way to deal with it is to accommodate the other person.
2. A person should not insist on his own opinion if his co-workers disagree with him.

#### **C. Social harmony**

1. Harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize lots of groups.
2. If people have too many different ways of thinking, society will be chaotic.

#### **D. Political paternalism**

1. Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions.

2. If we have political leaders who are morally upright, we can let them decide everything.

- (1) Strongly agree
- (2) Somewhat agree
- (3) Somewhat disagree
- (4) Strongly disagree