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The East and the West: Collision of Values or Mismatched Goals?

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Abstract: ***The discussion presented here offers a timely and nuanced reflection on how differing value systems shape global relations, particularly between the East and the West. The article moves beyond the usual clichés of cultural opposition, suggesting instead that it is often the misalignment of goals-rather than values themselves-that fuels misunderstanding. Drawing on historical context, political thought, and examples from leaders like Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad, the narrative traces how "Asian values" have emerged as both a developmental philosophy and a framework for governance, blending tradition with selective adoption of Western practices. It is evident that while the West tends to prize freedom, innovation, and individualism, much of the East remains anchored in order, stability, and collectivism, leading to divergent approaches to governance, economics, and social life. That said, the text also makes a compelling case for mutual accommodation, arguing that these contrasting orientations can be strategically harmonized to address shared priorities such as environmental stewardship, technological advancement, and peaceful coexistence. This suggests that the real task for leaders and policymakers is not to erase differences, but to build a "golden bridge" where respect for each other's systems becomes the foundation for sustained cooperation in an increasingly fragmented world.***

Keywords: Asian values, East-West relations, cultural alignment, governance, sustainable cooperation

A system of values underlies the life of any society, be it a family unit or the scale of a large transnational company. Any high-level attempts to unite and manage people always struggle with necessity to balance the values of different groups. According to Rokeach [Rokeach, Milton (1968). Beliefs, attitudes, and values: A theory of organization and change. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass], one can distinguish between instrumental and terminal values, that is, how people prefer to live and what they prefer to see as a result. Therefore, values play a decisive role in defining, forming and achieving the goals of a specific group of people. For any leader, there is always a challenge in determining the right direction and the right goal for the groups under his or her control.

Corporate world tends to use the term "stakeholder", coined by Edward Freeman [Freeman, R. Edward (1984). Strategic Management: a stakeholder approach. Boston: Pitman.], to define the groups with different economic interests, values and goals that are taken into consideration for achieving desired economic outcomes and sustainable development of any business. On a broader level, the values and interests of citizens and social groups are scrupulously examined for designing solid macro-economic policies and development strategies that, ideally, would be based on historical, geographic, economic and social characteristics of a particular country or region.

This article examines the differences in value systems between the West and the East in an attempt to explain the persistent misunderstandings between countries in these two hemispheres. We look at Western and Eastern ways of thinking without being strictly tied to any geographical boundaries and mainly study the basic values that shape the way people live, think and make decisions at the management level. The hypothesis put forward suggests that the cause of the misunderstandings is probably not values, but goals that the societies fail to align. Such strategic alignment might be helpful for achieving peace and stability.

Western-led Globalization and Asian values

The second half of the XX century witnessed the intense competition between two major economic approaches to resource management-the market economy and the planned distribution system. There was considerable mutual influence between those systems, and each eventually adopted the characteristics of its rival, but the political forces behind them used these conflicting economic philosophies to expand their dominance on a global scale. It occurred that economic philosophy of "freedom", supported by mathematically calculated benefits and aftershocks of the World War II, was used by Western policy- makers to start liberalizing the markets and expanding control towards less developed economies of Asian countries, Africa and Latin America. Economists and researchers note that the United States represented the epicenter of economic globalization and the hegemonic leadership of the globalized world. [Chomsky, Noam (January 2024). Hegemony or Survival. Haymarket Books]

In some Asian states, economic development based on "Westernization" was truly phenomenal, producing the "economic miracles", first of Japan, and then – of the Asian Tigers [Asian tigers include South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong], which set economic models that were adopted with varying degrees of success by other smaller Asian economies. It should be noted that China's socialist market economy stands out in this row, with this country's economic growth beginning in the late 1980s and accelerating in the 2000s, allowing it to advance to the status of a superpower and becoming the current main economic competitor of the United States.

Although excessive optimism about Asian economic development was tempered by the late 1990s financial crisis, the idea of understanding the unique features of the "Asian model" attracted many researchers both in Asia and beyond. The concept of "Asian values" appeared in academic discourse in 1990s and remains a practical tool for

identifying aspects of Asian economic development "style". Given the noticeable decrease of the United States' hegemony and growing social problems in the West stemmed from freedom cultivation, the essence of Asian values based on stability and conservatism should not be ignored. A balanced approach can be wisely used to build understanding between the East and the West in the current difficult times of mass disorientation and geo-economic fragmentation.

At the state level, there were famous prime ministers of Singapore and Malaysia – Lee Kuan Yew [Lee Kuan Yew served as prime minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990] and Mahathir Mohamad-who actively promoted the concept of Asian values [Mahathir Mohamad served as prime minister of Malaysia from 1981 until 2003 and then from 2018 until 2020]. Both were able to build economic miracles in their home countries by using Western best practices without sacrificing existing traditions and values, the strategy that enabled them to remain in power for considerable time enjoying the respect of the local population and international colleagues. However, there is also a large share of criticism directed at the Eastern collective thinking and excessive focus on ancestral traditions. Such collision of values may create not only misunderstanding but also a lack of consensus in aligning the mutual goals of the West and the East. These pieces of the puzzle come together when we analyze and understand the extent of the ideological differences between the East and the West.

Freedom vs. Order

The value of "freedom" is actively advertised by the Western world that is concerned about market competition, independence, individual success and growing profits. According to Schumpeter [Schumpeter, J.A. 1934, The theory of economic development: an inquiry into profits, capital, credit, interest and the business cycle, Harvard Economic Studies, Vol. 46, Harvard College, Cambridge, MA.], anyone who strives for profit must engage in innovations by creating new products, markets, methods of production, industry structures and sources of supply. The creation of "new" always disrupts the order and stability that are much valued in the Eastern mentality [Here we mainly mean the Eastern mentality supported by Confucianism]. This is why innovation is more in line with the Western mentality, which is aimed at constant change based on free thinking that goes beyond the template, while the Asian mentality is mainly inclined to imitation and hierarchical order. When innovation is organized for mass production, it is able to generate new products, markets and, of course, profits. This is what caused the technology transfer from West to East in the 20th century, which was mutually beneficial but later created many problems in the field of intellectual property.

Confucius said: "*I transmit but do not create. I believe in and love the ancients*". This well-known quote reflects the idea of transmitting the knowledge without distortion and unnecessary changes. Therefore, in the East it is more important to preserve than to change.

Supporter of Confucian values, Lee Kuan Yew, in one of his interviews [Culture is destiny-A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew Zakaria, Fareed Foreign Affairs; Mar/Apr 1994; 73, 2; ABI/INFORM Global pg. 109] stated that in American society he liked "*the free, easy and open relations between people regardless of social status, ethnicity or religion*" but he also added that "*in the East the main object is to have a well-ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms"*. Former prime minister believed that "*freedom can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy*". This approach may contradict the liberal values that shape Western mentality.

To note, in 2025, Singapore is among the leaders on the list of the world's richest countries by GDP-PPP per capita [The Times of India, 27 February, 2025, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/10-richest-countries-by-gdp-per-capita-2025-including-singapore-us-and-more/articleshow/118532513.cms], while the country is still largely regulated and has a death penalty. The latter preserves the order but, as the West sees it, violates generally accepted human rights and freedoms.

Another advocate of Asian values, Mahathir Mohamad stated that feudalism, Islam and adat (traditional customs) are at the core of Malaysian culture. He also strongly rejected Western liberal notion of human rights that, as he believed, could negatively affect Malaysian culture and religious beliefs. [Mahathir Mohamad as a cultural relativist: Mahathirism on human rights, M. Sani, Mohd Azizuddin, College of Laws, Government and International Studies Universiti Utara Malaysia 06010 Sintok, Kedakh, Malaysia, January 2008] Certainly, such a traditional approach and its advocacy cannot explain the Malaysian view of Asian values to the Western- oriented mind. Remarkably, even as Malaysia was recovering from the 1997 financial crisis, it refused IMF assistance and chose to pursue its own recovery policy. This decision, although criticized, protected the Malaysian economy from Western intervention and allowed it to chart its own path to recovery, with a more favorable impact on the poor than other Asian economies that received IMF support. [An Assessment of Malaysia's Response to the IMF During the Asian Economic Crisis, Ross Buckley, Sarala M. Fitzgerald, October 2007SSRN Electronic Journal, DOI:10.2139/ssrn.2988719]

Individualism vs. Collectivism

The dominance of society over the individual is the main feature of the Asian world. This stems from the aforementioned "Freedom vs. Order" dimension. Philosophically speaking, "freedom" is a constant desire of the system's elements towards individual *independency and separation* while "order" represents a *cooperation* within the system.

Famous "free marketeers" such as Adam Smith and Milton Friedman captured the minds of many Western scholars and thinkers, shaping the landscape of international business ideology, which in its ideal pure form is based on the self-regulating mechanism of egoistic interests of subjects, market competition and the equilibrium of supply and demand dictating prices and trends.

The formula suggested by Adam Smith, in its simple interpretation, meant that being an egoist leads to success of

the whole society. American writer and philosopher Ayn Rand emphasized this concept by introducing the ideology of rational self-interest in the oath of her main character of "Atlas Shrugged" novel: "*I swear by my life and by my love of it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine*." This approach, beloved in the West, may seem strange and simply impractical in the East, where helping others and respecting their needs comes first, while personal interests recede into the background.

In particular, one of the main Japanese concepts is "Omoiyari" which is about expressing empathy and sympathy to other people by doing or not doing certain actions (such as making no noise in public places). The concept of "guanxi" in China demonstrates that a person views his immediate social circle as his extended family. Such a broad identification of "myself" in the East (including family, friends, and close business associates) is considered inadequate in the West and may even be illegal, with a person being accused of corruption and nepotism if his "myself" is too broad. However, when we study values, we can conclude that such attitude comes from communitarianism and collectivistic thinking of the Asian people. This formula works for them just the same way as Adam Smith's egoism works for Western self-concerned capitalists.

Asian collectivism is evident both in the organization of work (consensus-based decision-making) and in the organization of leisure (spacious cafeterias to accommodate large groups, big portions of food for shared meals, etc.). Any manager can also notice that personal work-based bonuses are not popular in the East, unlike benefits for a group of people working together.

Most Eastern approaches are based on Confucian principle of reciprocal obligations, which is that in any cooperation, both parties, even if they are hierarchically subordinate, should harmoniously benefit from such cooperation without trying to be separated from the collective or environment and, on a broader level, from the nature itself. This appears to be not so valued in the West where the strength may come from being alone, acting independently, struggling with the system and innovating.

Democracy vs. Authoritarianism

The "westerners" sometimes view Lee Kuan Yew or Mahathir Mohamad as authoritarian rulers who used Asian values concept to maintain their political power. [Peerenboom, R. P. (1 September 2000). "Human Rights and Asian Values: The Limits of Universalism". China Review International. 7 (2): 295–320] The value of democracy is much promoted in Western societies, although we must not forget that, according to Plato, it is not the ideal form of government, just like tyranny. However, there is no generally accepted ideal form of government for any state, since in each case there are too many factors to take into account.

Authoritarianism in the East could be justified when it enabled the leaders to cope with social imbalances and respond to external shocks. If we look at Singapore's or Malaysia's last century's history we would see that the leaders of these countries had to apply strict rules and carefully thought-out approaches to prevent their countries from the rage of ethnical conflicts which burst out in 1960s in both states. The idea of Asian values, which started appearing at that time, was aimed at bringing together representatives of diverse ethnic groups and religious confessions, thereby preventing the development of conflicts on ethno-religious grounds.

The national philosophy of Malaysia was formulated and recorded in the 1970 Declaration of National Principles-Rukun Negara. [Rukun Negara can be translated from Malay language as "National Principles"] The document's main purpose was to create harmony and balance between various races of Malaysia. Subsequently introduced New Economic Policy (1971-1991) supported those principles by setting the goals to achieve national unity, socio-economic restructuring and elimination of poverty. It took tough decisions to unite the country and create a sustainable environment in its diverse society.

Similarly, Singapore' White Paper on Shared Values, ratified in January 1991 as a part of the Singapore's Constitution, was aimed at creating national identity for all Singaporeans despite their different origins. The city-state has four official languages, which excludes any linguistic discrimination. Housing units have quotas for all ethnical groups-Chinese, Malays, Indians and others. The crime rate in Singapore is at its lowest and 'order' can be found in every aspect of people's lives. On the other hand, the law prohibits any public protests, and protesters can be heavily fined and even imprisoned. Censorship is also strict, and due to the lack of any underground movements, the city has been described by Gilbert Wilson [Gibson William, Disney Land with the Death Penalty, Wired, 1993] as suffering from a lack of creativity.

Many Eastern societies are criticized for violating human rights as they are interpreted in the West, although additional scrutiny and a balanced opinion are required in each specific case. Strict rules, if applied wisely, can pave the way for meritocracy, while excessive democratic freedoms and tolerance can lead to social unrest and the spread of poorly controlled inappropriate behavior that may go beyond the law.

Authoritarian style can be also attributed to North Korea, and to less extent, it may be found in China and South Korea. Paternalism and tendency to maintain relationships in these cultures brought much criticism from the Western corporate governance principles that accused their Eastern peers of being involved in nepotism and corruption. This is how it is observed from the West and, from their perception, can definitely distort market principles of independence and individualism.

Of course, this can be seen as a double-edged sword. When a society is built on the principles of freedom and individualism, democracy may be more appropriate for ensuring both governability and the happiness of the people. However, if a society is less individual-oriented and consists largely of extended groups of people with long-standing traditions, an authoritarian leader can regulate these

relationships by wielding increased power, especially in times of transformation and intense economic, political, and social challenges. It should be noted that nowadays democratic principles accompanied by liberal values are penetrating Eastern societies – sometimes this is protected at the state level (China's closure from international social networks) and sometimes not (South Korea's inclusion in the global digital space). People's values determine the future political structure of their countries, so the processes of value formation are usually controlled and managed both from within and from without.

Religion vs. Secular Society

Religion is always a sensitive area for analysis as it reflects peoples' faith and beliefs, mostly irrational. Understanding psychology of the masses becomes crucial aspect for policy-makers and political leaders when choosing appropriate economic and social path.

The Western world nowadays is dominated by the monotheistic approach propagated by the Abrahamic religions-Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The Eastern world encapsulates different worldviews-Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and others-they also seek for irrational or mystical explanation of life essence.

One should not ignore the fact that for more than two thousand years the secular teaching of Confucius was the basic ideology for Chinese civilization, spreading its influence towards neighboring countries and regions. There are no mystical components in Confucianism and it is mainly based on establishing harmonious relationships between members of society-ruler and subordinates, wife and husband, elders and juniors. That is why in the East relationships become the main value; they are protected, guarded and enshrined in traditions. Secular principles and traditions are formalized in rituals that are strictly observed to achieve stability, mutual understanding and well-being. Therefore, many Asian cultures have such characteristics as pragmatism, frugality and hard work (mostly due to the absence of irrational belief in divine support).

However, *irrational* has also been tolerated and allowed in the East. In particular, looking at the history of China, one can notice that Confucianism, being an official state ideology, co-existed with Taoism and Buddhism. These *three teachings* reflect the harmonious nature of the Asian mentality-to preserve and to integrate, but not to destroy.

In the West, religions, even those with a common origin, tend to split into different branches that offer their own ways of interpreting sacred books and scriptures. Differences in interpretation can develop into confrontation, while syncretism is less common. Therefore, respect for ideologies and beliefs is a necessary element in the process of building relations within the framework of cooperation between the East and the West. Learning about traditions of the Eastern world can be helpful to establish firm partnerships and political ties, reaching consensus and building the future through understanding the past. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said: "*We are not makers of history. We are made of history*".

Hegemony vs. Multilateral world

There is no secret that many cultures consider the Western values pretense as neocolonialism [Nkrumah K. Neocolonialism. The last stage of imperialism / K. Nkrumah.-N. Y.: International publishers, 1966.-280 p.]. This term mainly reflects economic dependence of developing countries over developed states, which can take different forms and *globalization* is one of them. Indirect political control that some Western countries express towards less developed states is the example of neocolonialism.

The concept of Asian values is generally used in regional policy, emphasizing the need to respect the integrity and internal decisions of countries and promoting a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of countries. Harmonius cooperation is more preferable for Asian mentality rather than brutal interference with the use of economic, financial and military mechanisms. Thus, the Western approach of uninvited intervention in every political conflict can be perceived in the East as disrespect and unnecessary manipulation of the states' own recovery and decision-making mechanisms.

The idea of constructing multilateral world appeared within international agenda in 1997 when Russia and China signed declaration [Documents from the website of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, www.mid.ru] in promotion of multipolar world based on principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression and non-interference in internal affairs. Such approach may ensure peaceful co-existence with the creation of multiple decision-making centers around the planet and beyond.

Asian values concept can serve as a useful tool for reaching consensus between countries and building harmonius relationships based on respect and mutual commitment. Such an approach seems much more viable and humanistic, given the current space exploration agenda, which should not be monopolized but rather viewed as an area of multilateral cooperation between the East and the West.

Matching the goals: golden bridge of understanding

Extremes in thinking do not contribute to sustainable development. Western and Eastern values may seem diametrically opposed, but if we look at the level of the individual, we will find a diversity of values embedded in his or her consciousness, regardless the origin. Any value system can evolve through expanding knowledge, understanding other cultures, studying history, and analyzing the geographical, demographic, religious, and social aspects that determine the life of any country or region.

Moving to the macro level of a state, we can extrapolate this statement by saying that understanding the values of other countries is crucial to building a golden bridge of mutual trust and respect. In light of the ongoing economic standoff between the West and the East, especially the United States and China, any observer can see that Asian values should not become an obstacle to building healthy relations, as they mainly reflect local cultures and historically based decisions aimed at survival and economic development.

The mismatch of goals is the real obstacle to multilateralism. At the same time, any attempts to impose hegemony entail many victims associated with the aggravation of economic problems, security problems and the increasing fragmentation of the world, which creates scars and borders, causes deaths and disruption.

We suggest that we can see Asian values quite the opposite way when they serve as a tool for finding consensus and aligning goals between the East and the West in order to ensure peace and sustainable development without losing face and composure. The major suggestions are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Alignment of goals using Asian values and principles

Mutual Goals	Asian value
Global cooperation on environmental issues	Harmony with nature
Enhanced educational techniques	Educational principles of Confucius, Japanese Kaizen (constant improvement)
Sustaining cultural and ethnical diversity	Traditionalism
Support for children and the elderly	Paternalism, role of the family
Cooperation in waste management sphere	Frugality
Non-interference in internal affairs of other countries	Respecting the partners
Combating unethical and illegal behavior	Reciprocal obligations, loyalty
Cooperation in the sphere of innovation and space exploration	Collectivism
Global strategic planning	Long-term orientation

Conclusion

Current geo-economic and financial fragmentation leads to the formation of a bloc mentality among groups of countries, generating fear and anger in response to security and uncertainty issues. Collision of values between Western and Eastern societies exacerbates misunderstandings between cultures and nations and creates challenges on the way towards cooperation.

The concept of Asian values, taken as a tool for economic management of the ethnically diversified societies, attempted to combine the conservative principles of traditional Confucian teachings with the beliefs of the indigenous peoples of the Asian lands. The main idea, promoted by prominent Eastern political figures such as Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad, was that Asia could use its own aggregated approach to development and combine both Western best practices and Asian traditions, taking into account local historical backgrounds, ethnic groups and cultures. As a result, Asian values have come to favor order and collectivism over freedom and individualism so prized in the West. Paternalism of Eastern cultures influenced the formation of authoritarian-style management approach that led to economic success in many solid economies of Asia, including Singapore, China, South Korea and Malaysia.

Looking at the main aspects of Asian values, we can conclude that they have not only contributed to the high growth rates of Asian economies while maintaining social stability, but can also help formulate common goals for the East and the West in terms of their possible cooperation, where each side can contribute to the final result.

Key objectives to be agreed upon include environmental protection and waste management, education, ethnic and cultural diversity, care for children and the elderly, non-interference in other countries' political affairs, combating unethical behavior, as well as innovation, space exploration, and cooperation in global strategic planning. Building a golden bridge of understanding between the East and the West can bring order to the world without losing the impulse for creativity.

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