

Book Reviews

Asian Values and Modernization, edited by Seah Chee-Meow. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1977. Pp. xiii, 101, Foreword, Introduction. Paperback S\$8.00.

Asian Values in a Changing World

The theme of modernization is a recurrent one in Singapore, both among its community of social scientists and as a subject of general discussion. Recently there has been a tendency to view this debate in an interesting form: no one doubts the reality of modernization, or for that matter its desirability, but the pressing question is seen as being the problem of the extent to which modernization is compatible with traditional Asian values, which are seen as the essential “cement” or “cultural ballast” which keeps the society together and stable. This review addresses itself, by way of an examination of the arguments of the book under consideration, to a discussion of the underlying assumptions as they bear on this theme, and attempts to show that these assumptions while they contain paradoxes and ambiguities, nevertheless form a fairly coherent and logical system of thought.

The idea of “Asian values” as the basis of Southeast Asian cultures is not a particularly new one, but it is interesting that it appears in a number of forms, one being the above-mentioned concept of “cultural ballast”, another being the idea of the fundamental opposition between “Asian” and “Western” values, and a third being the theme that “Western” values are culturally polluting, whereas “Eastern” ones are not. These themes, and the closely related ones that will be discussed in the course of this review, form a regular and predictable part of political and public rhetoric. That these problems have not altogether escaped the attention of the intellectual community in Singapore the proceedings of this symposium reveal. The symposium papers are of interest however for their failure to resolve most of the root problems. The book under review provides the single most condensed analysis of these themes yet to be presented by a group of Singaporean scholars.

It represents the proceedings of a symposium, and contains papers of varying brevity and quality on a number of themes all bearing on the general topic of the book. I will not attempt to summarize them here: this is done briefly in the editor’s introduction. All of the authors find very little trouble in defining modernization; but when it comes to Asian values, all seem to agree that there is really no such thing in general terms, that the “spiritual” qualities of Asians as opposed to the “materialistic” qualities of Westerners has been grossly over-exaggerated, and that the values of Asian societies — group spirit, mutual assistance, cohesive family life, etc. — while indeed threatened by modernization, are actually not significantly different

from their counterpart Western values, which are equally threatened by modernization. Perhaps more so — the process has been going on longer in the west. Perhaps indeed Western “decadence” is just what that word precisely suggests: good old values now decayed — rather than something qualitatively different from Asian values? (In this respect see in particular the following papers: Ho Wing Meng, “Asian Values and Modernization”, especially pp. 11, 13, 16, and Peter S.J. Chen, “Asian Values and Modernization: A Sociological Perspective”, especially pp. 29ff, and Wu Teh-yao, “Chinese Traditional Values and Modernization”.) Additionally the thrust of their argument is generally that traditional values are very difficult if not impossible to maintain in the face of the rapid and intense modernization process that is sweeping Singapore. Perhaps the most interesting paper in the collection, however, is the one by S. Rajaratnam, the Foreign Minister of Singapore. He begins by doubting if Asian values exist at all: “If it has any meaning at all it is merely a convenient way of describing the heterogeneous, conflicting, and complex network of beliefs, prejudices, and values developed in the countries which for geographical purposes have been grouped as being in Asia.” (p. 95) Rajaratnam then deftly turns the argument on its head — it is not so much Asian values as Western values that need to be critically reassessed, especially as these values are imitated by many Asians. Thus, “if there is much in Asian values that are incompatible with modernization there is also much in Western values which have become obstacles to modernization” — “crime, corruption, and permissiveness” (pp. 98–99).

Such views as these pose problems for a serious intellectual critique. Several themes run through these and countless other discussions of the problem in the Singapore press and other publications elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The first of these is the opposition of “Eastern” and “Western” values, the former being virtuous and the latter decadent. The second is that “Eastern” or “Asian” values are nowhere specifically identified except in very general terms — thrift, honesty, etc. — which, many Westerners would agree, hardly serves to distinguish them from their Western counterparts which possess exactly the same features. Thirdly, “Asian” is seen as a homogeneous label, just as “Western” is, without any reference to internal diversity within Asia, in terms of typical value system. Fourthly, we have the idea that Western technology and instrumental concepts can be borrowed, without taking the culture (at least to some degree) as well. At the same time, we see Asian children busily learning ballet, playing in brass bands, and affluent Asian parents playing golf and attending concerts of classical Western music. Are these simply the Westernized few? All in all, the phrase “Asian values”, as the term is commonly used, appears to have two outstanding features: firstly, Asian values contain many of the universally accepted “good values” such as honesty and, secondly, they are often defined, though not always, by their contrast with their alleged opposites, namely, Western values.

This is somewhat overlooked in the symposium, except by implication. Ho Wing Meng, for example, makes the important discovery that many of the qualities of the stereotype Asian — spirituality, non-materialism, non-violence, renunciation, moral preoccupation, and ascetism — are actually no more inherent qualities of Asians that they are of anyone else. This being the case, it is a little unfair to expect Asian youths to manifest these “Asians virtues” as a natural element of their “Asianness”. This

belief does exist: it is reflected in the very widely held belief that students educated in the Chinese-medium are more "moral" than those educated in the English-medium in Singapore. It is unfortunate that the papers by Wu Teh-Yao and Chang Yu-Hung, which deal respectively with a historical account of Chinese traditional values and romanization of the Chinese script, do not address these questions of language, education, and values squarely. Ann Wee, in a very brief paper on the family, does appear to recognize this when she states that the old Eastern model of the family will not serve a modern civic state without some radical rethinking, but unfortunately she does not expand on the promising theme of what might actually be involved in this rethinking.

Let us now move on to explore the consequences and conclusions that we can draw from this brief analysis. Let us begin by returning to the question of modernization and "Western" values raised by this symposium. To begin with, we have a theoretical problem which might be summarized by asking "Weber or Marx"? In other words, is this ideology that we have characterized here itself a product of underlying socio-economic conditions (Marx) or is it on the contrary designed to *bring about* certain such conditions (Weber)? On the whole, Weber would seem to win as the system of beliefs draws its rationale from its ability to manipulate socio-economic circumstances, to mould them, and to establish a national ideology which is compatible with a social model of capitalism and growth. Secondly, there are the problems inherent in the concepts of change, modernization, and development themselves. (See in particular the papers by Ho and Chen.) Will a society that has acquired some modern characteristics necessarily continue to become more modern and less non-modern? This is the point at which the problem of values tends to get raised — can Asian societies modernize without having "Western" values?

The solution to this is fairly clear: that actually many of the values that accompany modernization are *not* "Western" at all, they are simply the values that necessarily accompany technology — concepts of rationality or efficiency, for example. If one looks at the definitions of modernization proposed in Singapore, it is apparent that in fact they have little to do with the West, as the symposium so clearly reveals. But this becomes confused, in many minds, with the historical contingency that much modern technology is Western in origin. In fact an important analytical distinction needs to be made between a technology and a mode of production — a technology can be culturally neutral, but tends to become otherwise when it is combined with certain social relations of production, for example, factories instead of cottage industries. Indeed several modes of production can coexist in the same society — some of which may be Western-technological, but others traditional. In Singapore, for example, one frequently finds businesses which are modern in their technology, but traditional in their social organization.

The problem is frequently seen as essentially one of how to acquire Western technology without accepting "Western values" along with it. But this problem diminishes once it can be shown that the logical connection between the two is obscure — accepting technology does not imply accepting the moral superiority of the West; many basic "Western" values, as we have seen, tend to be indistinguishable from their "Eastern" counterparts.

The other level at which the tension conspicuously appears is at the level of discussion of Singaporean, Malaysian, or ASEAN culture: Is there one? If so what is it? If not, how to acquire one? Analysis of discussion about culture indicates that it is not random but structured. Even if no one is exactly sure what these cultures are, it is clear that it must fulfil several requirements — they must be “traditional” and “indigenous”, with “local” values manifested in it, but yet must also embrace progress while rejecting the idea of the superiority of Western culture. But here we may introduce an interesting new theme. One finds throughout the region the interesting assumption that a person can be bilingual or multilingual, though not bicultural or multicultural. But why not? It is true to a great extent that when one learns a language for everyday usage (as opposed to learning, for example, simply to read technical documents in a language, such as “scientific German”) one acquires of necessity the concepts and many of the value assumptions of the associated culture. But the view expressed above reveals belief in a different model of language learning altogether — that one can learn a language without acquiring its culture if that language is an “alien” one, for example, English, even if it is learnt first; but that *values* are transmitted through the “non-alien” language, that is, the one nearest to the learner’s own culture; and that one value system, thus acquired, forces out any other. But how true is this? And how desirable is it that Southeast Asian nations pursue a mono-cultural model?

In fact, of course, they are already “plural societies”, and any regional culture is certain to contain elements of the different cultures, Oriental and Occidental, represented in the area. The model seems to refer more to the belief that any single individual, although multilingual, will be monocultural. But is this the case, or need it be, conceptually or empirically? In practice many Southeast Asians are to some extent already multicultural: indeed it is almost a requirement of survival to be so. Many others are what we might term “cultural brokers”, that is, they inhabit more than one system of cultural values, and they not only pass continuously from one to another of these systems, but their very role in the society is vital as they represent the channels of communication from one cultural “zone” to another. Society is an overlapping network of such zones. No one individual inhabits all the zones, but many act as mediators between two or more zones by being simultaneously members of a plurality of such zones. An educated English-speaking Chinese in Singapore may, for example, belong to two major zones — the “English” and the “Chinese”, to several sub-zones, for example, the Hokkien and Cantonese sub-divisions of the Chinese, and possibly to the Malay zone as well if he can speak Malay and works, for example, as a production supervisor or manager in an electronics factory, which would certainly employ Malay and Malay-speaking Indian workers. At the macro-level it is clear that “Singapore culture” is expected to fulfil a model based on the *integration* rather than on the *segregation* or the *assimilation* of the various ethnic cultures. Indeed national identity, as opposed to narrower loyalties of race, class, or religion, requires this. Nevertheless the relationships between the multilingual and the multicultural models have never been explored in any satisfactory way.

It should perhaps be stressed at this point that a sub-theme of this review article is that authentic Southeast Asian cultures *do* exist. To an anthropologist it is inconceivable that any enduring social group should *not* possess a culture, even if

that culture still contains ambiguities and paradoxes and is still in a process of evolution. It is equally clear that all cultures evolve and that all cultures begin somewhere. A culture organizes, integrates, and maintains a system of values and patterns of characteristic behaviour, and in this sense distinctive although still fluid local cultures already exist. This can also be seen by contrast. Singapore, for example, is a quite different society from, say, Hong Kong, and is very different indeed even from its close neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia.

Ultimately this process must be related back to the idea of socialization — to the inculcation of this pattern of ideas which, while it still contains many paradoxes, fits, as we have seen, into a recognizable cosmological pattern.

This leads quite naturally to a preoccupation with the problem of order: how to have both order and rapid change; authority and pragmatism; rationality and tradition. As we have seen, the concepts of “Asian democracy” in the political sphere, “Asian values” in the culture sphere, and a concern with tidying, ordering, and classifying in all spheres are the manifestations of this preoccupation. The objective of this review has been to begin an exploration of the system of thought that underlies this remarkable situation, to show that it forms a logical cosmology organized around certain key concepts. A great deal of conceptual and empirical clarification of this situation is still required, but these thoughts are offered because the “archaeology of ideas” is helpful: it assists thinking and throws light on the assumptions which policy-makers and local intellectuals utilize. It is not my place to judge these ideas. I would however argue that there are lessons to be learnt from the study of this book: firstly, how not to approach the problems of “Asian values”; secondly, how much intellectual rigour, which is not conspicuous in this book, will be needed to fully and comprehensively deal with the problems of modernization and their impact on ideological systems; and, thirdly, to enter a plea for a more systematically sociological approach to these problems, combined with a sense of history.

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Diversity and Development in Southeast Asia: The Coming Decade, by Guy J. Pauker, Frank H. Golay, Cynthia Enloe. Council of Foreign Relations 1980's Project. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977. Pp. xiv, 190, Introduction by Catherine Gwin, Bibliography, Index. Hardcover S\$30.70, Paperback S\$16.70.

This book represents one of five volumes in the 1980's Project of the Council of Foreign Relations which studies issues of potentially great importance in the next decade and beyond. The purpose, as Catherine Gwin states in her short introduction, is “to shed light on the closely related features of the South, the sources and strengths of the commitment of individual states to join with others to press for political and economic change, and the ways in which Southern perceptions of the