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## Long Reads

# The Asian Values Debate Returns

Mar 2, 2018 | **ANDREW SHENG**

HONG KONG – In 1998, when China’s economic rise was just beginning, Kishore Mahbubani ignited something of a global intellectual firestorm with his book *Can Asians Think?* Two decades later, with Asia forming the core of the world economy, and China challenging the United States for hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region and even for global leadership, Mahbubani’s question has gained new, and perhaps more profound, resonance.

To be clear, Mahbubani was not asking whether Asians lack other people’s cognitive abilities. Rather, he was questioning whether Asia – a region comprising vastly different countries, from Japan to Singapore – possessed its own intellectual framework, one that lies outside of the dominant Western paradigm. Were there specific Asian values to which the people of the region adhered, and was this inquiry still a viable way to understand the workings of a rapidly modernizing region?

Some observers responded to Mahbubani’s query by asserting that core Asian values – such as hard work, pragmatism, and family – are not specific to Asia. Others countered that Asian values are not only unique, but also superior to those of the West. Mahbubani agreed that Asia had its own values and intellectual traditions, which he argued deserved at least equal respect and consideration as those of the West – not least because of the mixed results of the West’s own frameworks. At the time Mahbubani published his book, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 had just decimated many of the region’s economies, thanks, many Asians believed, to prevailing Western economic ideas.

Today, 20 years after Mahbubani weighed in on what became known as the “Asian values debate,” talk about Asia’s intellectual distinctiveness is gaining traction once more, thanks in part to the assertive political leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This raises a three-part question: What can we learn from the Asian values debate, what does it leave out, and how can it be productively advanced?

## **A Crisis of Values**

When it was released, Mahbubani's book stood in sharp contrast to another book – *The End of History and the Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama – which was published to even greater acclaim a half-decade earlier. Fukuyama's thesis was that following the collapse of communism, liberal democracy and free-market capitalism stood unchallenged. No other system, he argued, could challenge democratic capitalism in terms of political freedom and economic prosperity.

For a while, Fukuyama's prophesy appeared to be correct. Former communist countries like those in Central and Eastern Europe were consolidating democracy and embracing the market. Even Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening up" to the world seemed to pave the way for a future democratic opening. Whether or not history had "ended," the democratic and capitalist world appeared to be the place to be. The Asian financial crisis seemed, at least initially, to reinforce this belief, because the crisis had consumed some of the region's biggest success stories and supposedly discredited the Asian way of doing things. But as states like Malaysia, which rejected the economic cures proposed by the IMF, recovered from the crisis much more quickly than those countries that followed the Fund's advice, doubts about the reliability of Western wisdom began to emerge throughout the region. Western ideas, it seemed, perhaps did not win so decisively after all.

A decade after Mahbubani's book was published, however, the tables were turned further. The US and Europe were plunged into a crisis of their own making – one so severe that it engulfed most of the world economy, much to the chagrin of Asian governments, which had undertaken painful reforms to inoculate themselves from such episodes.

Muddled ideas, it seems, were at the root of the crisis of 2008. To paraphrase Friedrich von Hayek's Nobel Prize lecture, the "perfection" of the economic models that governments and economists used to predict the future was exposed as mere "pretense." Western economic thought was exposed as an emperor who, if not completely without clothes, was in an advanced state of undress.

The consequences of the charade were severe: a lost decade of growth and stagnation, in which Western governments accumulated massive debts and central banks expanded their balance sheets through experiments like quantitative easing (QE). At the same time, economic inequality, systemic fragility, and political polarization intensified, reinforcing Asian doubts not only about Western ideas, but also about Western leadership of the global economy.

Indeed, the growing sense that the free-market policy prescriptions that comprised the so-called Washington Consensus, and the mainstream politicians who had championed them, had failed fueled the rise of illiberalism and autocracy in Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and elsewhere. Even the US – the poster child for Western democratic capitalism – has faced such pressures, exemplified by the election of President Donald Trump, who has embraced protectionism and attacked – at least rhetorically – the system of checks and balances that underpins America's democracy.

Not surprisingly, Asian doubts about Western ideas have continued to mount. In China, the government is insisting that schools and universities place greater

emphasis on teaching Chinese thought (a reform that dovetails with the government's desire to consolidate its intellectual and political legitimacy). Other Asian countries, such as South Korea and India, are also seeking to promote their domestic intellectual traditions, if not as direct competitors to Western ideas, then at least as co-equal analytical traditions for understanding the world.

### **An Opening for the “Rest”**

To be fair, Fukuyama and likeminded democratic theorists were never the unquestioning Western cheerleaders that pundits made them out to be. On the contrary, Fukuyama recognized that the dominant Western liberal democratic system was neither inevitable nor even applicable in all countries. In his 2014 book *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*, Fukuyama went further, acknowledging that China's recent experience has shown that “authoritarian governments can sometimes be more capable than democratic ones of breaking decisively with the past.”

As Warwick University's Robert Skidelsky points out, a key problem with Western economic thinking lies in the economic profession's intellectual aridity. The Great Depression of the 1930s, Skidelsky notes, produced Keynesian economics. The stagflation of the 1970s produced Milton Friedman's monetarism, which revolutionized policy formulation. Yet, a decade after the Great Recession began, there is no consensus on a new breakthrough in mainstream Western economic thinking.

As the West has struggled, Asia has continued to forge ahead, with China, India, and Southeast Asian economies accounting for 63% of the world's GDP growth and more than half of new consumption over the last 15 years. The countries that Fareed Zakaria once referred to as “the rest” are now set to overtake the West in terms of global output, consumption, and savings levels.

This suggests that Asia's recent growth cannot be dismissed as merely a matter of developing economies catching up to their developed counterparts. Instead, as Columbia University's Hamid Dabashi suggests, Asia's economies, after centuries of imperial domination, seem finally to be performing according to their people's own ideas, frameworks, and values. In his 2015 book *Can Non-Europeans Think?* – a title that self-consciously echoes Mahbubani's – Dabashi argues that the problem was never that “the rest” did not have their own theoretical frameworks, but rather that those frameworks were marginalized and ignored.

Dabashi points to the late Columbia University professor Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism*, which highlights patronizing Western representations of the “East” as a region comprising societies that are less advanced, less rational, and, ultimately, inferior. With their thinking and achievements so often regarded as less valid – locally applicable, perhaps, but not universal in the way that Eurocentric frameworks allegedly were – non-Western intellectuals struggled to debate with their Western counterparts on an equal footing.

But whatever intimidation non-Western thinkers may have felt is now dissipating, as the flaws in Western ideas and models are exposed. The assault on facts, reason, and science undertaken by the likes of Trump has undermined the West's position further.

The question is whether non-Western thinkers will be able to seize this opportunity to expand the influence of their own intellectual frameworks.

## Spreading the Word

A key challenge for Asian thinkers will be to overcome enduring Western biases. English-language publishers still tend to encourage analysis of global affairs from a Eurocentric perspective. For example, though there are undoubtedly many valuable scholarly books on China, particularly by Chinese academics – such as Yasheng Huang and Minxin Pei – who now live and work in the West, too many seem intended mainly to stoke China-phobia or overstate the risk of crisis or collapse. Non-Western thinkers often are not translated into European languages, even though insiders' understanding and appreciation of, say, Confucius, Mencius, and Han Feizi would undoubtedly help outsiders grapple more effectively with their Chinese interlocutors in politics and business.

Given the paucity of such studies in Western publishing lists, some of the most powerful challenges to Western thinking have come from Indians writing in English. For example, the historian Pankaj Mishra's 2012 book *From the Ruins of Empire* highlighted how early-twentieth-century Asian intellectuals like Gandhi, Kang Youwei, and Mohamed Abduh were forced to reinterpret their own traditions – Hindu, Confucian, and Islamic, respectively – through a Western lens.

To expand the reach of their ideas, non-Western thinkers must prove, using thoughtful, cogent arguments, the originality, value, and universality of their perspectives. They might try to do this much in the way Mishra describes, by using Eurocentric methodologies. They might also reject that approach entirely, thinking completely outside the European box. Or they might meld the two modalities, integrating Eurocentric and non-European thinking to arrive at a consistent universal frame of analysis.

Whichever approach non-Western thinkers choose, frameworks – including familiar values and concepts – that have long been defined largely according to a local perspective will have to be adjusted so that they are universally comprehensible. This is easier said than done.

The Indian author Rajiv Malhotra's 2011 book *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism* illustrates this challenge. No one can dispute the argument that India is different from the West. But the practice of "direct mutual engagement" (purva paksha) that Malhotra asserts is needed to recognize those differences fully – as well as to support the establishment of a "harmonious approach to social and spiritual growth" – can be understood only if one comprehends and accepts the concept of "Dharma" contained in Indian religions.

For a Chinese reader, this may not be such a stretch, as Dharma bears some similarity to the concept of "Tao" found in traditional Chinese philosophy. But a secular Western scientist may struggle to understand what are not easily definable concepts. Even if they do, they might be unwilling to accept either Dharma or Tao as foundations for a useful intellectual framework, as neither can be scientifically tested or empirically verified.

Another key challenge for non-Western thinkers will be to synthesize their ideas – and, specifically, the intellectual building blocks of the Chinese economic miracle – into a package that can rival the Washington Consensus. As it stands, despite the fact that millions of Chinese have received a Western education or training, there is no coherent or convincing Chinese analysis of the drivers of China’s economic success. In the absence of such a “Beijing Consensus,” Western analysts are able to dismiss China’s experience as idiosyncratic, preventing its lessons from being applied more widely.

### **The Challenge Ahead**

Given the combination of conceptual barriers and resistance to unfamiliar frameworks, convincing the West that “the rest” have something to offer will not be easy. For the time being, concrete evidence of policy success may well be the most effective way to buttress the case for applying non-Western perspectives. For example, the adoption in India of a unique digital identity number (called Aadhaar) could do more to support the creation of a more inclusive economy than any academic publication.

But, in the longer term, non-Western thinkers will need to translate their ideas into testable models and theories. Given the complexity and interconnectedness of existing systems, it is likely that such work will be done not by a single figure like John Maynard Keynes or Milton Friedman, but rather from collective work based on knowledge-sharing. The Chinese tradition of creating “encyclopedias” for every dynasty may provide a helpful precedent.

In business, greater diversity leads to greater success. The differing perspectives that diverse actors bring to the table – and even the discomfort that can result from those differences – tend to spur innovation. As the world attempts to correct the problems arising from the Western approach to growth and development – problems like economic inequality and social frustration – the breakthroughs that diversity encourages are precisely what is needed. The West has had its say. The rest must now have theirs.



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