

CONFUCIUS SAYS: GO EAST, YOUNG MAN

By [T.R. Reid](#)

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THE ASIAN leaders gathered in Osaka this weekend for the annual Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit have expressed pious regrets that Bill Clinton had to cancel his attendance at the last minute. At some level, though, they're probably delighted. The image of a U.S. president trapped in Washington by political chaos surrounding a red-ink budget can only strengthen the Asians' growing superiority complex toward the once-revered U.S.A.

Many Asian politicians, scholars and business leaders are proudly proclaiming these days that there is an ocean of difference in basic social values across the Pacific. They have decided that the Western, democratic, Judeo-Christian value structure, with its emphasis on the primacy of the individual -- in short, "The American Way" -- is fundamentally different from the Eastern, group-oriented, vaguely Confucian cultural pattern that is now proudly labeled "The Asian Way."

And it's not just that the values are different. Rather, these Asian Neo-Confucianists insist that their cultural values are better than ours.

"Many Western societies -- including the United States -- are doing some major things fundamentally wrong today, while a great number of East Asian societies are doing the same things right," argues Kishore Mahbubani, a Singaporean scholar and diplomat who has emerged as the Max Weber of this new "Confucian Ethic."

In an endless series of articles and lectures bearing titles like "The Dangers of Decadence" and "Go East, Young Man," the engaging and articulate Mahbubani tells his fellow Asians that "the American boat is sinking" and that a strong dose of Confucian values is needed to set things right. "If Americans were to try to begin learning from Asians, their nation would become a better place."

Even in Japan, most Westernized of the Asian nations, there is a movement to turn back East. "By following the insights of Confucianism," insists the Japanese academician Kichitaro Katsuta, "we can avoid the social catastrophe befalling the West, the result of centuries of individualism and egotism."

Americans, still patting themselves on the back for winning the Cold War, may not be ready just yet for another global ideological struggle over first principles. But an increasingly wealthy and confident East Asia is eager to engage us in a debate that raises direct challenges to cherished Western ideals.

Fueling the notion of "Asia Good, America Bad" is the palpable sense of social and economic well-being sweeping over East Asia. Overall, the Asian members of APEC have much higher economic growth rates than the Western democracies -- coupled with much lower rates of unemployment, violent crime, drug use, broken homes, welfare dependency and other detritus of Euro-American society.

From Kuala Lumpur to Kawasaki, people cite the 1994 World Bank report that sought to predict which countries would be the richest on earth a quarter-century from now. In that ranking, four of the five

wealthiest nations, and seven of the top 10, are Asian. The United States, the world's richest nation today, is projected in second place in the year 2020, between China and Japan.

Economic statistics can go up and down, of course -- just ask Japan, yesterday's Asian Superman, now wallowing in extended recession. But Asia's current crop of Neo-Confucians look more at social indicators than economic statistics.

"You Americans have this mantra about your high standard of living," Mahbubani told me once, soft-spoken and amiable even as he plunged the rhetorical dagger.

"And yes, if standard of living means the number of square feet in your home, or the number of channels on your TV, America leads the world. But if standard of living means not being afraid to go outside that home after dark, or not worrying about what filth your children will see on all those TV channels, then our Asian societies have the higher standard."

That gets to the core of the Neo-Confucian case against Western democracy. The free nations of Europe and America are simply too free, the argument runs; they have gone too far to indulge individual freedom at the expense of society as a whole. When Asian leaders talk about American democracy, the names that come up are not Washington or Jefferson, but rather Tonya Harding, Howard Stern, the Menendez brothers and the Michigan Militia. "Democracies are only beginning to learn that too much freedom is dangerous," argues Mahathir Mohamad, prime minister of Malaysia, who is perhaps the most caustic critic of Western values among Asia's current political leadership.

"Whether the West admits it or not, David Koresh and the {Jim} Jones cult were the products of the Western form of democracy," Mahathir told an applauding audience in Tokyo this spring. "So also is the recent bombing in Oklahoma. The Michigan Militia corps has as yet done no real harm. But you can bet that sooner or later they will be using those guns which they democratically own." There's an arrogant flavor to this kind of attack -- not terribly surprising for people who have decided they are winners. "The growing realization among East Asians," Mahbubani says, "that they can do anything as well as, if not better than, other cultures has led to an explosion of confidence."

Most of today's Neo-Confucianists grew up in an Asia where Westerners were the colonial governors, the preachers, the teachers, the founders of great colleges and giant business enterprises. Now the Asian Way folks want to reverse the cultural flow.

Naturally, the Neo-Confucianists are encouraged to see Americans agreeing with them on some points.

When Mahathir complains that "Abolition of religious instruction in {public} schools . . . has resulted in a loss of direction," he is singing a chorus right out of Pat Robertson's hymn book. His criticism of the freedom to own guns resonates with a whole different group of Americans. Singapore strongman Lee Kuan Yew likes to point out that when his island state subjected teen-ager Michael Fay to a whipping for the crime of vandalizing cars, opinion polls showed that most Americans supported the sentence.

One of the nicer ironies of the Neo-Confucian boom is that this whole "Pan-Asian" movement borrows its most basic concept from Western thought. The very existence of a "Far East," a place called "Asia," is a modern Western invention, dreamed up by European geographers and traders.

If the geography underpinning the Neo-Confucian boom is a tad ambiguous, the same can be said for the basic philosophy. As with the ancient prophets of other cultures, Confucius and his ideas are open to a wide range of interpretations.

The great sage K'ung Fu-tzu (that Latinate name "Confucius" is another Western concoction) was appalled by the vice and corruption all about him in Chou dynasty China of the 5th Century B.C. He taught that the remedy for broad social ills lay in individual dedication to basic virtues.

The Confucian virtues, as they are generally described nowadays, include thrift, hard work, honoring the family unit and obeying the law. There is also a deep commitment to education, to pass along these virtues and other necessary skills.

None of this sounds particularly alien to anybody who grew up in a Judeo-Christian Western society. As Michael Armacost, the president of the Brookings Institution, used to say during his tenure as ambassador to Japan, "Americans can't criticize people for working hard, saving a lot, investing in the future, educating rigorously. Those are things we've always prided ourselves on."

At at least two points in the Confucian canon, the master declares that the most important single guide to life can be found in the term shu. Confucius defines it this way: "Do not impose on others what you do not want done to yourself." To any veteran of Sunday school, of course, this is simply The Golden Rule.

In their contempt for Western ways, however, the Neo-Confucianists insist that the teachings of their ancient Chinese ancestor involve a unique set of values. Even that Confucian statement of The Golden Rule is "different in a subtle way," argues Katsuta, the Japanese academician. The Confucian Golden Rule is stated in the negative, he notes. "Confucius thus advocated tolerance," Katsuta maintains. "The Christian rule encourages well-intentioned activism. But sometimes well-meaning people are importunate and self-righteous Western individualism leads to a clash of egos that will destroy tolerance."

Katsuta has Westerners in mind when he denounces intolerance and self-righteousness. In fact, though, the world capital of self-righteousness at the moment may well be the tidy, industrious and thoroughly intolerant city-state of Singapore, a place tightly controlled by Lee Kuan Yew's personal clique of self-styled Neo-Confucians.

Lee charges that Americans "have abandoned an ethical basis for society" -- and he's not about to let the same thing happen on his island. Thus police keep watch from the rooftops of Singapore to catch people committing such crimes as littering or chewing gum. Parents of school children deemed to be overweight receive letters ordering them to change the family menus. The government tells people how much of their money to save.

And almost nobody complains about this -- at least, not publicly. Quick to attack the problems they see in the West, the thin-skinned Singapore Confucianists go ballistic the minute anyone criticizes them. No media outlet circulating in Singapore would dare reproduce this article, for example; the sentence a few paragraphs up describing Lee as the nation's "strongman" would likely draw libel fines in the tens of thousands of dollars.

If this is The Asian Way, most people would probably be happy to do without it. But many Neo-Confucianists say Lee's Singapore is a gross perversion of the sage's teaching. These critics say that autocrats like Lee and Malaysia's Mahathir have appropriated Confucius as a high-minded rationale for maintaining personal power.

Confucianism need not necessarily involve the spic-and-span authoritarianism of Singapore. South Korea, a bulwark of Confucian learning to this day, is a noisy, dirty, rambunctious nation where people not only chew gum on the streets but do many more offensive things there as well. But Koreans furiously deny that they are less Asian than Lee Kuan Yew.

"Lee's view of Asian culture is not only unsupportable but also self-serving," charges Kim Dae Jung, the veteran South Korean politician who risked his life repeatedly opposing military dictators in his own country. Kim insists that dissent and democracy are cherished Confucian ideals, and that the master's teaching was a key element in South Korea's dramatic switch to democracy in 1987.

In short, proponents of The Asian Way are hazy about which direction their Way is headed. In Asia, though, the most important point is that it is not The American Way. The Neo-Confucianists are convinced that their cultural pattern is preferable, and they want to whole world to know it.

"For the past several hundred years, the world has been dominated by Greek and Judeo-Christian ideas," Kim Dae Jung wrote recently. "Now it is time for the world to turn to . . . Asia for another revolution in ideas." T. R. Reid, who just completed a five-year tour as the Post's Tokyo bureau chief, is on leave from the paper while writing a book, "Confucius Lives Next Door."

 **Comments**

T.R. Reid

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