CHAPTER THREE

EAST ASIAN VALUES AND HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

Brendan M. Howe

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, controversies over national and international responses to May’s devastating cyclone in Burma/Myanmar and Chinese rule in Tibet (with violent demonstrations in Tibet itself, in the surrounding region and, as a result of the Olympic torch relay, across the globe), as well as severe civil unrest in Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia, gave an immediacy and urgency to the debate on the clash between state prerogatives, human rights, and the duties of the international community in particular with reference to the East Asian region.

2009 saw an ongoing focus on transnational human security issues in the region, with criticism of the Chinese repatriation of North Korean refugees and the Thai repatriation of ethnic Hmong from Laos. Many victims of the cyclone in Myanmar and also the earthquake which devastated parts of China’s Sichuan province in the same month, found themselves victimized a second time by the insufficient responses of regimes that seemed unable or unwilling to provide them with support. Meanwhile, members of the international community are increasingly asserting a right to intervene to protect the human security of individuals against the prerogatives of states. This chapter addresses the philosophical underpinnings for, and future of, non-intervention in East Asia in the face of solidarist claims and pressures from internal and external constituencies.

Traditionally, East Asia has been viewed as a zone of non-intervention where state prerogatives, as the definitive embodiment of political community and shared values, are seen to trump individual human rights. For example Henry Nau notes that the lack of full protection for civil liberties in Asia “reflects the significantly different traditions regarding the relationship of the individual to society. Nowhere in Asia is there a celebration

2 See discussion of international organisations and regimes below.
of political individualism as we know it in the West, either in political thought or in historical events such as the Reformation or Enlightenment.”

Furthermore, Nau claims that authority patterns “infuse all social relationships – in the family (Confucianism), in religion (Buddhism and Islam), and in the state (Shintoism).” Although perhaps no other region on earth is as culturally and socio-economically diverse, opposition to Western liberal or universal cosmopolitan values emanating from East Asia has been identified collectively as the challenge of “Asian values.” A broad resistance to encroachment upon state prerogatives does seem to be reflected in the day-to-day diplomacy of the East Asian region.

In December 1990, when the UN decided to convene a World Conference on Human Rights, several Asian states questioned the applicability of universal human rights in different cultural, economic and social settings. The Asian regional preparatory meeting which took place in Bangkok between 29 March and 2 April 1993 provided an opportunity for Asian governments to put forward their definition of human rights on the global agenda. The Bangkok Declaration, signed by over forty Asian governments, did not reject universal human rights, but the declaration suggested that universality should be considered “in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds.” The Asian states also sought to link development issues with human rights questions and emphasize the importance of non-interference. Indeed, for Kenneth Christie and Denny Roy “development has assumed cult-like status” in East Asia, while for Chu Shulong, “East Asia is one of few areas in the world where most countries strongly defend traditional concepts of national sovereignty and firmly resist foreign intervention in the internal affairs of independent states.”

---

4 Ibid., p. 164.