
This work provides a number of contributions towards the debate over the existence and conceptual relevance of Asian values. The book is concerned with the question of whether “Asian values” are responsible for the particular political cultures that resulted in the success of East and South East Asian nations’ economic development. To answer this question, writers proceed to examine the relation between the citizens and the State. The writers begin their argument by questioning the validity of the claims made by Asian political elites on the innate difference between Asian and Western political cultures as a result of the particularistic character of the “Asian values” held by its people. This is done in order to discover if such celebrated and often unquestioned discourses on “Asian values” are truly representative of what the citizens actually believed in. For the purpose of the study, the authors conducted a large survey on the basic attitudes of citizens in Asia and Europe towards political and social beliefs. The authors’ premise is that for the existence of these “values” to be proven empirically, two conditions must be fulfilled. Firstly the “values” held by a majority of the Asian citizens must be significantly different from the citizens from a Western culture for such a difference to be viewed as valid. Secondly, these “values” must be held by a sufficiently large majority of the Asian population in a consistent manner such that an existence of a “communitarian” political culture can be proven.

While much have been written about the self-serving manner in which the political elites have used the “Asian values” discourse for the purpose of consolidating their political power, little empirical work has been done to verify or disprove such claims. In addition, most of these arguments would often focus merely on the role and personal beliefs of the political elites in relation to the development of the State. To their credit, the writers have moved beyond such an exercise through their survey which provides us with the means to verify empirically the existence of an underlying cultural difference that would account for the purported difference between Asian and European political culture. From their analysis of the data, the writers found that there was no conclusive evidence to show that “Asian values” as articulated by the political elites existed among the citizens of the Asian nations. There was neither sufficient nor consistent support across and within Asian nations for such “values” that would indicate the existence of a “communitarian” political culture. Comparisons between the Asian and European respondents did not reveal significant differences between the two populations that would readily affirm the existence of “Asian values” and its role as a pivotal source of difference between cultures. The writers put forth the argument that the differences between the attitudes held by the citizens in different nation-states can only be explained by looking at the relationship between the citizen and the State and the particular context from which it had developed. For these differences to be properly studied, the writers argued that approaches based on placing nations and cultures in a fixed dichotomous relation should be abandoned. What is needed is rather an examination of each nation-state as a specific case study on political culture.

The strength of this work lies in a number of areas; firstly the provision of the necessary and extensive empirical evidence helped to put forth a much more compelling argument against the proponents of “Asian values” discourse than previous studies did. Secondly, the book also provides an in-depth review of the necessary literature on the Asian values debate.
as well as a comprehensive discussion on the limits of various analytical approaches towards making sense of the differences and similarities present in the varied data across nations. These ranged from the use of climatic differences, culture-based regionalism to the “flying geese” model. Finally, the writers present in their concluding chapter an impressive outline explaining the manner which they approach the data in relation to their questions and how their argument is constructed as a result, hence allowing the reader to develop a better understanding of the complexities involved in examining the varied an extensive data.

However the book is not without a number of flaws. The writers appear to have made the assumption that cultural identity is equated with ethnic identity and ethnic identity is the primary form of identification for the individual citizen. In order to facilitate the running of a comparative study based purely upon differences in ethnic/cultural beliefs, the writers attempt to negate the effects of “modernization” on the political culture by choosing nations with similar level of economic development from both continents. Such a move is both futile and misleading as it implicitly essentialized cultural values as norms originating primarily from one’s ethnic origins while ignoring the impact brought about by the imposition of the particular regime of work and system of governance demanded by the requirements of industrialization and a capitalist economy. These impositions would result in adaptations towards existing ethnic-based basic societal values. Such adaptations are however highly dependant on the specific context of the nation-state. Assuming that having similar levels of economic development would necessarily result in similar adjustments by different national cultures to the demands of modernization such that these changes can be negated is naïve and served only to detract away the complexities involved in such a study.

Improvements could be made towards the manner in which the data is analyzed in relation to the sample. The writers defined “political culture” as comprising of two different set of attitudes, one of the citizens’ values towards “good society” and another of their support for the state. The political culture that the writers are concerned with is the political ideology of the elites, the dominant class. One of the concerns of the writers was with regards to whether the average citizen subscribes to the political discourses of the elites. The social positions from which the survey respondents hail from would therefore be an important determinant; yet the writers made the choice to neglect this factor. The individual citizen’s position in the social order would inform their respective attitudes towards the political elites’ dominant vision of “good society”. A middle class respondent would potentially answer in a very different way from a working class respondent, reflecting a differing reading of the political culture of a nation. The presence of diverse and significantly large ethnic minority groups in a nation-state particularly in South East Asia might also affect the data as well. The political culture of the nation-state would be identified as the political culture of the dominant ethnic community. For the case of Singapore where Asian values as espoused by the political elites are often seen by the public as synonymous with Chinese or Confucian values, the ethnic minorities’ reaction towards “Asian values” as the dominant source of political culture would be highly antagonistic. Conceptually the addition of class and ethnic majority/minority relations as factors of analysis would have provided a more meaningful approach towards both the comparative study of the data among different nation-states and within them.

Despite its flaws, Blondel and Iniguchi’s work would prove invaluable to those who wish to engage with the issue further. Given the importance the writers placed upon the relationship