

Community Building in East Asia: In Search of Common Values

By FUKUOKA Yuki

In the process of building an 'East Asian Community', the issue of creating common values that member states agree on cannot be avoided. However, there has been no clear regional consensus as to exactly what sort of values should be explicitly embraced. Take 'democracy' for example – though Asian states may agree on the idea of respecting democracy in principle, when it comes to the question of its precise meaning and the means to achieve it, Asian nations tend to push for the idea of acknowledging a diversity of democratic forms. In this respect, the distinction between 'Asian' human rights and 'Western' human rights has often been pointed out, as has the idea of exploring an 'Asian' version of democracy that is rooted in the various contexts particular to Asia. Simply adding the adjective of 'Asian', however, does not help us have a clearer understanding of what we are talking about, and usually results in creating further ambiguous concepts open to multiple interpretations that are not a useful guide when it comes to offering direction on where the process of community building should be heading.

At the same time, it should also be noted that the literature on democracy, and democratisation, has largely been dominated by supposedly 'universal' theories developed out of the 'particular' experience of the West. Here, democracy essentially refers to a Western-style liberal democracy which is driven by a naïve hope that it has universal potential. It is often implicitly argued that regardless of local needs, habits and traditions, economic development inevitably produces the social forces that drive a democratic transformation of the political system. Whenever this model does not work in Asia, special factors are sometimes pointed out in order to explain, often with an outcry, such 'deviant cases' where liberal democracy has 'stagnated' or been 'rolled back' with little consideration given to the possibility of other kinds of democratic evolution. What is missing from this perspective is an attempt to develop a more nuanced understanding of what has actually been happening in Asia in terms of the transformation of political systems and where they are heading. In fact, the experience of Asia to date would seem to suggest that Western-style liberal democracy is one of the least likely outcomes. It is hardly surprising, then, that democracy activists exporting liberal democracy have often encountered much resistance in the region.

In relation to the issue of common values in Asia, those 'deviant cases' should, I think, receive greater attention, rather than being casually dismissed as 'exceptions' to the rule. It would be more sensible to get away from a blind deductive application of 'universal' theories, which see all countries as traveling on the same historical path, and revisit the experience of political change in Asia through an empirical and inductive investigation. Through such an exercise, one may be able to gain a clearer understanding of what democracy, and hence democratisation, is all about in the region.

If that can be achieved, then light may be shed on the direction in which the region is headed, so facilitating the process of community building.

In this respect, a statement by an Indonesian academic at an international conference, which I recently attended, may be helpful. Though there has been no consensus as to the precise meaning of democracy in Asia, he argued, the bottom line is to create a situation where 'no one is tortured or raped by the state security apparatus.' The approach of establishing a 'bottom line' which member states can agree on and abide by, in terms of what democracy and democratisation stand for, and working together not to fall short of that target might perhaps be worth considering as the first step. Given that community building in East Asia is about 'integration with diversity', such a patient but still steady approach might perhaps be a more desirable way forward.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Mr. FUKUOKA Yuki, PhD candidate at the University of Bristol, which originally appeared on the BBS "Hyakka-Somei" of CEAC on August 25, 2007.)