

Modernization, Japan, China, Asia, and the West: Comparative Observations

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Summary

The question of modernization remains a major issue in the mind of Asia's civilizations, and is related to basic questions of identity. Unlike some late developing western nations that have participated in it as part of the process of the expansion of Europe, and have therefore welcomed it as part of the inevitable process of change and progress, on the whole, the nations of Asia have been much more ambiguous in their appreciation of the "blessings" of modernization and their frequently dubious consequences. In some cases, it has been viewed merely as a regrettable necessity, and pursued with the requisite amount of vigour, while in other cases, it has been embraced only because the alternatives appeared so unpalatable. Lack of sensitivity to this issue constantly bedevils relations between the nations of Asia and the west, nor does it show any signs of diminishing, in spite of education, Asian Studies programmes in the west, and continuing commercial intercourse, tourism and expanding media information.

This paper will, in the course of dealing with a number of issues, argue that in spite of their great differences, the Japanese and Chinese approaches to modernization have much in common, and that the differences lie not so much in historical timing as in the way in which western ideas were adopted and adapted in terms of traditional cultural patterns. The differences only begin to show once economic growth commences, with China returning quickly to its instinctive mercantile way of thinking. Both, however, still, consciously or unconsciously, manifest an ambiguous attitude towards the circumstances into which they were forced, and both express the same dismay when western nations make assumptions and harbour expectations that seem neither desirable nor justifiable. It is here that bedrock differences between the cultures of Asia and the west begin to show, on matters of law and order, human rights, democracy, and shared wealth. These issues have now become public currency through the actions and expressed opinions of many of Asia's new leaders. This is all part of the modern genealogy of modernization.

Introduction: The Problem of Modernization in Asian Perspective

The question of modernization remains a major issue in the mind of Asia's civilizations, and is related to basic questions of identity.¹⁾ Unlike some late developing west-

ern nations that have participated in it as part of the process of the expansion of Europe, and have therefore welcomed it as part of the inevitable process of change and progress, on the whole, the nations of Asia have been much more ambiguous in their appreciation of the “blessings” of modernization and their consequences. In some cases, it has been viewed merely as a regrettable necessity, but nevertheless pursued with vigour, while in other cases, it has been embraced only because the alternatives appeared so unpalatable. Lack of sensitivity to this issue constantly bedevils relations between the nations of Asia and the west, nor does it show any signs of diminishing, in spite of education, Asian Studies programmes in the west, and continuing commercial intercourse, tourism and media information.

As a general premise, it would not be incorrect to say that modernization was forced, directly or indirectly, on Asia, by western nations, because of the technological developments that came in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. These gave western nations ironclad steam ships and powerful weaponry to which Asians had no answer.

In the case of awakening Japan, it was the sufferings of China which served as a warning, when China became the object of western predators, in the 19th century, after the rejection of the McCartney Mission to Beijing in 1789.²⁾ The United States began to pressure Japan to open her doors to the west, in 1853, even before the U.S. herself had faced the trauma of modernization that lay in the background of the Civil War.³⁾ The U.S. had become politically modernized in 1776, at the time of the Revolution, much in the same way as the U.K. moved to a Constitutional Monarchy some time before technological change prompted the developments that the French came to describe as an “Industrial Revolution”. While the U.S. clearly possessed a technological advantage over Japan, the country was itself lagging behind in other areas of social and economic development, and, like all pre-modernized societies, was still predominantly based upon an agricultural economy. The appearance alone, however, of overwhelming naval superiority, convinced a sufficient number of Japanese that change was necessary, indeed inevitable.

Presumably, neither Americans nor Japanese had considered more deeply whether the U.S.A. could maintain sustained pressure on Japan. Nevertheless, fear of the European nations was real and unimagined, and cancelled out any illusions Japan may have had of successfully resisting western overtures across the Pacific.

The focus of this paper is not upon the historical process by which the modernization of Japan and China was accomplished. Documentation exists in abundance.⁴⁾ It is concerned primarily with the interpretation of the process, a hermeneutical rather than historiographical study, paying attention to attitudes behind actions, because actions usually speak louder than words. I shall commence with some observations on Japan before moving to China, and finally to some comparative comments and conclusions based upon observations of attitudes seen elsewhere in Asia.

I. The Modernization of Japan and Western Culture

The western world has suffered, since the Industrial Revolution, from a form of narcissism engendered by the belief that technological superiority is the ultimate, if not the only form of superiority. The prevalent attitude towards Asia, as it has been towards everywhere that colonization has taken place, is that local people should show gratitude to the west for the benefits of enlightened civilization. Perhaps it is a kind of revisionism that proposes a different interpretation of events, but evidence seems to abound that the Asian embrace of the west was involuntary, unwelcome, and judged to be no more than a necessary evil to be endured for the sake of survival, since the alternatives were unthinkable, especially, for example, to a race such as the Japanese.

Japan's negative 17th century response to Western advances in the form of Roman Catholic missionaries was praised by Immanuel Kant in his *Essay on Perpetual Peace*, one of the finest pieces of writing on the subject.⁵⁾ He argued that the disruption of society was too great a price to be paid for questionable benefits. Considering the circumstances of the time in which he lived, it is interesting that he was quite familiar with the event and that he could take a positive attitude towards it. The key to the change in attitude was of course the technological factor combined with the awareness that western civilizations were able to dismiss China at will, in spite of her size and apparent power. To avoid such a fate, and to prepare Japan to withstand any future pressures, change was accepted as the only means to survival. The Shogunate became aware of its own lack of credibility as potential leader for the new age, and surrendered to a rival group that used the symbol of a restored Imperial sovereign as their *imprimatur*, a device of Japanese politics as old as the the Nara period. The rest, is indeed history.

The main point being made in this discussion is to point out the ambiguity that existed from the beginning towards the need for modernization. It is highly doubtful if belief in the "superiority" of western culture ever really existed. It was respected and it was studied. Where necessary it was copied. The three famous slogans of the Meiji period sum up the complexity of attitudes. The "Civilization and Enlightenment", (文明開化) pro-western movement, was challenged by the "Reverence the Emperor: Expel the Barbarians" (尊王攘夷). The compromise was expressed in "Western techniques: Japanese Spirit" (和魂洋才). It is usually interpreted as meaning that the Japanese were trying to combine something Japanese with their imported learning. I think this fails to grasp the conflict it expressed, and the overwhelming desire not to lose traditional cultural characteristics in the process of importing the means necessary for national defence and survival.

One dimension of the genealogy of modernization that remains to the present is this ambiguity. While debated less in academic circles, which often reflect western influences, it appears to have gained some recognition in the writings of non-academics, popularizers and, indeed, amongst Asian politicians and businessmen. These people represent various Asian countries, Japan, included, but also the "Little Dragons", and

more recently, Malaysia, under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Of this we shall speak later, but awareness of this ambiguity, as I have described it, is one key to interpreting Asian attitudes that frequently puzzle western diplomats and businessmen in particular. Access to the underlying attitudes cannot be found in surveys or reference books, but in the un verbalized behaviour that indicates a quite different stance from that which outsiders might have expected to encounter.

One of the interesting features of Japanese literature since the Meiji period, culminating in the death of Mishima Yukio, has been the struggle to integrate and interpret the meaning of modernization and its implications for Japanese culture and society.⁶⁾ That this has been such a large theme indicates the degree to which the problem has been internalized in the Japanese psyche. In popular culture, very much a thermometer of popular consciousness and tastes, the endless production of costume dramas, and soap versions such as *Mito Kōmon*, or the forty-eighth Torasan movie in 1995, alike suggests deep longings that are more than a passing nostalgia. If we compare the analogous situation in the United States, the American Western frontier movie is almost a dead genre. Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* kept it alive for one more generation, but it is clear that the romanticization of that period is over, and that should anything remain, it will be a more realistic representation of the past than most previous versions have been. This in itself underlines one enormous difference in attitudes towards the past. The west can discard its past. Japan, at many levels has sought to preserve it. It took an Australian, Mel Gibson, to find a historical theme, in the form of the 13th century freedom fighter and patriot, Sir William Wallace of Scotland, around which to create a movie. For the local people of Stirling, history, legend, castle and town are for tourists. There is little attempt, as there is in Japan, to preserve and maintain the past in such an elaborate and systematic way.⁷⁾

This does not mean that, *simpliciter* Japanese are obsessed with the past, and westerns do not care at all about it. Perhaps because of time, or because of an obsessive fascination with scientific culture, the west adjusted more quickly to the changes that led to the emergence of industrial society. It is considered natural that even good traditions may be sacrificed in the name of "progress". Japan, like China, maintained its rural culture, and in that respect, these societies differ radically from the west. They embraced change, but with a totally different agenda in mind. Observing China's struggle in the 20th century helps to reconstruct something of what the Japanese were facing in the Meiji period since the experiences were inherently similar, namely a life and death struggle for survival.

It has become more common since the 1980s to hear Japanese politicians and bureaucrats advocating a clearer and more decisive leadership role for Japan in world affairs, particularly in Asia. Sometimes this is referred to as revisionism, but it is a strange state of affairs that a sovereign state such as Japan should be so heavily dependent upon the United States in so many areas. The pre-war outlook of former Prime Minister Nakasone, who claimed, in his inaugural lecture as President of Takushoku University, that little Japan took on the white colonial powers on behalf of Asia is

certainly not believed by those Asians who suffered the deprivations of the Japanese military machine, nor by most Japanese who feel that their government totally misled them. But there is a sense in which the very resistance of which he speaks of represents the ambiguity I have identified. His pre-war ultra-nationalist stance is well known, but is nevertheless indicative of some deeper outlook that is not confined to his sanitized view of history.

Ishihara Shintaro's *The Japan that can say 'No'*⁸⁾ is perhaps a better example of what I am trying to identify. I am suggesting that the so called "revisionism" is not merely a delayed reaction to U.S. presence since 1945, although that in part might explain some aspects of the form it takes. Rather I am seeing it as the late 20th century manifestation of the ambiguity towards western culture that has existed, at least, since the Meiji period.

Perhaps it is appropriate to discuss Ishihara's first work at this point. The book was published originally in Japanese, and was a dialogue with Chairman Morita Akio of Sony Corporation. According to Ishihara, when an unofficial and inaccurate translation, (which he attributes to the Pentagon) went into circulation, he thought an official version should come out in the U.S.A. For reasons of business diplomacy, Morita dropped out of the project, and Ishihara continued alone. The end product is enigmatic and quite difficult to evaluate. It is clearly emotional, filled with assertions based on hearsay, second hand comments, unverified anecdotes and unreferenced sources. It could be classified as journalism that is no more than the product of a writer's imagination. That would be the easy option. But Ishihara was a politician as well. He had experience in the real world, and did express some of his published his opinions to his U.S. counterparts. Therefore he does deserve a hearing. But how does one assess that kind of a book?

The answer, I think, has to be to recognize that the whole work is simply a monument to precisely the kind of ambiguity of attitude of which I am speaking. Perhaps a few quotations would be enough to explain how the ideas are expressed.

"During my meetings with politicians in Washington, I said, "I admit that Caucasians created modern civilization, but what bothers me is that you seem to think that heritage makes you superior. In the thirteenth century, the Mongols under Genghis Khan and his successors overran Russia and eastern Europe, reaching almost to Vienna and Venice. Mongol armies destroyed every army and fortress in their path, plundering and raping. Caucasians adopted Mongol style haircuts and shaved eyebrows, and even the Mongols' bandy-legged gait. Just as Orientals of today are crazy about the clothing and hairstyles of the Beatles, Michael Jackson, and Sting, Occidentals of Genghis Khan's time copied Mongolian ways. Even women liked the new styles.'"

Thus far, he makes a fair point about how cultural influences go back and forward. But the sting is in the tail. In the following paragraph he says:

"Eventually, the Mongol Empire disintegrated, but some people trace Western fear of Asians — the concept of the yellow peril — to the slaughter and pillage committed

by the Mongol forces.”

Now he is on questionable grounds, historically at least. But his final statement becomes a severe judgement based on these assumed and semi-imaginative premises.

“Whatever the reason, Japanese should not forget that Caucasians are prejudiced against Orientals.”⁹⁾

This passage demonstrates precisely what I have argued. He recognizes the role of the west in creating the modern world, but has a very obvious love-hate attitude towards it. Reference to the Mongols is ironic in that they became the only Chinese dynasty that ever threatened Japan. In this respect, he is showing a kind of Asian solidarity, but at the same time, drawing the lines of racial prejudice somewhat too firmly and rigidly.

In contrast to this type of rhetoric, he frequently insists that Japan and the U.S.A. have too much to lose by not co-operating. For example, he comes to almost an opposite point of view when he argues:

“With the end of modernism, Japanese and Americans are like the explorers in the Age of Discovery: uncertain but intrepid, scanning the horizon for signs of the new age. We must travel lightly on this journey, discarding useless possessions like national stereotypes and prejudice. And for a safe passage, we need the beacon of a close equal partnership.”¹⁰⁾

Once again, the ambiguity is shown very clearly. Ishihara’s book produced varied reactions and considerable controversy. Some Japanese agreed with him, while others were suspicious of his Asia “tilt”,¹¹⁾ doubtless harbouring the feeling that he was returning to the pre-war doctrine of Japan standing alone against the white menace. Neither view, of course, is without justification as an interpretation of his words. No amount of further quotations will add weight to either one side or the other, simply because the entire text is riddled with ambiguity and inconsistency. This fact has been used to dismiss him as an eccentric. The reason that none of the standard interpretations is adequate is because they assume that he must be expressing a consistent view. However, Ishihara is more like an angry man shouting at the wind. In this case, it is the wind of modernization, which in one regard he respects both for what it is in itself, and for how Japan handled it. But he rejects the western assumptions of superiority that accompany it, assumptions that are still deeply embedded in the western approach at different levels. In this respect, he is correct in identifying and separating them from modernization as a universally occurring process. This distinction has been difficult for westerners to draw, and that is why Ishihara has been easy prey. But Ishihara’s reaction is not unknown, elsewhere, and at other times. When the Highland crofters of 18th century Scotland were being driven off their land and dumped unceremoniously on the banks of the St. Lawrence, upon what became for them Nova Scotia, the first ominous signs of industrialized agriculture were being seen. The same ambiguous feelings and the same danger was felt. Those left in Scotland retreated into a rigid Calvinism of the elect that became, in effect, a form of xenophobia. Two generations on, the taste for romanticism for a lost past took hold. This is not too far from

the Japanese experience, and makes sense because it is the same issue of what happens when a technologically superior civilization tries to impose its breed of industrial and economic rationality on a less developed neighbour. Ishihara would have had many sympathizers in 18th century Scotland.

II. The Modernization of China and the Western World

If we look at the work of Sun Yat-Sen and later of Mao Zedong, it becomes even clearer than in the case of Japan, as we come closer to the present, that the basic strategy was devised in the interests of the preservation and development of China, and that anything western was being adopted and adapted for that purpose.

When Mao declared that the People's Republic of China had come into being in 1949, for the first time in its history, China, the world's oldest continuous civilization, had become, at last, the world's largest single country. Authentic nationhood had escaped it for centuries, although something called the Central Kingdom had always existed. In 1949, it had a new birth and a new identity. Mao and his colleagues had three priorities above all else. First was to secure the borders of the country, once and for all, and to establish territorial integrity. In this, he was successful, although it was left to his successor, Deng Xiaoping to initiate the process that would lead to the return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule. The thorny issue of Taiwan could not be forced in Mao's time, and even Deng showed caution. It would appear that economic interests may settle this issue in due course, once the generation change is complete. Territorial integrity was the first priority.

Secondly, there was the need to close all frontiers to foreign interference. Following the failure of the Manchu Emperors to prevent foreign incursions and the disastrous post-1911 Revolution period when the Nationalists and the Japanese were moving armies freely across the country, he was determined, as were his colleagues to close the country, at least for a period, to establish order and growth within. Finally, he worked for the ideological supremacy of the communist party (as he defined communism, rather than as defined by Marx or the U.S.S.R.) He took upon himself the role of Guardian supreme. Mao Zedong was the only person permitted to write poems, hitherto a national and cultural pastime. Like the guardian in Plato's *Republic*, he was a person who suffers a great deal, is in many ways deprived, isolated, overloaded with responsibility but deeply committed to his task. This was the role Mao Zedong had to play.

Why did he become Marxist? What was his understanding of Marxism? How did he see Marxism helping China?¹²⁾ These questions have been the subject of many theses and discussions. Mao Zedong was labelled, in keeping of the U.S. categorization of all social and political systems, as a communist. But in truth, beneath it all was a Confucian philosophy with a strong puritan streak. It was a Confucian type of communism, directed, not to the down-trodden industrial masses, who did not as yet exist, but to agricultural peasants. In this, it espoused the cause of China rather than seeing itself as "international". There may have been an early enthusiasm for the Soviet

ideal, but that soon waned in favour of something more definitely Chinese. The inspiration for the Revolution was Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, claimed as spiritual leader by both Mao Zedong and the Kuomintang under Jiang Jie Shi.

The Cultural Revolution is the one exception to what has been argued. Mao, or whoever else was masterminding the movement, tried to carry it to extremes, with the apparent intent of weakening those aspects of traditional culture that stood in the way of development. Many absurd programs were initiated, such as the day of the removal of sparrows, or the pulling up of grass and lawns. More focussed was the abolition of family graves and funerals. This was a clear and thoughtful assault on ancestral reverence. But it failed ultimately, and Mao himself is now, amongst other things, a guardian deity of road safety. Traditional culture, in Asia, is difficult to suppress.¹³⁾

What is the key to understanding Chinese postures in the later decades of the 20th century? No more and no less than that the agenda of 1949 is still priority. President Richard Nixon's relationship with China and that of Sir Edward Heath, the British Prime Minister, was based on a respect for this understanding of what China was attempting to achieve,¹⁴⁾ although both reserved the right to their own judgements of events.

Deng's "socialism with a Chinese face" grew from two principles. One was that the Cultural Revolution had actually diverted energy from the real agenda of 1949, for a mythical vision. Secondly, he was deeply aware of the resilience of traditional culture and of the need not only to accommodate it, but to utilize it in the development of the country and the economy. This set China back on course, but implicitly, began both the rapprochement, and the confrontation, with the west.

III. The Modernization of Asia and the "Little Dragons"

After reviewing Japan and China we can see how interest begins to emerge in what might be called as Asian evaluation of modernization, one which has more recently brought Asians into conflict with the west, and has seen the emergence of western-style Asian diplomats and leaders, speaking firmly, however, for the Asian cause. Two outstanding examples are Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore and Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia.

The importance of these men will be judged in the future, but Lee's profound influence remains unequalled in making the case for an Asia that makes up its own mind. Lee's influence in Asia is well known, as is his independence of mind. His major writings contain numerous statements which underline precisely the same ambiguous attitude towards the west as we have found in Ishihara. There is respect for technological advance, but, in the case of Lee, almost a scathing disrespect for the western world which he views as limited in its capacity to serve as any kind of model for Asia. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Lee offered some comparative observations on Eastern and Western approaches to democracy and Human Rights.

"I don't think that Japan, Taiwan, Korea and Singapore wish to view the United States of America or any European nations as a model. No society abandons its tradi-

tions in order to adopt a totally new social system. They will improve upon what they have by trial and error, and if it benefits both society and the economy, they may adopt it. I don't think that any Asian society wishes to copy the American system. Personally, having observed Americans, I am amazed that the country has survived 200 years. Only the Philippines has adopted the U.S. model, and that is a bad model for Asia.”¹⁵⁾

He also makes the point that the selfish individualism of the western world is not a value that is either shared or respected by Asian cultures.

“Human Rights are another problem in Asia. Whether a society is in a golden age scenario, or in total chaos, the individual is never valued above society. Society is always valued as more important than the individual.”¹⁶⁾

As a direct consequence of this outlook, he has also been a stout and consistent critic of western attacks on China. He has warned pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong that democracy is a luxury that some rich countries can afford, but not China and certainly not until the three issues of concern, identified earlier, have been resolved satisfactorily. Consequently, in a 1995 *Los Angeles Times* interview, he warned critics of China in the U.S. not to raise the stakes over Taiwan. He pointed out that it was a delicate issue, and that the west had really no right to interfere, and further could precipitate an international crisis through reckless thinking. Singapore itself was criticised by many Americans over the use of a bamboo cane to punish a young offender who had been warned about his behaviour, and who happened to be a U.S. citizen. The government refused to change the sentence, and the punishment was carried out. This attitude is an expression of Lee's philosophy of social discipline. Every country, he argues, places different value upon the concept of Human Rights.

Mahathir Mohamad is the third outspoken critic of the west, whose comments are less defences of Asia so much as rejection of most western values. He is critical of the inability of the west to recognize the intrinsic value of Asian thinking, and at the aggressive way in which the western nations have imposed their systems on Asia.

“The West has a long history of aggressive wars fought in an ongoing campaign to westernize the world: no Asian country has ever invaded another country to “Easternize” it. The notion that a country must Westernize in order to modernize is ludicrous. Asian modernization occurred as an inevitable stage in our own history, not because we were Europeanized or Americanized. For Westerners to think that we cannot make progress unless we become like them is absurd.”¹⁶⁾

This passage expounds the heart of his position. He attributes the decline of the West to the same hedonism that Lee identifies. He also condemns: the misunderstanding of the meaning of the term and ideal of “democracy”:

“When devotion to a pedantic notion of democracy results in economic stagnation, high unemployment, the denial of the right to work and work hard, the protection of neo-fascists, or the empowering of a vocal minority of political activists over the silent majority of ordinary citizens, then it is time to ask whether the ideal is being perverted. Democratic fanatics are no better than religious fanatics; neither can see

the wood for the trees. In any case, to Asians, democracy does not confer a license for citizens to go wild . . . ”¹⁷⁾

One further controversial element in Mahathir’s thought is his view of Japan, which is based on Japan’s post-World War II record. He goes so far as to predict that “with Japan leading the way, (East Asia) will continue to drive the world economy and play an increasingly global role in the coming century.”¹⁸⁾

This approach to East-West issues is now to be found at many levels, and not just that of outspoken political leaders. It can be found, for example, in the further growing debate about modernization and its implications for Asian styles of business management, illustrating further that mere copying of the west never was basic to the agenda of these nations.

The popular magazine *Asian Business* has in recent times devoted much space to the issue of what is Asian Management.

“Managers in the 21st century will also understand the need to . . . find common threads and mutual ground that will support corporate goals across many cultures. In capitalist Japan and communist China, leaders have recognised this. The Japanese refer to *wakon yošai* — Japanese spirit and Western learning, Japan’s success was based on a commitment to learn from outsiders. The Chinese have another dictum — Chinese learning as base, Western science and business methods as application. Both call for what each society would consider a ‘best practice’; both result in modernisation.

What is “Asian best practice”? It is our sense of responsibility to our community, the positive side of paternalism associated with Asian companies. If we can sustain this, our management styles will be based on respect for the communities in which we operate. All else will follow.”

The author then makes reference to a Hong Kong academic in support of his views:

“Gordon Redding, professor of management studies at the University of Hong Kong School of Business, believes that all economic systems are embedded in a culture that is defined as a set of values. The cultures which cope best with modernisation are those that blend the rational values of modernisation with their own values to maintain co-operation within organisations.”¹⁹⁾

Bernardo Villegas, Dean of the School of Economics at the University of Manila, made a similar point that “It is up to enlightened leaders to devise appropriate economic policies that make the culture’s strengths productive”. He was critical of the 1960’s Harvard theorists who wrote off South Korea, but praised Myanmar and the Philippines, and how they were totally wrong in doing so. He then takes up the issue of “Confucian cultures” being responsible for growth, Japan and Singapore being cited, in contrast to the older view that it was Confucianism that was holding China in feudalism. This in course calls for a further review of the Weberian thesis about economic growth and development. However, while Dean Villegas may be a good economist, he does not even define either “culture” or “Confucianism” clearly, but presumably assumes that there are agreed meanings. In fact, while rejecting cultural theories, he actually admits they have credibility:

“A careful look at the historical evidence in Asia, therefore, leads to the conclusion that culture *per se* neither hinders nor helps economic development. That is not to say culture is irrelevant.

But the success of some Confucian countries demonstrates only that particular cultures have particular strengths. Systems and policies which take these into account can accelerate economic development, even to ‘miraculous’ rates of growth.”²⁰⁾

These assorted views should be enough to substantiate the overall argument about the view of modernization and development that is currently growing in Asia.

Lee Kwan Yew perhaps might have the last word here in summarising the issue raised in this section:

“For Asian countries, the issue is not not to copy America, Britain or any European nation’s constitution. For them, they simply wish to live in a secure, ordered society and enjoy a growing standard of living.”²¹⁾

IV. Roots of Western Misunderstanding

One of the basic and underlying problems of western observers and commentators, as a whole, is that they are usually commenting from dubious premises, premises that presuppose the old Euro-centric view of the world. These run something as follows, although they are never made explicit in quite this form, but they can be detected quite easily in both attitudes and statements.

“The west is the source of modern progressive civilization, of scientific and technological culture. Since the 19th century, the west has been conferring its religious blessings and economic benefits upon the unenlightened nations of the world, giving them education, literacy, hospitals, and modern institutions, such as democracy, and free markets. Modernization is the process by which these benefits are acquired, and since these are the greatest prizes in the world, naturally, all nations wish to have them. Thus, modernization is really little more than the rest of the world copying the west and trying to catch up. They should all be grateful for these benefits and should listen when the west offer advice.”²²⁾

Like most observers, I have heard this theme many times in different forms. It is most usually claimed of Africa and South America. Asia is sometimes given a little more credit for its own development, but the superciliousness remains. I would contend, strongly, that while to the west these are blessings beyond doubt, to the Asian world, they were never unambiguously welcomed. As has been noted by some critics, modernization in Asia has meant three things, namely Christianity, crime and venereal disease. The Chinese and Japanese had literacy before the west came gate-crashing other civilizations. Traditional medicine, for example, worked well. But in terms of technology, these nations were weak. Modernization was conceived of not so much as desirable, but as regrettably necessary. To the west it was progress. To Asia, it meant disruption, discontinuity and change.²³⁾

But the West must examine its own record, and in particular the record of failure in social policy, particularly since the 1980s. The High Priestess in the West of the idea

that the individual is the ultimate reality, and that society is a mere aggregate of individuals, a leading criticism of the West by all Asians quoted, was former British Prime Minister Thatcher. Her theme was stated nowhere more clearly than when she visited the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in 1988, when it met in the Assembly Halls on the Mound in Edinburgh. Not inappropriately, it was dubbed, quite sarcastically, “The Sermon on the Mound”, and was viewed by many observers as a direct threat to the “Scottish philosophical and theological conviction that to be human means to have a social identity as persons in community. “This” as one critic put it “is being shaken by the conviction that, in Mrs. Thatcher’s tell-tale phrase, there is no such thing as society, only competitive, property-owning individuals regulated by an amoral market and an absolute state.”²⁴⁾ This clear and unambiguous denunciation of Thatcher is perhaps also a gentle rejoinder to the Ishihara / Mahathir attack on Christianity as one source of the Western attitude towards Asia. Perhaps some kinds of Christianity fit their description. There are those, with a social conscience, that do not.

I have alluded to some of the assumptions made about Asia that lead to misunderstanding and misinformed comment. Professor Maurice J. Meisner²⁵⁾ points to another and more recent source of misunderstanding which affects China specifically, but which belongs to the same syndrome. He enunciated it in a 1995 article in the *Los Angeles Times*.

“The waves of Sinophobia that have swept over the United States and the West are not entirely due to the suppression of the 1989 democracy movement. The Tian An Men Square massacre was, of course, repulsive, but it suggested a Chinese government that was weak and unpopular — inspiring contempt more than fear. Rather, Western fears of China began in earnest only in 1993 — when the World Bank calculated that China’s economy was the world’s third largest, and was growing most rapidly.

Fears were intensified when CIA analysts estimated that China had replaced Japan as the world’s second-largest economic power and projected that the Chinese economy would surpass in size that of the United States within a generation.”

The natural fear of economic power translating into military power, and this has fuelled fears of China. But as Meisner argues:

“The threat of Chinese expansionism has been greatly exaggerated. Neither in rhetoric nor deed is there any indication that Beijing seeks territories other than those historically part of China.”²⁶⁾

The sentiments described have been compounded by articles in *Fortune*²⁷⁾ and in the *Harvard Business Review*²⁸⁾ describing the scale of growth in Asia, and the worldwide network of Chinese business. It seems that some centres of thought in the west are unhappy about ceasing to be number one in size. To them the answer must be thus. “If you stimulate growth in the interests of creating markets, you create wealth. Wealth can be translated, initially into power, and subsequently into independence”. It puts a new economic slant on words attributed to Napoleon. “Let China sleep.

When China awakes, the world will tremble". It underlines another point missed by western promoters of growth and development. Once a country or culture embarks on the road to modernization, the outcome cannot be either predicted or controlled by outside forces. This principle does not yet seem to have been widely understood.

Concluding Observations on Economic Success and Modernization

It is hard to resist the conclusion that overall, Asian nations' "controlled" or "managed" modernization, in the style, for example, of Lee Kwan Yeuw in Singapore, or MITI in Japan, has helped to increase wealth, but in a way that generates social stability and not social unrest because of discontent over disparity of wealth.

The pragmatic humanism of the Asia tradition seems to have coped well with the stresses on traditional system that modernization brings. Unlike western nations that tend to abandon almost everything traditional that appears to stand in the way of "progress", Asian nations have preferred to maintain much of their past while developing modern features. Singapore and Malaysia's legal penalties for drug-related offences by western standards of judgement, may seem excessive, but those countries eschew lawlessness, and have no desire to be swamped by crime waves so common in the west, and often assumed there to be the inevitable result of social change. Similarly, China's record on Human Rights may likewise seem oppressive, but if public order means the avoidance of a civil war involving one and a half billion people, something that would shake the world, and not just Asia, then China's leaders can act only as they see fit, and "manage" the pace of change accordingly.

Japan's market opening is another instance of "managed" development. It will come, when the domestic situation is stable enough to handle the consequences. This frustrates and angers westerners who expect, indeed, almost will, that all their woes will be replicated in Asia, so that these conditions will "level the playing fields". It will most likely not happen like that. Neither Japan nor Singapore, least of all China, will accede to these kinds of pressures. Recent western critics are now complaining that *gaiatsu* (外圧), in terms of Rosenberg's thesis on Japan's economic and trading system, is not working any more. The point is that it probably never did. It merely seemed to work when its exertion co-incided with circumstances where Japan had elected to change because all the preparatory groundwork had been completed, and the system had been sufficiently insulated to bear any unexpected shock.

The principal point to emerge here should be that Asia has moved into a new phase, in which the nations of Asia are now managing their ongoing modernization and development as they see fit. They may feel a debt to the west for initiating the process. But the west no longer functions as either a model or an ideal, if indeed, it ever did except in the minds of westerners themselves. To maintain peace and stability in the modern world calls for a more sympathetic appreciation of the Asian tradition on the part of the west, and more intra-Asian interaction on the basis of equality and mutual respect. This is the challenge for the coming generation.

Notes

- 1) There is a disturbing failure to recognize how deeply the issue of modernization in Asia is now linked to local identity, and not to veneration of the west. Evidence of this is the procession of the uninformed who reach the shores of Japan and China with little awareness of what to expect, and who then protest and complain when they discover that the rules of engagement are different. Western media prejudice has a lot of responsibility to bear, particularly on account of Japan-bashing and China-bashing in recent years. Guilty also are the business schools that teach universal models for the world economy that take no account whatsoever of cultural diversity and its role in shaping attitudes towards the modernization or industrialization process.
- 2) The McCartney Mission is discussed most recently in two interesting works:
Aubrey Singer *The Lion and the Dragon* (Barrie & Jenkins, 1992), pp. 192.
Alan Peyrefitte *The Collision of Two Civilisations* (Harvill, 1992), pp. 630.
The rejection of the west by China was clear and unequivocal, a rejection for which China paid dearly when British naval power reached its zenith and when the British Empire in the east was being consolidated in the 19th century. Had China been ruled by a less decadent dynasty, and a less closed attitude, subsequent disasters might have been avoided. It was this chain of consequences that served as a warning, thus provoking change in Japan.
- 3) Compared to the ravages and slaughter of the Civil War in the United States of America, in which an estimated two million Americans died, Japan's Meiji Restoration resembles more a bloodless palace coup. The Meiji Restoration was over by 1868. The American Civil War lasted from 1861 to 1865, and therefore occurred only a short time before Japan underwent the same modernization process. The erroneous image lingers, even amongst some academics, that Japan's encounter with the west only really began to happen after the Pacific War, with the earlier encounters being discounted.
- 4) Among works consulted are the following which deal primarily with the historical aspects of the modernization period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Frances W. Moulder *Japan, China and the Modern World Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 1977); Kajima Morinosuke *The Emergence of Japan as a World Power, 1895–1925* (Tuttle, Tokyo, 1968); Black et al. *The Modernization of Japan and Russia* (Free Press, 1975); Ed. Marius B. Jansen *Changing Japanese Attitudes towards Modernization* (Princeton University Press, 1965); Craig and Reischauer *Japan: Tradition and Transformation* (Mifflin, Boston, 1973) William W. Lockwood "Japan's Response to the West: The Contrast with China" *World Politics*, Vol. IX, Part I, October 1956 pp. 37–54.
- 5) Kant *Essay on Perpetual Peace*, 1795, (Liberal Arts Press, 1957) pp. 23–23.
- 6) Henry Scott Stokes *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima* (The Noonday Press, 1995 edition). The entire book deals with the theme of the problem of Japanese identity in the modernized world.
- 7) Buruma, Ian *A Japanese Mirror* (Penguin Books, 1984). Chapter 10 in particular deals with this theme, but the entire work is excellent.
- 8) Ishihara Shintaro *The Japan that can Say 'No'* (Kodansha International, 1993).
- 9) *op. cit.* p. 27.
- 10) *ibid.* p. 127.
- 11) Kondo, Ken ICU Peace Research Institute, *Peace Reports*, Vol. 2, No. 1, December 1995, p. 1 and p. 9. The paper raises the long term question of 'Asia or the West?' and of the rise of an "Asia-ism". This issue requires further serious analysis.
- 12) Mao's thought has been widely discussed and analysed. Zhou Enlai, in a report given at the First National Youth Congress, and which was published in the People's Daily on October 8, 1978, speaks of learning from Mao Zedong. The highly personalised and eclectic nature of Mao's thought comes through. The revolutionary aspects of his approach have an affinity with Marx, but many other elements are borrowed from the Chinese tradition and elsewhere.
- 13) Mao's failure to end ancestor worship has resulted in himself being treated as a divinity after his death, being used by taxi drivers in Beijing as a road-safety protector.
- 14) History will come to evaluate the importance of these two men in supporting China's williness

- to emerge from isolation, with assurances of co-operation and respect.
- 15) Lee Kwan Yew *Forty Years of Political Discourses* (Li Guang Yao *Sishi Nian Zheng Xuan*, United Press, Singapore, 1995) pp. 581–2.
 - 16) Mahathir Mohammad and Shintaro Ishihara *The Voice of Asia: Two Leaders Discuss the Coming Century* (Kōdansha International, Tokyo and New York, 1995) p. 77.
 - 17) *op. cit.* p. 83.
 - 18) *op. cit.* p. 132.
 - 19) *Asian Business* Vol. 32, No. 1 January 1966 p. 38.
 - 20) *Asian Business* Vol. 32, No. 3, March 1996 p. 16.
 - 21) Li Guang Yao *op. cit.* p. 524.
 - 22) Professor Emily S. Rosenberg gave a lecture at the International House of Japan, entitled “Spreading ‘The American Dream’ to Asia” (*IHJ Bulletin*, Vol. 15. No. 1, Winter 1995) pp. 1–6, which describes the subordination image of Asia learning from its master in the early part of the 20th century. As I have suggested, it has lingered much longer.
 - 23) There was a major debate in Europe during summer 1996 about western paedophiliacs visiting countries like Thailand, or the Philippines. The local cultures were criticised for permitting it. Counter-arguments suggested that western nations might impose penalties on their nationals arrested for such crimes. Similar issues are raised on the subject of the U.S. military and prostitution, by Sandra Pollock *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the U.S. military in Asia* (New York, 1992). All these issues are side-effects of the entire colonial era.
 - 24) William Storrar *Scottish Identity: A Christian Vision* (The Handsel Press, Edinburgh, 1990) pp. 4–8, 179.
 - 25) Meisner is Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and author of *The Reign of Deng Xiaoping: An Inquiry into the Fate of Chinese Socialism* (Hill and Wang, 1996).
 - 26) “Trying to Tame the Dragon: An Escalating Fear of China Complicated Already Complex U.S. — Sino Relations”.
 - 27) October 31, 1994.
 - 28) “The Worldwide Web of Chinese Business” *Harvard Business Review*, (March-April 1993), pp. 24–37.