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Asian Values: Methodological Issues and Tasks

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The Premises of the Asian Value Debate

This paper focuses on the social science literature on Asian values, rather than on the politics-saturated literature of ideological orientation or on the literature of cultural or intellectual history. As such, it will not discuss the works related to the basic conceptual definition of Asian values, namely what Asian values are; the foundation of Eastern and Western modes of thinking; and religious and philosophical debates (De Bary 1981, 1991; De Bary and Chaffee 1989; Hahm 1994; Hall and Ames 1987; Huntington 1996; Lee 2001; Tu 1993; Tu et al. 1992; Yao 2000). It will attempt to identify methodological issues and tasks in defining Asian values and to discuss the utility and functionality of the Asian values debate in social sciences. For this, this paper will focus on the social science literature which views Asian values as explanans or explicatum used for the explanation, not as explanandum or explicandum to be explained (Hempel 1965; Von Wright 1971).

To begin with, it is necessary to discuss the premises on which the Asian values debate operates (Hahm 2000; Huang 2000; Lim 2000). There must be a premise as to whether one discusses Asian values as a concept symmetrical or in contrast with Western values or as a classificatory model along the regions such as East and the West.

The economic and political systems called Western capitalism and democracy that emerged in the modernizing process of human civilization have globally spread along with such Western values as individual liberty, equality and individualistic rationality. Western values are becoming an all-encompassing global standard as a timeless, universalistic and naturally-given entity. Asian values have emerged by countering or resisting the globalizing trend of Western values. The emerging discourse on Asian values in such a context indicates that both Western and Asian values should not be viewed as being universalistic value systems but as particularistic ones. Given such particularism, a debate on Asian values is directly connected with the debate concerning the boundary of spatial and temporal application across space and over time respectively.

A debate on the boundary of spatial and temporal application delves into the extent to which the value systems containing the particularities have been applied and expanded across regions as well as to what extent they have retained their consistency over time in the transition from the premodern to modern eras. It will also investigate how applicable Western and Asian values are across space and over time in the transition towards postmodernity. In other words, the debate is directly related to the question of how much Western values have globalized or are capable of being globalized as a global standard through the axes of space and time, and the question of how much Asian values can be globalized from a comparative perspective. Given such a particularistic premise, the Asian values debates should address the question of the boundary of spatial and temporal application which is directly connected with how widely the value system, mode of thinking, conceptual structure and ideology of Asian values can be applied to and accommodated by Western society and Westerners.

Based on the premise of particularism, the Asian values debate also entails the issue of how much Asian society and its members have established, maintained and developed Asian values independent of the influence of Western values. This view holds that the Asian community, having established a common value system called Asian values, maintains and develops its own particular political and economic systems. It posits that the Asian community and its members, based on sustainable if not unchangeable Asian values, have maintained and are developing their own, a unique capitalist economic system (Brook 1995; Brook and Luong 2000; Cauquelin et al. 1998; Clegg and Redding

1990; Wang et al. 2000) and communitarian political system (Jiang 2000; Vogel 1991). Presupposing such coexistent but independent and self-sustaining Asian values signifies the presupposition of the regional categorization of value systems. This indicates that a regional classificatory model can be established such as Western, Asian, African and Middle Eastern values.

While the regional categorization of value systems is obviously possible, this paper will focus on the Asian values that emerged in contrast with Western values, and thus address the issue of the boundary of spatial and temporal application. Among the Asian value debates, the paper will focus particularly on a methodological discussion of the utility and functionality of Asian values as explanans or explicandum used for the explanation in the social science literature.

Defining the Concept of Asian Values: Methodological Issues and Tasks

What are Asian values? How should we define the concept of Asian values and what is their existential substance? As mentioned above, the paper will give priority to methodological issues and tasks that ought to be considered in the process of defining the social scientific concept of Asian values, rather than attempt to define the concept of Asian values itself.

What should be considered first in the process of defining the concept of Asian values are components or dimensions in concept construction. No concept can be defined without discussing the essential components in the construction of a concept. What are then the essential components and dimensions of constituting the concept of Asian values? Discourse on this may differ depending on the academic discipline. Even if someone takes a different stance on what the basic components or dimensions constituting Asian values are, it is essential for them to make a clear statement about them. The conceptualization of Asian values requires a specification of the components or dimensions which constitute the values. A debate is fallacious and even meaningless, if the dimensions on which cases may vary are not specified in detail in comparative studies.

Second, a debate on Asian values in the social science circles requires a process of elaborating on concrete empirical referents about the components or dimensions of Asian values, after the specification of the components

constituting Asian values in conceptualization. Measurement comparability of empirical referents is essential to a debate on the relative boundary of spatial and temporal application of the contrasting value systems of the East and West. An Asian values debate devoid of elaborate empirical referents tends to commit the fallacy of negative comparison. A negative comparison is a comparison of the properties in an object with objects which do not have such properties. If Western and Eastern value systems are compared without an accord on mutually comparable components or dimensions in conceptualization, and if a discussion is made not based on mutually comparable empirical referents in measurement, the debate is not going to be productive. In other words, agreement on the components or dimensions with which Eastern and Western value systems can be compared is a prerequisite, and one should be able to compare empirical referents based on them. Furthermore, if there is agreement on the particular components or dimensions, the mutual comparability of their empirical referents is essential in comparative research. For instance, if a negative comparison is made in a case where empirical referents a and b exist in a particular component or dimension of Western values, but do not exist in Asian values, and where empirical referents x and y existing within a dimension of Asian values do not exist in Western society, the level of possible comparability is definitely lowered.

Third, for a mutual comparison of Asian and Western value systems, the axis of spatio-temporality should correspond with each other to a certain extent. If the axis of spatio-temporality differs when the two value systems are compared with one another, the empirical referents of the value systems will be predominantly different, rendering comparison impossible. Furthermore, if the aggregated levels of empirical referents are inconsistent or not in agreement in comparative research, a comparison of Asian and Western value systems gives rise to either a fallacy of composition or ecological fallacy. Fallacy of composition occurs when a conjecture is made from the micro to the macro level, while ecological fallacy is committed when one speculates about a macro phenomenon inferring from a micro level phenomenon. If the aggregated level of Western society's empirical referents does not correspond with that of the Asia's empirical referents, a comparison of empirical referents tends to be fallacious. Therefore, it is always hazardous to draw inferences about cases at one level of aggregation on the basis of data describing cases at another level of aggregation.

In sum, the social science definition of Asian values requires specification on the dimensionality of the concept as well as elaboration on empirical referents on each dimension specified in conceptualization. We also need to pay more attention to the macro-micro aggregation issue with somewhat corresponding axis of spatio-temporality in comparative research. A discourse or debate on Asian values can be productive if such methodological issues and tasks are resolved.

Asian Values as Explanans

Social science literature discussing Asian values generally regard Asian values as explanans or explicatum and attempts to insert them into social, political and economic phenomena. Such literature makes a particular attempt to explain them by inserting Asian values into rapid economic growth, particular organizational patterns of Asian capitalism, and characteristics of Asian democracy or civil society. We will now discuss the functionality of Asian values focused on the literature on Asian capitalism and civil society.

Asian Capitalism

Discourses on Asian capitalism are roughly classified into two groups: convergence and divergence (Berger and Dore 1996; Deyo et al. 2001; Kim et al. 2000). The economic system of capitalism has basic defining qualities such as private ownership of production means, market-oriented commodity production and consumption, individuals' acquisitive and maximizing behavior in market activities as well as in wealth accumulation, and minimized systematic intervention and interference in the market by the state (Kim et al. 2000). As mentioned above, these defining qualities are not simply universal, timeless or naturally given, but change depending on spatial and temporal contexts, the given situations, and the interests and power relations of economic actors.

Though the defining qualities of the economic system of capitalism cannot be fully realized in a utopian manner, their analytical utility and enduring quality can be acknowledged. The all-encompassing global system of capitalism originated in the West is expanding beyond Asia even to socialist

countries. Prior to the Asian economic crisis in the 1990s, Asian countries achieved rapid economic growth. Scholars were asked to explain the phenomenon of the rapid economic growth Asian countries had achieved through capitalism. In response, those in social science circle presented characteristics particular to Asia such as the developmental state and the Confucian tradition as explanatory factors. The developmental state model, in particular, explained the Asian economic growth through characteristics such as the cohesiveness of state bureaucracy, the state's capacity and leadership role in economic management and in minimizing rent-seeking behaviors and moral hazards of economic actors (Kim et al. 2000). Based on particular patterns of economic organizations and features in modes of management, they differentiated Japan's capitalism as alliance capitalism, Korea's as *jaebeol* or state-led capitalism, and Taiwan's as family capitalism (Kim 2000b, 2000c). As the explanatory power of the development state model has weakened in the wake of the Asian economic crisis, the East Asian capitalism and broadly Asian capitalism are now being redefined as crony capitalism.

Asian values as explanans or explicatum are a favorite formula for explaining economic growth, the common features of Asian capitalism. They maintain that Asian values, accompanied by productivity based on a strong individual work ethic, managerial efficiency based on hierarchy in businesses, and transaction costs minimization from hierarchy between the state and private businesses, fueled economic growth at the macro level.

What would be the functionality of this favorite formula? Devoid of empirical statistics and numbers, conclusively speaking, the functionality is minimal. Statistically, the increased R square of additive explained variances by inserting the variables of Asian values carries little significance. When it is statistically insignificant, the inserted variables are deleted from the model. This means that there is not much of practical functionality of inserting the variables related to Asian values in empirical studies. Another tendency appearing in the social science literature dealing with Asian values is that in cases where there are many unexplained variances, cultural factors are made into additional speculative models. Although they serve as a root cause in explaining causes and effects in such a case, Asian values are too remote from the phenomena to be explained. Even when they are remote, no serious problems arise if the explained mechanism is structured elaborately and logically, but this is absent in most of the social science literature on Asian values. In conclusion, Asian

value debates related to Asian capitalism do not have much practical utility or functionality.

Asian Civil Society

Coming into the 21st century and particularly following the Asian economic crisis, interest in Asian civil society has mounted. Has Asian civil society existed and does it exist now? Is Asian civil society different from Western civil society? If different, what are the defining elements and characteristics of Asian civil society? Can Asian civil society stand for one collective form in spite of its historical and cultural diversity?

The concept of civil society emerged as a historical concept independent of, confronting and often counterbalancing state and ecclesiastical authority, reflecting the political power struggle of the capitalist class in the process of forming modern states and capitalism in the West. The genealogy of the concept of civil society in European society is also diverse (Kim 2002b). The concept of Western civil society as a historical concept should not be applied to Asia as a norm (Kim 2000a, 2002b). The analytical utility of the concept of civil society rather can be found if dimensions are inserted, such as voluntarism, autonomy, self-governance and independence from state power on the part of civil society and its organizations (Kim 2002a, 2002b, 2003). Accordingly, it is possible to argue that self-governing, voluntary and autonomous civic organizations existed at the regional and village level in Asian states under absolutist governance prior to modernization and industrialization. In other words, every society historically had some degree of voluntary organization at the local level, the particular relational dynamics of which can be characterized in terms of history and culture.

If so, did Asian civil society exist? If it did or does now, what are its characteristics and appearances? This question parallels our earlier discussion of Asian capitalism. Whether or not Asian civil society shared the same historical context with Western civil society or formed a particular self-sustaining civil society on the analytical level, the social science literature tends to insert Asian values as explanans or explicatum. The practical utility of Asian values is also weak. As pointed out earlier, the social science literature involving Asian values is basically ambiguous in conceptualization and less than accurate in empirical referents. Because of such fundamental flaws in

conceptualization and measurement, Asian values inserted as additive variables in the model do not show any significance in statistics and cannot secure any practical functionality in explanation. If Asian values are to secure practical functionality as explanans or explicatum, methodological issues and tasks related to defining the concept of Asian values first need to be resolved.

Conclusion

In the attempt to expand the application spectrum of Asian values in reaction to Western values, one must take several precautions. It is necessary first of all to be detached both from discourse declaring the end of Western values, rule by reason, or individualistic rationalism, and from discourse reversely arguing the restoration or emergence of Asian values as being most faithful to human nature and conducive to a sincere restoration of humanity. One should also avoid arguments about which one of the Asian or Western values is more universal or more particularistic. We now need to add concreteness to the discourse. Namely, the focus should be on the practical utility of Asian values as a concept distinguishable from or in contrast with Western values rather than being tied down to the category and bound to the application of Asian values irrespective of space and time, obsessed by the theme of universalizing Asian values, and or the timelessness of Asian values. This paper is neither opposed to basic discussions of Asian values and their universal logic, nor denies the contribution made by such literature. The article merely attempts to look into methodological issues and tasks in the social science literature and further to discuss Asian values with a view to increase productivity in social science discourses.

In defining the concept of Asian values, it is necessary to make precise statements about the specific dimensions which constitute the concept of Asian values. In the absence of such specification, a debate on Asian values can become fallacious or meaningless. It is also necessary to elaborate empirical referents available in applying Asian values to the real world and to clarify their spatio-temporality axis in comparative research. Comparison of Asian and Western value systems without some agreement on empirical referents under spatio-temporality limitations gives rise to the fallacy of simple negative comparison. A lack of agreement on macro and micro levels in empirical

studies commits the fallacy of composition or ecological fallacy.

The practical utility and functionality of Asian values in the social science literature refers to how much of social, economic and political phenomena are to be explained by inserting the variables of Asian values. In most cases, there is not much of significance increase by inserting Asian values into the model. Therefore, Asian values should not be simply inserted or added into the model to fill in areas that cannot be explained. To enhance the practical utility and functionality of Asian values in the social science literature, the concept should be defined specifically, elaborate empirical referents precisely, and more importantly build a sound logical system. When Asian values are used as explanans or explicatum, the practical utility will depend on the appropriateness of the explained mechanism or logical structure contained in the model. If the concept of Asian values is to serve a useful and practical function as explanans in the social science literature, the logical relevance and appropriateness of causal mechanisms should be further enhanced in addition to specification and elaboration.

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