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Asian Values—Swiss Values?

by Elmar Holenstein

For years one is reading of "Asian values." Traveling through Asia, one is rubbing one's eyes. The whole of Asia, from the Bosporus and Ural all the way to the Pacific Ocean, is thrown into one great pot, as if they all, Turkic peoples and Mongols, Arabs, Iranians and Malaysians as well as Chinese, Koreans and Japanese had been educated by Confucius. Business people as well as political scientists who tell us of "Asiatic values" are flying in twelve hours from Frankfurt and Zurich to Shanghai, Singapore, and Tokyo. Those shortcuts therefore?

Indeed, the peoples mentioned share one trait: from the perspective of Europe, they live in the "Orient." When in the past one had to undertake long boat journeys to the "Far East," one got to know them all as "oriental." It meant: irrational, sensuous, longwinded and dissolute, inscrutable for us, therefore unreliable all the way to devious, certainly alien and odd. Some even did fantasize about "female cultures." Those who were religiously oriented, enjoyed exquisite mysticism; those rather guided by esthetics, discovered the exotic; those thinking "holistically," found closeness to nature.

Today quite different traits are being presented under the rubric "Asian values." Here is a list compiled by the president of a multinational business with head office in Frankfurt, Germany: "Familial unity, learning, industriousness, discipline, consensus orientation and community mindedness." Of these traits, none seem

1 Expanded and slightly revised version of a text first published in the supplement "Zeitfragen" (Timely Issues) of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung of 4/5 July 1998; also in Home Stories: Neue Studien zu Film und Kino in der Schweiz, Vinzenz Hediger et al. eds. (Marburg: Schüre, 2001), 347–352.
alien to us, we know them quite well from our own tradition. Some of them are regarded as conservative and, given the present living conditions, are viewed as endangered. Political parties that have adopted “family values” into their programs, bringing electoral success, find their model not in Asia, but in their own “good old times.” Philosophers, who put community mindedness, using the strange word “communitarism” at the top of their value system, view themselves just as restorative.

“Learning” in the sense of “Bildung,” of integrated understanding, however, is viewed in Europe as a progressive term that derives from the Enlightenment, and all hold it in high esteem. As to “industriousness and discipline” one assumes that they are still truly pursued in Switzerland—and even somewhat more than elsewhere. “Consensus orientation,” finally, is seen under the term “concordance” as a quite unique trademark of the Confederacy. As to its evaluation, however, consensus has vanished. Some continue to view it as a national virtue, others as an evil that causes the Confederacy’s “reform backlog.” This term, however, has been coined in Germany, where compared to Switzerland a disputatious and oppositional culture blossoms. Yet mono-causal explanations and mono-cultural therapies do not lead very far.

A Comparative Test

Is Switzerland an Asian country? Not only the listed canon of values seems to suggest it. Some twenty years ago a Japanese philosopher tried to highlight for me the “national character” of his countrymen by this typical Japanese proverb: Deru kui wa utareru—“A pole that sticks out gets hit.” I had heard the same line with the identical meaning as being typical for Switzerland already in primary school. In the 1980s, the Tokyo Mövenpick restaurants presented a list of traits that Japan and Switzerland shared. It peaked in the self-praise: “In no other country people work as hard and as long as in Japan and Switzerland.” Just as many Japanese many Swiss, too, are “married” to their firms. A decade later at its centenary celebration, the manager of the oldest vegetarian restaurant of Zurich proclaimed the guideline “no day without improvement” as the “firm’s philosophy in conformity with the Japanese management outlook.”
Around 1900, Carl Hilty (1833–1909)—constitutional scholar, political scientist, and popular philosopher—was one of the most read writers in Switzerland and given the title praeceptor Helvetiae, Helvetia’s teacher. Today but historians and a few late fans still know of him. After a long slump, the demand for his books has recently increased again. But in Japan his 1890 book about Glück (Happiness) and especially the 1901 volume of aphorisms Für schlaflose Nächte (For Sleepless Nights) remained a highly valued text among the “meaning of life” books until quite recently. His books were first issued in 1935 and 1936 by the same established publisher Iwanami who also published the most noted representatives of the Kyoto School (of philosophy) such as Nishida, Kuki, and Watsuji. I have not yet met a Japanese intellectual of my generation (+/-70) who has not read the 1901 book. After such experiences I made the following test at the beginning of the 1990s:

Around 1980 Peter Bichsel published an essay in which he contrasted Germany and Switzerland in sensibly formulated sentences. He saw the main difference not in the fact that in Germany one spoke High German and in Switzerland dialects, but that in Switzerland one did not talk at all about many things that were extensively discussed in Germany. Germans found our “not talking about it,” and articles of the Constitution that contain an “as well as,” being ominous. Bichsel suggested that in the northern neighboring country one strove to solve problems by a new administrative form, an unambiguous law, and a court judgment, but among Swiss one preferred informal and disguised solutions. Throughout Bichsel’s text, I replaced “Germany” with “Europe” and “Switzerland” with “Japan,” then read it aloud in Switzerland, Germany, and Japan. Nobody realized the change, to the contrary. A Japanese law professor even conjectured that it was written by a Shintoist.

2 Carl Hilty, Glück. Frauenfeld: Huber, 1891; Kāru Hiruti, Kōfukuron, Tokyo: Iwanami, 1936. Für schlaflose Nächte, Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1901; Nemuren yoru no tame ni, Tokyo: Iwanami, 1935. The books appeared subsequently in several translations edited by different publishers. (They are still available today, for instance from Amazon). Hilty was promoted in Japan by the German-Russian philosopher at the then Imperial University of Tokyo Raphael von Koeber (Nizhny Novgorod 1848—Yokohama 1923).

3 The two texts, Bichsel’s original and my version are reprinted in Elmar Holenstein, Kulturphilosophische Perspektiven (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), pp. 360-363; online http://www.eu-ro-ni.ch/publications/Holenstein_ Kulturvergleich.pdf.
What does this all mean? It is certain that the old equations—
“One people, one language, one culture, one set of values” and:
“other people, other language, other culture, other set of values”—
are untenable propositions. In eastern countries of Europe, many still
believe in these equations, and they also have proponents in East
Asia. Today’s revised dominant terminology that replaces “people
and language” with large-scale terms such as “continent” and, since
Samuel Huntington, “culture” with “civilization,” is in no way
more valid as: “One continent, one culture (or civilization), one set
of values.” It is not that simple. Cultures just do not form closed,
centered, and homogenous “cultural units.”

Hans Küng’s List of “Japanistic” Non-Values

In his *Project Weltethos* (Project World Ethic), Hans Küng
criticized Japanese Shinto that “it hardly developed any moral
principles.”

It probably didn’t need to. When with changing conditions
in the economy and in society the time for “doctrinal statements” had
come, Shinto, being by nature ecumenically open minded, entered
into such a close relationship with the Buddhadharma (“Buddha’s
Law,” that is, “Buddhism”) and with Confucian philosophy that
formulating separate “moral precepts” proved unnecessary. The fruit
of the Japanese adoption of Buddhadharma and Confucian political
philosophy was Prince Shotoku’s “Constitution” (*Jūshichijō kempo*)
attributed to Prince Shotoku (572–622).

It is a document from the
seventh or eighth century relating to ethics as well as politics. It
had no parallel in central Europe, where at the same time economic,
political, and social conditions began to change similarly as they did in Japan. Four excerpts from articles 1, 7, 15, and 17 must suffice. The first three are mainly inspired by the Confucian tradition, article 7 is Buđhait, others also Daoit. All are easily harmonized with a vibrant Shinto that traditionally has done without scripture.

(1) Harmony is to be valued. ... If those positioned above strive for harmony and if those being below are of good will, so that an issue may be dealt with in proper fashion, then an issue’s intrinsic rationality will emerge by itself.

(7) In this world but few have inborn understanding. But continued reflection leads to wisdom.

(15) It belongs to a statesman’s duty to abandon private interests and to focus on the public common good.

(17) One person cannot decide matters of importance. It is absolutely necessary that several people consider them.

Küng uses the condescending term “Shintoism.” It may be a proper label for the ideological state religion established by Japanese nationalists, but not for the folk religion that is still shaped by ethical and many (also secular) traditions. For the latter one should rather, and with greater respect, use the self-designation “Shinto.” The term “secular” in parenthesis is to be understood in its double meaning, as “centuries old” as well as “worldly,” that is, as “non-religious.”

In Küng’s view, there are three “Slogans without a future”: State socialism, Neocapitalism, and “Japanism.” Küng deals with Japan in a similar way as European right wing intellectuals deal with the United States. In a nationalistic vein they write “Americanism” instead of “neocapitalism.” Such word-choice ascribes traits to a whole people that might be typical only for a part, though possibly in both cases for an influential part. Blind acceptance of generalizing claims about evil traits, especially in regard to a non-European people, stands as a textbook criterion for racism. The theologian Küng
clearly abhors it outright. But he labels “Japanism” nevertheless as “efficiency without other considerations, flexibility without principles, authoritarian leadership without responsibility, politics and economics without a moral vision, trade and business without reciprocity, war guilt without consciousness of guilt.”

The list reads like a kind of counter-list of “Japanistic” bad values alongside the listing of the good “Asiatic values” given at the beginning. But are these bad values to be found markedly just in Japan, on all its levels, and not less blatantly also in “Western” countries? Japanese firms are known for their reluctance simply to dismiss employees in case of reduced orders. The state of Japan, at least as to the care of the sick and the aged, is a remarkable welfare state. It is not based on a Christian, but on a Confucian, Shintoit, and Buddhist tradition. Europeans fail to recognize an awareness of war guilt in Japan. Yet with some exceptions significant payments of reparations are not missing, in part under the label of development assistance. One cannot escape the suspicion that the most known exception—an insufficient indemnity for women forced into prostitution in the conquered regions besides a missing public acknowledgment of guilt— are related to a pronounced sense of shame. Japan is noted for both, the missing or at least insufficient public acknowledgement of committed war crimes and for its pronounced “culture of shame.” The relevant literature nowhere refers to that connection. A sense of shame is as much incompatible with pride in crime as it is with public contrition. If one is ashamed, one prefers to remain silent and to apologize only with discretion.

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9Also acknowledgements of war guilt are not wholly absent. See the listing for the years 1979 to 2007: www.answers.com/japanese%20war%20apologies.

The word “shame” is missing in Künig’s writings that relate to his “Project World Ethic.” It is also strikingly absent in Karl Jaspers’ most sensitively written book *The Question of Guilt*, published in 1946. But what Jaspers observes about a certain urge of admitting guilt, could help Künig understand the Japanese hesitancy to admitting guilt:

Those edgy in the face of reproach may easily shift to a compulsion of acknowledging their trespass. Such acknowledgements—faulty because still compulsive and instinctual—show in their emergence an unmistakable trait: Since they derive as their opposites in the same person from the same will to power, one realizes that the acknowledging person wants to attach a value to the acknowledgement, to stand out in relation to others. That acknowledgment of guilt wants to force others to do the same, it derives from aggressiveness. ... It seems advantageous to acknowledge guilt. ... One wants to say what the world wants to hear. Added to it is the fatal inclination to view oneself better than others. In exposing oneself hides an attack on those who don’t do it. Thus the ignominy of such cheap self-accusation, the dishonor of a vaunted and advantageous flattery is revealed.

Knowledge of guilt and shame are both complex phenomena that do not allow simple statements. Admissions of guilt may be tied to pride of sin. They may also be seen and misused as gestures of humility. A person admitting guilt takes a bow and scrapes. The step diminishes retributive aggression. As behaviorists richly document, among animals gestures of humility may prevent getting hurt by retaliatory bites. Among humans admissions of guilt are mitigating and, thus the official interpretation, may prove that the culprit will strive for betterment. Although being unperceived and unreflecting, leniency and a diminution of punishment, although viewed as typically human, may be basically inborn, instinctual, and animal-like responses. An apology reintegrates a person into the community. One becomes again socially acceptable. If one experiences shame,

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12 Ibid., p. 73.
one withdraws and prefers to stay unnoticed. In addition, shame also reveals a feeling of honor, a high esteem of oneself, and with it also a high standard for oneself. One realizes that one did not behave in a way that conformed to one’s self-image. Since the classical Confucian philosopher Mengzi (Mencius), shame has been viewed as a natural source of moral behavior. Its connection with a sense of honor and self-esteem reveals however that one behaves morally not fully out of selflessness. It is valuable to become conscious of such connections.

Intra-Cultural Diversity

All human communities show “trans-cultural” aspects, that is, aspects that are independent of a given culture: Differences depending upon age and sex. In complex and large-scale societies there are others to be added: unique traits of occupational groups, contrasts between urban and rural areas, regional differences due to narrow valleys, wide-open plains, vast oceans, climatic shifts between north and south, and the like. Such differences certainly do not determine unavoidably (or even fatalistically) world- and value-perceptions. But they are also not wholly irrelevant. They leave markers. In the various phases of life, different value orientations dominate. One may consider the often-quoted remark: “Who is not a socialist at age twenty, has no heart, who is it still at forty, has no brains.” Occupations tend to evolve a separate professional ethos. It is hardly astonishing that one is able to distinguish urbanites from rural people just as easily in a foreign culture as in one’s own. Nor is one surprised therefore to learn that farmers in China and in Europe share more values among them than they do with urban dwellers of their given cultural area. This is similarly true for different age groups.

Western Individualism—Eastern Communitarianism?

The different evaluation of the relationship between individual and community is a difference that one has stubbornly claimed to separate Western culture from other cultures of the world. The West is supposedly individualistic, the rest of the world “communitaristic.” During the Vietnam War, an American officer even claimed that war in Asia could not be judged by the same moral standard. There
individual lives were not valued as much as in the "West." One also finds similar infuriating prejudice among intellectuals. Less than thirty years ago, a German specialist concerned with Japan declared: "Realizing oneself" was actually "a Western concept" and alien to Japan. Had she never seen a Samurai film? Or senior women and men engaged in their daily gymnastic exercises or at regular Haiku writing sessions? "Self-cultivation" (xiushen) is a central ideal of Confucian ethics that is also pursued in Japan. Christians actually have criticized the classic Buddhadharma that it supposedly encourages followers to "self-redemption," thus overtaxing the individual human being.

Value conflicts do not only emerge when different cultures face each other. Value conflicts of the same kind and of the same intensity erupt also again and again within one and the same culture. Therefore various political parties emerge, those that vigorously promote individual liberty and those that fight for communal institutions and a community-centered society. Value conflicts are not at all surprising, not only between but also within cultures, actually even within one and the same person. Already early in life we discover that many values, none of which we want to miss, cannot be harmoniously and seamlessly ordered into an elegant and hierarchical value-pyramid. We cannot realize them all optimally at the same time. We must choose—and we realize all too soon that values that presuppose each other may also hinder each other, individual liberties and social rights providing the classic example.

In Switzerland the (French-speaking) "Welschen" are viewed as greater individualists than German Swiss. They more strongly oppose any limiting of personal autonomy. They found scandalous to be forced to use seatbelts. But when some years ago the federal administration proposed the sentence "Freedom of language use is guaranteed" as a constitutional provision, it was they who protested. Instead they fought for the legal protection of the languages then spoken in the Confederation’s various regions.\(^{13}\) Why this initially not understandable shift in priorities?

\(^{13}\)The corresponding article (70.2) in the federal constitution of the year 2000 has been cautiously formulated. "In order to preserve harmony between linguistic communities, the Cantons shall respect the traditional territorial distribution of languages and take account of indigenous linguistic minorities."
A language grants a speaker far more possibilities of expression and much greater mental mobility, if it is the language of administrative offices, courts, and schools (from kindergarten to the university), also of literature and scholarship, even more so if it is a world language as well, and not a regional language spoken worldwide only by a million or even less people. If one has but limited choice of literary and cultural variation, liberty is of small value. The individual right to choose is evidently depending on "corporate" rights. The freedom of language depends on such a corporate right of language groups and on territorial integrity that allows a language to unfold and constantly renew and enrich itself.

The Swiss controversy about freedom of language is most helpful for an understanding of Asian countries that demand collective human rights as a precondition for individual rights, for instance, the "right of development." Without corresponding economic development, many individual human rights such as the right to adequate basic education or free choice of occupation and residence remain an illusion.

Nothing is more revealing than, whenever warranted, to view territorially small and narrow native Switzerland explicitly from a comparative cultural perspective. It may become a key experience. In the proverbial "nutshell" one may truly grasp problems that today present themselves less clearly around the globe. This means that Switzerland is not a "Sonderfall," a special case. Within given variations, one may experience quite similar circumstances in many other countries.

**Manifest and Hidden Values**

Cultures are not differentiated in such a way that in a given culture certain basic values may be wholly insignificant or even be missing but in another are considered to be crucial. Cultures are differentiated rather on the basis that specific values receive different rankings on a scale. One also finds within individual cultures shifting patterns of rank. From the standpoint of philosophical anthropology such shifts are of small importance, especially if they involve "secondary virtues" such as discipline and industriousness. Economists, however, hold quite a different view. Since philosophically considered
insignificant differences may have large effects on management and finance, economic specialists view them differently from philosophers and identify them with greater attention. But economists can also overlook fine differences if they are not in their interest. For instance, the people who composed the advertisement for the Tokyo Mövenpick restaurants, were not aware that in Japan the “marriage-bond” between a firm and its employees is symmetrical. The owner of an establishment is to show care for the well being of workers. In case of economic crisis therefore, the socially sanctioned threshold of dismissal is in Japan much higher than in Switzerland.

Another and less easily explained difference consists in the fact that in one culture values may remain latent while in others they are manifest, ritually actualized, ideologically heightened, and strengthened by historical myth. Thus Florian Coulmas chose for one of his books about Japan the title *The Land of the Ritual Harmony.*

Japan was a country that solved conflicts that are given everywhere preferably unnoticed and under the hand. Concerning the “West” one could correspondingly talk about “The Hemisphere of the Ritualized Individualism”: The obvious dependence on taken for granted social institutions and the widespread conformism—in fashion and lifestyle, in the media and at universities—are being ignored. What leads people to the tabooing of certain anthropological constants, like conformity or being dependent on a social safety net in their own culture, and to projecting them onto other cultures?

Philosophers of the 18th century European Enlightenment viewed their newly found belief in the “perfectability of man,” that is, of people and social relations—a fundamental of their tenets—to be verified by China. After the humanistic Enlightenment optimism of Europe had clearly collapsed during the 20th century, the “Asian crisis” toward the end of the century seemed to serve as an additional sign that an ethic subsumed under the title “Asian values” was also inadequate as a basis of human wellbeing and prosperity. Besides an ethic other factors are needed, such as sufficient material and legal resources and political institutions such as democracy, the separation of power, and freedom of information.

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14 *Das Land der rituellen Harmonie: Japan, Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haf tung* (Hamburg: Campus, 1993).
Today we witness less the clash between wholly different value systems of the earth’s various civilizations, but rather face value conflicts inside of individual civilizations, mainly in societies rooted in Christian, Islamic and Hindu traditions. It might not be for long that such conflicts will also emerge more clearly than they do now in the Confucian tradition. One can find the same basic values in all cultural areas and therefore also the same value conflicts, such as between liberty and justice (today again as in the times of Hobbes, more intensely between freedom and safety), between loyalty to the family versus loyalty to the state, and between these types of loyalty and the ideal of equal treatment of all.

We also witness the rivalry between different political institutions and economic systems, between different forms and stages of the legal ordering of the economy and society. Within “the European civilization” diverse views of this kind lead Switzerland to hesitate fully to join the European Union. The growing urge of European commissars toward regulation reminds many of Chinese patterns. Only when legalism exclusively—not merely as an auxiliary strategy—were typical of China, and not also, and even more so, and with deeper cultural roots anti-legalistic Confucian moral and political philosophy, only then could one entertain the claim of a lacking convergence between “Asian” and “Swiss” values.