

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Daniel A. Bell: East Meets West

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2000, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

For COURSE PACK and other PERMISSIONS, refer to entry on previous page. For more information, send e-mail to permissions@pupress.princeton.edu

* *Introduction* *

A SMALL SET OF crucial human rights are valued, at least in theory, by all governments in the contemporary world. The most obvious are the prohibitions against slavery, genocide, murder, torture, prolonged arbitrary detention, and systematic racial discrimination. These rights have become part of customary international law¹ and they are not contested in the public rhetoric of the international arena. Of course, many gross human rights violations occur off the record, and human rights groups such as Amnesty International have the task of exposing the gap between public allegiance to rights and the sad reality of ongoing abuse. This is largely practical work, however. There is not much point writing or deliberating about the desirability of practices that everyone condemns at the level of principle.

But political thinkers and activists around the world can and do take different sides on many pressing human rights concerns that fall outside the sphere of customary international law. This gray area of debate includes criminal law, family law, women's rights, social and economic rights, the rights of indigenous peoples, and the attempt to universalize Western-style democratic practices. Some of these issues are contested on cultural grounds, others are a matter of how rights are prioritized in developing nations, and sometimes the question is whether or not to employ the language of rights in the first place. Not all human rights values and practices typically endorsed by Western countries are automatically accepted elsewhere, and dialogue between interested parties is needed to identify areas of commonality and justifiable difference.

This should not be too controversial. The problem, however, is that many prominent voices in the West seem to foreclose the possibility of a constructive dialogue with "the rest."

¹ These rights, in other words, cannot be displaced by agreements of states or in any other way. See Oscar Schacter, *International Law in Theory and Practice*, 337–338, and Ingrid Detter, *The International Legal Order*, 304–305.

INTRODUCTION

WEST-CENTRIC PERSPECTIVES

Liberal democratic ideals and institutions command almost universal allegiance in Western societies. This phenomenon is to be understood in light of the West's shared history and culture. In what seems like an all too obvious theoretical mistake, however, it is often assumed without argument that liberal democracy also meets the deeper aspirations of the rest of the world. Needless to say, we have moved beyond the brief moment of euphoria that followed the collapse of communism in the Soviet bloc. It is now widely recognized that brutal ethnic warfare, crippling poverty, environmental degradation, and pervasive corruption, to name some of the more obvious troubles afflicting the "developing" world, pose serious obstacles to the successful establishment and consolidation of liberal democratic political arrangements. But these are seen as unfortunate (hopefully temporary) afflictions that may delay the "end of history" when liberal democracy has finally triumphed over its rivals. They are not meant to pose a challenge to the *ideal* of liberal democracy.² It is widely assumed that liberal democracy is something that all rational individuals *would* want if they could "get it."³

² It is worth noting, however, that Francis Fukuyama, who coined the term "end of history" as a reference to the ultimate (and presumably final) triumph of liberal democracy, is not an uncritical advocate of the dominant value system in Western liberal democracies. For example, he suggests that Asian-style personalism and "relational contracting" may be particularly appropriate in a sophisticated economy, and that these "Asian values" cannot be blamed for Asia's recent economic decline ("Asian Values and the Asian Crisis," 26). Still, Fukuyama does not to my knowledge argue that Asian *political* values that differ from liberal democratic norms may be appropriate in a modern polity.

³ Not everyone, of course, holds this viewpoint. But the most prominent political thinker who recognizes that there may be justifiable alternatives to Western-style liberal democracy—Samuel Huntington, author of the notorious article "The Clash of Civilizations"—focuses more on the threat posed by the "other" and the need to build walls between civilizations and prepare for the possibility of military conflict by rearming the West. As he puts it in a follow-up article, the task is "to preserve and renew the unique qualities of Western civilization" by, for example, "controlling immigration from non-Western societies" ("The West Unique, Not Universal," 46, 45). However, Huntington seems to express a rather

INTRODUCTION

More concretely, this blind faith in the universal potential of liberal democracy takes the form of a U.S. government policy to promote human rights and democracy abroad, regardless of local needs, habits, and traditions. As President Bill Clinton argues, “America’s interests require the United States to lead an effort to build a world order shaped by U.S. values.”⁴ Of course, critics on the left point out that there is a large gap between the rhetoric and the reality—that commercial and security interests frequently override human rights concerns in United States foreign policy—but few question the normative premise that the United States *ought* to promote its values abroad.

More surprisingly, perhaps, even critics of U.S.-style human rights discourse—which identifies civil and political rights with human rights in general—often seem to rule out the possibility that there may be something to learn from the non-Western world. It is a widespread view within the international human rights community that the U.S. government (and public, to a substantial extent) tends to regard freedom from the arbitrary powers of the state as most important, with a concomitant reluctance to accept economic, social, and cultural rights as human rights. The leading human rights theorist Jack Donnelly, for example, is critical of U.S.-style “civil and political rights centrism.” Instead, he upholds as a universal ideal the more comprehensive set of rights endorsed in West European social democratic states, and he argues that the task of the human rights activist is to implement this ideal in the developing world.⁵ But he seems to rule out the possibility that “international” human rights principles can be modified in response to more input by non-Western peoples.

different sentiment in his book-length treatise on the topic. He does not repeat the ugly comment about the need to limit the immigration of non-Westerners, and he ends the book by quoting Lester Pearson on the need for different civilizations “to learn to live side by side in peaceful interchange, learning from each other, studying each other’s history and ideals and art and culture, mutually enriching each other’s lives” (*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 321).

⁴ See Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz, “American Hegemony without an Enemy,” 7.

⁵ Jack Donnelly, “Post-Cold War Reflections of the Study of Human Rights,” 97, 112, 116.

INTRODUCTION

The situation is scarcely better in the field of normative political theory. The most influential Anglo-American political philosophers today still seem compelled by a tradition of universalist moral reasoning that proposes one final solution to the question of the ideal polity yet paradoxically draws only on the moral aspirations and political practices found in Western societies. The case of Brian Barry is not atypical. Barry opens his widely cited book *Justice as Impartiality* by boldly affirming the universality of his theory: “I continue to believe in the possibility of putting forward a universally valid case in favor of liberal egalitarian principles.”⁶ Barry does recognize that a theory of justice must be anchored in substantive moral considerations, but his normative horizon seems to be limited to the values and practices of liberal Western societies.⁷ For example, Barry does not draw on anything worthwhile from the Chinese political tradition: his discussion of “things Chinese” is confined to brief criticisms of the Cultural Revolution and the traditional practice of foot-binding.⁸

In short, these West-centric outlooks pose serious obstacles to constructive cross-cultural dialogue. On the one hand, they block the development of a truly international human rights regime that can fully accommodate the needs of non-Western peoples. On the other hand, they fail to allow for the possibility that there may be areas of justifiable difference between political values in the West and “the rest.”

⁶ Brian Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, 3. Barry portrays himself as a member of an embattled minority of universalists, but in fact his view is far more mainstream among contemporary Anglophone political philosophers than he suggests (e.g., Ronald Dworkin, Thomas Nagel, and Tim Scanlon—to name just some of the leading lights in the field—also defend a universalist account of liberal egalitarianism). Of course, many contemporary political theorists have written at length about multiculturalism, but this does not usually translate into explicit recognition of the possibility that there may be non-Western values of normative importance. And even fewer Western political theorists have written book-length works that seriously engage with non-Western political values and models of political organization.

⁷ See my review essay, which develops this criticism of Barry’s “parochial universalism” (“The Limits of Liberal Justice,” esp. 565–568).

⁸ One might consider the reaction to a Chinese intellectual who puts forward a universal theory of justice that draws on the Chinese political tradition for inspiration and completely ignores the history of Western societies, except for brief criticisms of slavery and imperialism.

INTRODUCTION

THE EAST ASIAN CHALLENGE TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The most widely publicized challenge to Western liberal democracy has emerged from the East Asian region.⁹ This debate has revolved primarily around the notion of “Asian values,” a term devised by several Asian officials and their supporters for the purpose of challenging Western-style civil and political freedoms. Asians, they claim, place special emphasis upon family and social harmony, with the implication that those in the “chaotic and crumbling” societies of the West should think twice before intervening in Asia for the sake of promoting human rights and democracy. As Singapore’s senior statesman Lee Kuan Yew put it, Asians have “little doubt that a society with communitarian values where the interests of society take precedence over that of the individual suits them better than the individualism of America.”¹⁰ Such claims attracted international attention primarily because East Asian leaders seemed to be presiding over what a recent U.N. human development report called “the most sustained and widespread development miracle of the twentieth century, perhaps all history.”¹¹ In 1997–98, however, the East Asian miracle seemed to have collapsed. And it looks like Asian values was one casualty of the crisis.

But it would be a mistake to ignore East Asian perspectives on human rights and democracy. For one thing, the region accounts for nearly half the world’s population. Moreover, as Amartya Sen notes, “even though the evident thrill in the power of Asian values has somewhat diminished with the financial and economic troubles that the East Asian economies have faced during 1997–98, enough has been achieved in the region—both absolutely and in relation to the record of other regions—to make it legitimate to continue to celebrate the economic performance of East Asia over the decades.”¹² In most Asian countries, the economic fundamentals—“high savings rates, a well-educated labor force, high levels

⁹ For purposes of this book, I define East Asia as including Northeast and Southeast Asia.

¹⁰ Quoted in the *International Herald Tribune*, 9–10 November 1991.

¹¹ Quoted in Barbara Crossette, “U.N. Survey Finds Rich-Poor Gap Widening,” *New York Times*, 15 July 1996.

¹² Amartya Sen, “Human Rights and Economic Achievements,” 89.

INTRODUCTION

of technology and an outward orientation”¹³—remain in place, and the region may well reemerge “meaner and leaner” in a few years time. China in particular looks set to become an economic and political heavyweight with the power to seriously challenge the hegemony of Western liberal democratic values in international fora. Thus, failing to engage seriously with East Asian political perspectives risks widening misunderstandings and setting the stage for hostilities that could otherwise have been avoided.

From a theoretical point of view, however, it must be conceded that the official debate on Asian values has not provided much of a challenge to dominant Western political outlooks. The main problem is that the debate has been led by Asian leaders who seem to be motivated primarily by political considerations, rather than by a sincere desire to make a constructive contribution to the cross-cultural dialogue on political values. Thus, it was easy to dismiss—rightly so, in most cases—the Asian challenge as nothing but a self-serving ploy by government leaders to justify their authoritarian rule in the face of increasing demands for democracy at home and abroad.

Still, it would be a mistake to conclude that nothing of theoretical significance has emerged from East Asia. The debate on Asian values has also prompted critical intellectuals in the region to reflect and debate over how they can locate themselves in a debate on human rights and democracy in which they had not previously played a substantial part. Neither wholly rejecting nor wholly endorsing the values and practices ordinarily realized through a liberal democratic political regime, these intellectuals are drawing on their own cultural traditions and exploring areas of commonality and difference with the West. Though often less provocative than the views of their governments, these unofficial East Asian viewpoints may offer more lasting contributions to the debate.

Part I of this book consists of my reflections on several dialogues (primarily conferences and workshops) on human rights (chapter 1) and democracy (chapter 2) between Western and East Asian intellectuals. It draws upon arguments made by East Asian intellectuals who are not likely to be motivated by a desire to justify authoritarian rule (in fact, many have been actively involved with

¹³ See Joseph Stiglitz (Senior Vice President and Chief Economist, The World Bank), “Road to Recovery,” *Asiaweek*, 17 July 1998, 67.

INTRODUCTION

nongovernmental organizations and opposition groups in seeking political change). This section attempts to get beyond the rhetoric that has dogged the Asian values debate and to identify relatively persuasive East Asian criticisms of traditional Western approaches to human rights and democracy. The ultimate aim is to argue for the need to take into account the meanings and priorities East Asians typically attach to a set of political standards that have been largely shaped by the Western experience.

TAKING CULTURE TOO SERIOUSLY

Having said all this in the name of cultural sensitivity, it is worth noting an opposite tendency that overestimates the social and political importance of traditional cultural values in contemporary societies. It is not unusual these days to find books and articles that engage in systematic comparisons of Eastern and Western philosophies. These comparisons can be interesting, particularly when they help to shed light on philosophical issues neglected or underemphasized in particular cultures. The problem occurs when attempts are made to draw political implications in modern Asian societies on the basis of traditional cultural values.

Such political efforts usually take the form of systematic comparisons between liberal democracy and Asian traditions such as Confucianism. The Singaporean scholar/diplomat Bilahari Kausikan is appropriately skeptical of such attempts: "In its more learned manifestations, this argument involves attempts to recover from ancient Asian texts references that purport to prove that traditional Asian cultures professed democratic, or at least quasi-democratic, values. The charm of these erudite games is that they can be played endlessly without uncovering anything with practical relevance to current concerns. Most Asian societies have such long histories and rich cultures that it is possible to 'prove' nearly anything about them if the context of the recovered references is ignored."¹⁴

Conversely, however, it is worth noting that cultural defenders of authoritarianism often recover references from ancient Asian texts in order to "prove" that Asians favor restrictions on demo-

¹⁴ Bilahari Kausikan, "Governance That Works," 30.

INTRODUCTION

cratic rule (dozens of my own students from Singapore and Hong Kong have made such arguments over the years). These arguments can also be refuted simply by showing that such values do not have any practical relevance given current normative outlooks and political concerns.

If the aim is to bridge the gap between political philosophy and political reality, it is important to distinguish between traditional values that are still relevant today and others that have been relegated to the dustbin of history. Rather than combing through ancient texts for the purpose of determining the (in)compatibility of two whole political traditions, it is far more useful to limit one's focus to particular traditional values that continue to have widespread impact on people's political behavior in contemporary societies.¹⁵ Once these are identified, the next step is to proceed with a normative argument explaining why such values *ought* to remain influential.¹⁶ As well, it must be recognized that modern East Asian societies are characterized by different mixtures of Confucian, Buddhist, Western, and other values,¹⁷ and that Asian societies may not all share the same set of pressing social needs and political concerns. Thus, it is important to specify both the traditional values that are still relevant (from a political and normative point of view) and the particular context for one's political analysis.

Part II is an attempt to construct a case for democracy in a contemporary Singaporean context. While it is recognized that some Western arguments for democracy may not resonate with the hab-

¹⁵ Ideally, this would be combined with a historically informed argument that shows how such values came to be transmitted from generation to generation. Such an investigation, however, is beyond the scope of this book.

¹⁶ One should also leave open the possibility that it may be desirable to try to resuscitate some marginal traditional values that resonate at a "deeper," not fully conscious level.

¹⁷ Confucianism, which is not a religion with an organized membership, seems to be particularly "compatible with and complementary to religions that are not strictly exclusionistic. Often the adjectival 'Confucian' can be attached to 'Buddhist' or 'Christian' to designate a particular style of being religious" (Tu Weiming, ed., *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity*, 188). In South Korea, for example, "even those who identified themselves as Christians and adhered to Christian values and practices were very much inclined to Confucian values and practices as well . . . This confirms the statement of a well-known Christian theologian, who said, 'Our Christians are Confucians dressed in Christian robes'" (Koh Byong-ik, "Confucianism in Contemporary Korea," 199).

INTRODUCTION

its and politically influential traditions of Singaporeans (chapter 3), prodemocracy forces may have more success by appealing to the continuing influence of traditional “communitarian” commitments to the family and the nation (chapter 4). But these arguments also need to be backed up with detailed knowledge of social realities and political concerns in Singapore.

Part III (chapter 5) is an attempt to construct a case for a distinctively Chinese approach to democracy. It is argued that the Confucian value of respect for rule by an intellectual elite continues to have widespread influence in China and that this value can also be justified with reference to contemporary sociopolitical concerns. On this basis, one can defend a political institution that aims to realize this value in the contemporary Chinese context.

In short, parts II and III are attempts to argue for culturally sensitive interpretations of political values in two Asian societies without falling into the trap of taking culture too seriously. Part II is an argument for extending Western-style democracy to Singapore on the basis of local cultural and political concerns, and part III is an argument that points to an area of justifiable difference (using Western-style liberal democracy as the benchmark) in the Chinese context.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

This book is written in dialogue form. This form is meant to be reader-friendly, and it also has the advantage of allowing for a relatively systematic treatment of two contrasting positions.¹⁸ More specifically with respect to the debate on extending human rights and democracy to non-Western societies, this form vividly illustrates the need for cross-cultural social critics concerned with practical effect to actually understand and engage in respectful dialogue with members of other cultures. The medium, in this case, is part of the message.

The main character of this book is named Sam Demo.¹⁹ Demo is the East Asia program officer for a fictitious U.S.-based nongov-

¹⁸ See also the other advantages of the dialogue form as described in my earlier book, *Communitarianism and Its Critics*, 21–23.

¹⁹ Sam Demo is named after “Mr. Democracy,” the heroic (fictitious) figure of the May 4, 1919, student movement in Beijing and “Demo,” Robert Dahl’s fictitious character in his book *Democracy and Its Critics*.

INTRODUCTION

ernment organization named the National Endowment for Human Rights and Democracy (NEHRD). The NEHRD is meant to resemble such groups as the Ford Foundation and the Open Society, which send activists abroad with the mission of promoting human rights and democracy in the long term, alleviating poverty, and building up civil society. These groups often work with official and semi-official organizations, and they need to be aware of local ways and cultural habits in order to develop and maintain working relationships with local partners. (In contrast, human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights in China that criticize governments for engaging in gross human rights violations have less of a need to understand and respect local ways because they tend to rely more on confrontational tactics, independent research, and nameless informants.) Moreover, program officers for “long-term” human rights groups often take public positions on such issues as democratic elections, family law, criminal law, minority rights, social and economic rights, and human rights education—precisely the sorts of controversial rights where there may be publicly articulated differences between “international” norms and East Asian viewpoints (including official and independent voices). This kind of human rights activist, one hopes, may benefit from a discussion on East Asian approaches to human rights and democracy.

In this book, Demo visits three East Asian societies: Hong Kong, Singapore, and mainland China. The book is therefore divided into three parts, and in each location Demo engages in a dialogue on human rights and democracy with a prominent member of the society under question. In Hong Kong, Demo engages with a human rights activist and business consultant; in Singapore, he engages with a leading politician; and in mainland China, he engages with a political philosopher. The aim here is to create three plausible, situated characters that express three different viewpoints, thus rendering vivid the fact that there are a plurality of thought-provoking voices involved in the debate on human rights and democracy in East Asia. Of course there are many other viewpoints in the East Asian region, but this multiple-voices approach is arguably a better starting point than most works on the topic.

INTRODUCTION

In part I, Demo converses with a Hong Kong businessman and human rights activist named Joseph Lo.²⁰ This section (as noted above) consists of my critical reflections on several dialogues between Western and East Asian intellectuals concerning human rights and democracy in East Asia, and it is divided into two chapters.

Chapter 1, presents and defends relatively persuasive East Asian criticisms of traditional Western approaches to the subject. It is made explicit at the outset that the debate turns on the merits of publicly contested rights that fall outside the sphere of customary international law. The interlocutors then discuss three separate East Asian challenges: (1) the argument that situation-specific justifications for the temporary curtailment of particular human rights can only be countered following the acquisition of substantial local knowledge; (2) the argument that East Asian cultural traditions can provide the resources to justify and increase local commitment to practices that in the West are typically realized through a human rights regime (as opposed to the claim that human rights ideas and practices are distinctive products of the Western liberal tradition); and (3) the argument that distinctive East Asian conceptions of vital human interests may justify some political practices that differ to some extent from human rights regimes typically endorsed in Western liberal countries. The main point of this chapter is to show that the current West-centric human rights regime needs to be modified with input from East Asian voices.

Chapter 2, draws on the same three East Asian challenges to traditional Western approaches to human rights, though it focuses more specifically on the question of extending democratic rights to the East Asian region. The chapter begins by noting that most East Asian governments do not try to justify the most egregious instances of authoritarianism, such as the jailing of political dissi-

²⁰ It is worth noting that the Hong Kong setting for part I is largely incidental, since Lo is primarily the mouthpiece for some of my reflections on political dialogues between East Asian and North American intellectuals. (This part is set in Hong Kong simply because many examples are drawn from the Hong Kong context.) In that sense, Lo is less “situated” than the local characters in parts II and III.

INTRODUCTION

dents without trial and the sacking of opposition members from their jobs. The interlocutors then discuss three separate, publicly articulated East Asian challenges to dominant Western notions of democracy: (1) specific trade-off arguments for the curtailment of democratic elections (as in the Hong Kong case) that can only be refuted with the help of local knowledge; (2) the argument that justifications for democratic rights can vary from context to context (which sets up part II on Singapore); and (3) the argument that there may be legitimate constraints on democratic rule and that these constraints may vary from context to context (which sets up part III on democracy in China). The main point of this chapter is that democracy activists should be well informed about the local situation before making up their minds about the desirability of promoting publicly contested democratic rights in the East Asian context.

This part of the book, in sum, is meant to affirm the importance of local knowledge for defenders of contested human rights. East Asian governments and especially intellectuals have raised some plausible doubts about the universal validity of rights that fall outside the sphere of customary international law, and it is impossible to engage with their arguments without the help of local knowledge. This gray area of debate includes the attempt to universalize Western-style democratic practices, and there are powerful reasons for cross-cultural critics to refrain from firm judgments regarding the desirability of democracy in particular East Asian countries prior to local knowledge. This means more than the claim that democratic political systems can be implemented only under certain social conditions, and hence that the prodemocracy activist concerned with effectiveness should understand those conditions before prescribing the desired democratic outcome. Cross-cultural critics, it is argued, should also leave open the possibility of revising their political ideals in response to an engagement with the local culture.

So if there is a case to be made for democracy in East Asia, it will not be made by relying on the abstract and unhistorical universalism that often disables contemporary Western liberal democrats. Rather, it will be made from the inside, from specific examples and argumentative strategies that East Asians themselves use in everyday moral and political debate. This insight is applied

INTRODUCTION

to the cases of Singapore and mainland China in parts II and III of this book.²¹

Part II is a discussion between Demo and elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew on the pros and cons of democracy in Singapore. This section attempts to present and evaluate (what I take to be) Lee's most plausible arguments against democracy, understood in the minimal sense of free and fair competitive elections for political rulers. Lee is one of the world's most brilliant politicians (he scored a rare double first at Cambridge), and his views on international relations and economics are widely reported in the international media.²² More relevant for our purposes, Lee is Singapore's founding father, and he has been willing to articulate his case and attempt to justify his policies to the Singaporean public and the world at large. Moreover, he is famous for speaking his mind, and what he says in public does seem to reflect his "true" thoughts. Hence, it is generally sufficient to rely on Lee's actual speeches to make my points, though I occasionally add my own remarks for the purpose of illustrating his arguments and maintaining the flow of the dialogue.

Why is it important to take Lee's views so seriously? One reason is that his arguments often set the terms for political debate in Singapore. More surprisingly, perhaps, his antidemocratic views are often endorsed by well-intentioned, educated Singaporeans (including many of my former students at the National University of Singapore), and as a consequence they form part of the ideological apparatus that helps to sustain nondemocratic rule. In other words, he expresses the sorts of politically influential arguments that cross-cultural critics need to take into account as a pre-

²¹ Why did I choose these two case studies? The main reason is that I am most familiar with these two countries, having lived and worked in each country. Naturally I apply my "culturally sensitive" method to those societies I know best. Beyond this reason, Singapore is particularly significant because it is held up as a kind of political and economic model by many politicians and intellectuals in East Asia (with Lee Kuan Yew as the most prominent spokesman for the Singapore model), and China is significant as the world's most populous country and an emerging economic and political heavyweight.

For more detailed perspectives on human rights issues in other East Asian countries, the reader may want to consult Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell, eds., *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*.

²² Most recently, scores of Asian and Western leaders, journalists, and academics have sought Lee's views on the Asian economic crisis.

INTRODUCTION

condition for persuading most Singaporeans of the merits of Western-style democracy.

This section is divided into two chapters. Chapter 3 examines Lee's criticisms against arguments commonly made by contemporary Western liberal democrats. Against the view that democracy can be defended by appealing to the value of individual autonomy, or the idea that citizens should have the right to make the decisions that affect their lives, Lee argues that this value may not resonate to the same extent in a culture where people are less concerned about enacting freely chosen life-plans and more reluctant to voice their interests in the political arena. Moreover, the most common consequentialist arguments for democracy also fail to resonate in a context where a paternalistic nondemocratic regime provides such goods as social peace, basic civil liberties, and sound economic management. In short, it seems that the most typical arguments for democracy made by contemporary Western liberal democrats may not be nearly as persuasive in the Singaporean context.

Chapter 4 turns to a more promising consequentialist justification for democracy in the Singaporean context. On this communitarian view, democratic rights can be justified on the grounds that they contribute to strengthening ties to such communities as the family and the nation.²³ This chapter begins with the argument that democracy can provide an important safeguard against politicians intent on destroying the family unit. The focus then shifts to the question of strengthening commitment to the national political community. The problem, Demo explains, is that authoritarian political practices have undermined communal solidarity in

²³ It is important to note that this argument is meant to stand or fall independently of other communitarian arguments, including those defended in my earlier book, *Communitarianism and Its Critics*. Nor do I wish to defend a grand dichotomy between liberals and communitarians; quite the opposite, in fact, since chapter 4 draws on John Stuart Mill's argument that democracy can contribute to public-spiritedness. Mill is of course one of the founding fathers of liberal theory, but for whatever reason this argument for democracy is more often advanced by communitarians today. So when I seem to be criticizing the arguments of Western liberal democrats in chapter 3, I have in mind the dominant justifications for democracy deployed by contemporary Anglo-American liberal democrats. But I do not wish to deny that there are many liberal communitarians around as well. I count myself as one!

INTRODUCTION

Singapore. Next, Demo argues that there is a need to increase public-spiritedness for the following five reasons: (1) the need for the Singaporean government to live up to its communitarian rhetoric; (2) the link between civic virtue and long-term checks against political corruption; (3) the fact that communal solidarity can motivate fellow citizens to support a national welfare system that benefits the worst-off; (4) the fact that political alienation will cause some talented and creative individuals to leave the country; and (5) the link between patriotism and an effective and credible local defense force. These arguments are made by drawing upon particular features of the Singaporean context.

In short, strategic considerations of political relevance strongly speak in favor of communitarian justifications for democracy in Singapore, and perhaps in other East Asian societies as well. It is worth keeping in mind that communism in the Soviet Union collapsed swiftly due partly to the fact that its official defenders had lost faith in their own arguments, and it is not entirely implausible to believe that official defenders of “Asian communitarianism” (which is meant to suggest that Western-style democracy is not suitable for communitarian Asians) may also lose faith in their own arguments.²⁴ More realistically, perhaps, such communitarian arguments can aid critical intellectuals and prodemocracy opposition forces in East Asian societies (see the conclusion to chapter 4).

It is important to emphasize, however, that the debate over democracy in East Asia does not turn simply on the practical question of how best to persuade East Asians of the value of Western-style democracy (or drawing on East Asian cultural traditions only

²⁴ One might also note that apartheid collapsed so swiftly partly due to the fact that F. W. De Klerk lost faith in the arguments justifying institutionalized racism. Once De Klerk had been “converted,” he says that “History did present me with an opportunity to move faster and take my constituency with me but we had to seize the opportunity” (quoted in *South China Morning Post*, 30 January 1999, 15). In the same vein, it could be that Pinochet decided to relinquish some power once he became persuaded that the costs of brutal dictatorship outweighed the benefits. One could make the same argument about Chiang Ching-kuo’s decision to democratize Taiwan’s political structure. The general point is that it may not be a waste of time to pursue a discussion on the pros and cons of democracy with relatively reflective autocrats who have the power to effect political change.

INTRODUCTION

for the strategic purpose of finding different means to achieve the same end-goal). The more theoretically challenging question, perhaps, is whether one can identify aspects of East Asian cultural traditions relevant in the sense that they may provide a moral foundation for political practices and institutions different from Western-style liberal democracy.²⁵ This question is answered affirmatively in part III (chapter 5).

This section draws on the resources from Chinese political thought to develop a proposal for a political institution that is recognizably democratic but significantly different from Western models. It is assumed at the outset that the current political system in China is not stable for the long term, and that fairly radical alternatives for political reform may become relevant once the system opens up again.²⁶ This fictitious dialogue is set in Beijing, June 3, 2007, one day before a constitutional convention on political reform in China. In conversation with Demo, a professor of political philosophy at Beijing University named Wang presents and defends a political proposal for a democratic regime that combines elements of traditional Confucianism.²⁷ The chapter be-

²⁵ According to Chih-yu Shih, “nothing [in the current literature] about the Chinese democratic future seems to have a colour or configuration different from that of known democracies” (Shih, *Collective Democracy*, 324).

²⁶ It is worth recalling that radical political proposals were openly discussed (by independent intellectuals as well as “liberal” branches of the Communist party) in China prior to the June 4, 1989, massacre. At this time (mid-1999), it is possible to develop ideas for political change so long as reformers refrain from active efforts to challenge Communist rule.

²⁷ This proposal has been presented in Hong Kong, mainland China, Korea, and Japan. The audiences have been generally willing to engage with this idea, although one hostile and dismissive response was put forward, strangely enough, by a North American member of the audience who seemed to find it strange that a Westerner tries to defend a proposal meant to appeal to East Asian people’s sensitivities and imagination. I replied that my aim is to provide food for thought, and of course it is up to the members of the audience to decide if they like the proposal. I then asked the “politically correct” questioner how he would react if an East Asian intellectual, relatively well versed in American culture and motivated by a certain degree of love for that same culture, proposed a political institution designed to appeal to the American imagination and to help deal with a contemporary political crisis in the United States. Would he listen with an open mind, leaving open the possibility that he might be persuaded by the proposal, or would he dismiss the proposal out of hand simply on account of the East Asian intellectual’s racial and cultural background?

INTRODUCTION

gins with an argument that modern democratic societies would benefit from the political input of a capable and public-spirited “Confucian” intellectual elite. The interlocutors then consider and reject alternative proposals for combining democracy with rule by an intellectual elite such as plural voting schemes and functional constituencies. Drawing upon the ideas of radical seventeenth-century Confucian political thinker Huang Zongxi, Professor Wang then sketches out his own proposal for a bicameral legislature with a democratically elected lower house and an upper house composed of representatives selected on the basis of competitive examinations. Demo is eventually persuaded by the proposal, though he presses the point that the “House of Scholars” should be constitutionally subordinate to the democratically elected house.

A NOTE ON THE NOTES

While this book can be read (and hopefully enjoyed) without consulting the notes, I have relied on footnotes to provide the reader with evidence for things said by the protagonists. The notes also include marginal commentary and qualifications of some of the arguments and empirical claims made in the main text.