‘Asian values’ as reverse Orientalism: Singapore

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Abstract: It is possible to demonstrate, using Singapore as a key example, the way in which the attribution of a set of ‘Asian values’ represented a Western project which is best labelled ‘reverse Orientalism’. This process entailed the attribution of a set of cultural values to East and Southeast Asian societies by Western social scientists in order to contrast the recent dynamic progress of Asian development with the stagnation and social disorganisation of contemporary Western economies and societies. The contrast provided legitimation for some of the nation-building policies of political leaders in such countries as Singapore and was incorporated in attempts to identify and institutionalise core values.

Keywords: ‘Asian values’, Orientalism, Singapore, Weber

Beginning in the 1970s, but increasing in emphasis in the following two decades, the role of ‘Asian values’ has been advanced as an explanation for the rapid industrial growth of East and Southeast Asia. In addition, the notion of a set of distinctively ‘Asian values’ has been promoted by some political leaders in the Southeast Asian region – notably Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia – as an explanation not only of their economic success but also as a justification of their resistance to Western, and especially American, concepts of human rights (Moody, 1996: 167). This paper examines the discourse of Orientalism and its association with Max Weber, whose ghost stalks the ‘Asian values’ debate.

Just as Orientalism in its origins provided a discourse within which Western intellectuals could perceive the trajectory of their own culture by constructing an ‘Other’ with diametrically opposed values (Said, 1979), so the concept of ‘Asian values’ promotes a similar polarised contrast in which the positive and negative polarities are simply reversed (Hill and Lian, 1995: 194). The irony of this ‘180-degree flip-flop’ (Whyte, 1994: 40) lies in the origins of ‘Asian values’ as a largely Western social scientific artefact which was later adopted...
by Asian leaders in a nation-building process of ‘self-orientalisation’ (Sai and Huang, 1999: 164).

It is particularly appropriate to trace the evolution of the ‘Asian values’ debate in Singapore because there is wide consensus that Lee Kuan Yew has been one of the most prominent proponents of the claim that a discrete set of values is characteristic of East and Southeast Asian cultures. The more sceptical literature on ‘Asian values’ is replete with references to the ‘Singapore model’ (Ng, 1997: 20; Kausikan, 1997: 26), the ‘Singapore School’ (Dupont, 1996: 14; Lingle, 1998: 309) and the ‘Lee thesis’ (Sen, 1999: 89). More immediately, the concept of ‘Asian values’ has been deployed by Western observers as a weapon with which to castigate the perceived hubris of Asian leaders faced with the collapse of their economies. The following is a typical example from a British newspaper:

> For some years Western politicians and businessmen have been expected to listen penitently as East Asian leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore and Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia have lectured them on the supremacy of ‘Asian values’, by which they mean a fairly free-market economy controlled by a tightly knit political elite which the people fail to elect at their peril . . . Sooner or later the Asian economies are likely to revive, although the failure of many governments to recognise the scale of the problem, let alone their part in it, will delay recovery. Next time, however, we must not allow ourselves to be fobbed off with talk of ‘Asian values’ or deterred by claims that attempts to strengthen democracy constitute unacceptable interference. (*Independent on Sunday*, 11 January 1998: 4)

**UNDER WESTERN EYES**

The discourse of Orientalism has direct and contemporary relevance for the debate over alleged ‘Asian values’. It is possible to demonstrate, using Singapore as a key example, the way in which the attribution of a set of ‘Asian values’ represented a *Western* project which is best labelled ‘reverse Orientalism’. This process entailed the attribution of a set of cultural values to East and Southeast Asian societies by Western social scientists in order to contrast the recent dynamic progress of Asian development with the stagnation and social disorganisation of contemporary Western economies and societies. The contrast provided legitimation for some of the nation-building policies of political leaders in such countries as Singapore and was incorporated in attempts to identify and institutionalise core values.

By the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s there was considerable interest among Western social and political scientists, frequently acknowledging Weber’s Protestant Ethic thesis, on the central role of core values in modernisation scenarios. The seminal contribution to this approach was Bellah’s study of the role of religion in Tokugawa Japan (Bellah, 1957). In that work Bellah explicitly states the direction of his investigation:
The sociologist influenced by Max Weber’s great work on the relation of religion to the development of modern Western society, especially the modern economy, naturally wonders whether religious factors might also be involved in the Japanese case. The problem stated baldly is, was there a functional analogue to the Protestant ethic in Japanese religion? (Bellah, 1957: 2–3, my emphasis)

During the 1950s most social scientists still subscribed to the Weberian version of Orientalism, and thus saw Confucianism as a serious obstacle to economic development, but Bellah was one sociologist who saw Japan as an important exception (Whyte, 1994: 39). He detected in Confucianism one of the decisive mechanisms which Weber had found in Western Protestantism, namely an inner-worldly asceticism (Bellah, 1957: 195–196). Such a search for functional analogues or equivalents was to set the agenda for much subsequent research into the role of values in modernisation, for instance, McClelland’s use of the concept of ‘achievement motivation’ (McClelland, 1967).

A major transformation in Western discussions of ‘Asian values’ occurred in the pivotal year 1979 with the publication of three influential books. In the first of these, The Japanese Challenge: The Success and Failure of Economic Success, Herman Kahn and Thomas Pepper offered an assessment of the high rates of economic growth in East and Southeast Asia which owed a substantial part of its explanation to the significance of the Confucian cultural tradition. Their account concluded that neo-Confucian countries were ‘in many respects more adept at industrialization than predominantly Western countries’ (Kahn and Pepper, 1979: 144). Here can be seen the emergence of an explicit Eastern-Western positive-negative polarity.

In a second volume in the same year, World Economic Development 1979 and Beyond (Kahn, 1979), Kahn was unrestrained in his advocacy of neo-Confucian values in the process of industrialization. Under current conditions, he claimed, the neo-Confucian cultures of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore – together with the ethnic Chinese minorities in Malaysia and Thailand – had many strengths and very few weaknesses and, repeating the earlier claim, seemed ‘more adept at industrialization than the West’ (Kahn, 1979: 118). Kahn acknowledged the importance of Weber’s Protestant Ethic but then reversed it to introduce what he called the ‘Confucian Ethic’. He emphasized the personal qualities it encouraged – those of a hardworking, responsible, skilful and ambitious member of society who would contribute to the group rather than pursuing individual, selfish interests – and thus contributed to a society that was based on complementarity rather than the fractious society characterised by the Western pattern of interest groups (Kahn, 1979: 121).

The Weberian polarity was decisively reversed in contrasting the neo-Confucian ethic with its Western predecessor. Since the most vital issues in contemporary society centre on cooperation and organisational efficiency, he argued, the neo-Confucian cultures have great advantages. As opposed to the earlier Protestant ethic, the modern Confucian ethic is superbly designed to create and foster loyalty, dedication, responsibility, and commitment and to intensify identification with the organization and one’s role in the organization. All this

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makes the economy and society operate much more smoothly than one whose principles of identification and association tend to lead to egalitarianism, to disunity, to confrontation, and to excessive compensation or repression. (Kahn, 1979: 122)

For these reasons, Kahn predicted, the neo-Confucian cultures had potentially higher economic growth rates than other cultures.

To this contrast Kahn added a further negative feature of Western cultures which was to attract considerable attention in some versions of reverse Orientalism: they were, he claimed, ‘decadent’:

Young people appear, superficially, to be less patriotic than their parents and grandparents and also distinctly less willing to make sacrifices for the public interest or even their own careers . . . They are distinctly less willing to accept military training or any kind of onerous task or discipline, no matter how valid or important the local or national need. There is extreme hedonism, self-indulgence, decadence, and vice. There is general concern in all of the neo-Confucian societies, the Soviet Union, and East Germany, that some of these ‘diseases of the West’ be kept away from their own people. In this respect, the current Western campaign in favor of human rights may backfire badly because in many Confucian societies it looks like a campaign for selfish, self-indulgent, and reckless individualism and egoism. (Kahn, 1979: 125–126)

Having rehearsed what was to become the established rhetoric of those Asian leaders who sought to ‘inoculate’ their populations against undesirable Western values, Kahn proceeded to encapsulate the negative features of Western values in what he termed the ‘Fourteen “New” Emphases and Trends in U.S. Values’ (Kahn, 1979: 141). These included such corrosive values as risk avoidance, environmentalism, hedonism, excessive regulation, and concern with self. These he depicted as ‘sand in the gears’ of economic growth and he elaborated them at length, contrasting them with what he labelled the ‘Thirteen Traditional Levers’. These were presented as the historical basis of middle class American values which were all now under challenge. The latter included tradition, respect for authority, earning a living, economic rationality, the ‘Puritan ethic’, and high group loyalty. On examination they contain quite disparate elements, and one might speculate that this is perhaps because they are meant to signify not only the ‘world we have lost’ but also the contemporary values of successful neo-Confucian societies. Thus, while economic rationality and the ‘Puritan ethic’ form part of the Weberian paradigm of Western progressive values, respect for tradition and group loyalty are emphatically not components of the individualistic ethic he emphasised. Finally, by stark contrast with the less desirable value traits of American society, neo-Confucian cultures were singled out as ‘heroes of development’. In giving approval to the ‘extraordinary and attractive political philosophy’ of such societies, Kahn concluded on a personal note:

I hope the reader will excuse my almost childlike enthusiasm for these countries, but I have spent many years in trying to make various policies more rational; it is
nice to know that others are pursuing the same goal and even putting it into practice. (Kahn, 1979: 380)

The third of the influential Western books to appear in 1979 was *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* by Ezra Vogel, who was later to make a significant contribution to the ideological project of some political elites in Southeast Asia. The East-West dichotomy was encapsulated in the term ‘lessons’ and in the further claim that there were ‘costs’ entailed in an inadequate American response to the Japanese challenge. Citing the work of George Lodge, he noted that the individualism of the bygone days of free enterprise had now given way to a ‘communitarian vision’ in which the interests of the group or society took precedence (Vogel, 1979: 234–235). Though there were costs and dangers incurred in importing Japanese patterns into American enterprise, such as smothering individual rights, ignoring opposition, overconformity, and excessive nationalism, many of the Asian virtues could be imported because they were ‘surprisingly consistent with America’s basic values’ (Vogel, 1979: 255). Like Kahn, Vogel based his prescription on a perceived congruence between certain core values of an American past and those of contemporary Asian culture. Reverse Orientalism was thus invoked by Western observers as a reinstatement of their own indigenous tradition: as will be shown later, a parallel ‘revitalization’ movement was about to be initiated in Singapore.

Also published in 1982 was Hofheinz and Calder’s *The Eastasia Edge* which took a similar approach to that of Kahn and Vogel in maintaining that ‘Eastasia has an edge on us today because it is organized and thinks differently from the way we do’ (Hofheinz and Calder, 1982: 41). Confucianism, together with other ideological underpinnings, was seen by these observers as contributing to the strikingly shared patterns of behaviour and organisation across the countries of the Eastasia region. The authors acknowledged the insights of Max Weber and even of his colleague Ernst Troeltsch – and while they concluded that Eastasian history offered no direct analogy to the ethical transformation which characterised the capitalist development of Western societies they found a number of equivalents in Confucian philosophy (Hofheinz and Calder, 1982: 121): these included prudence and frugality, deferred gratification, and concern for the future of the group, which were seen as its principal contributions to a work ethic. Of particular interest was the book’s portrayal of Singapore as an outstanding example of Confucian virtues and its then leader Lee Kuan Yew as a quintessential Confucian leader – ‘austere, remote, authoritarian, and intensely concerned with national welfare’ (Hofheinz and Calder, 1982: 58). The moralism represented in public campaigns – such as those on family size and short haircuts – were also evinced as thoroughly Confucian in origin.

**SINGAPORE: PRAGMATIC AND SCEPTICAL**

Thus by 1982 Singapore had been depicted by influential Western observers as a distinctively Confucian society which embodied an ethos characterised by
‘Asian values’. For the next stage of the argument it is necessary to trace the discussion of core values among politicians and social scientists based in Singapore from the 1960s onwards. In this way I think it is possible to show that the construction of a distinctive set of ‘Asian values’, and in particular a set of values seen as specifically Confucian, only began in the late 1970s and that it coincided with – and in its Confucian dimension followed – the transmission of these representations by Western social scientists. In other words, at least in some measure it is appropriate to regard the rhetoric of ‘Asian values’ in Singapore as an ideological variant of the ‘looking-glass self’.

The initial value concerns of Singapore’s political elite were overwhelmingly pragmatic. After the trauma of separation from Malaysia in 1965 and the reversals and exigencies of the first decade of independence, the emphasis was on survival and on the pursuit of material goals. Lee Kuan Yew himself emphasised this in his advice to students at the Raffles Institution in a speech in mid-1969:

And by ‘right values’ I mean the values that will ensure you a reasonably secure, a relatively high standard of living which demands a disciplined community prepared to give of its best and ready to pay for what it wants … (quoted in Tamney, 1988: 111)

The extent of this pragmatism has been discussed elsewhere (Hill and Lian, 1995: 188–193) and there is not space to explore it fully, but it is important to note that by the early 1970s social scientific observers in Singapore were depicting an ‘ideology of pragmatism’ as the main legitimation of the nation-building process (Chan and Evers, 1973). The pragmatism of the People’s Action Party (PAP) was identified in the early 1970s as being entirely compatible with Weber’s category of purposeful-rational action (Chan and Evers, 1973: 317).

Discussions of values by social scientists in Singapore during the late 1960s and early 1970s were focused on the themes of national consciousness or identity and made no reference to the concept of ‘Asian values’. Among the more perceptive contributions were those of Alatas, who effectively uncoupled the concept of modernisation from that of Westernisation (Alatas, 1969: 221). He also provided a critical assessment of the relevance of the Weber thesis to an analysis of the differential economic development of Malays and Chinese, suggesting that structural as well as ideological factors were a key variable (Alatas, 1973).

Only in a volume published in 1977 did discussion turn to the topic of ‘Asian values’ and it is crucial to the present argument to note that among both social scientists and politicians the initial reception of the concept was deeply sceptical. In a contribution on ‘Asian Values and Modernization’ Ho elaborated on the ideals of modernisation and found most of them lacking in Asian countries – which, incidentally, he did not distinguish from other Third World societies (Ho, 1977); indeed his account adopted a number of the negative characteristics derived from the original content of Orientalism. In
Asian societies, for example, he found the rational injunctions of modernization undermined by superstition; the equalizing of economic opportunity negated by the ‘sort of caste system’ of Confucianism (Ho, 1977: 6) and a lack of innovation in the face of traditional life-styles.

If Singapore social scientists found little value in the discussion of ‘Asian values’ before 1980, so did its politicians. In the same 1977 edited volume on Asian Values and Modernization there is a decisive rejection of the concept by Rajaratnam, one of the founding group of PAP leaders and an articulate ideologist, who declared:

...I have very serious doubts as to whether such a thing as ‘Asian values’ really exists – or for that matter ‘Asian’ anything – Asian unity, Asian socialism, Asian way of life and so on. It may exist as an image but it has no reality. If it has any meaning at all it is merely a convenient way of describing the heterogeneous, conflicting and complex network of beliefs, prejudices and values developed in the countries which for geographical purposes have been grouped as being in Asia. Only as a geographical expression does the term ‘Asia’ have any reality.

So were I to talk about modernization (which though real is itself a very imprecise concept) and Asian values I would be talking about nothing in particular. (Rajaratnam, 1977: 95)

Instead, Rajaratnam concerned himself with the distinction between modernisation and Westernisation, dismissing the latter as either the pursuit of the latest fashion trends or as a source of phoney intellectual pretensions, and suggesting that if ‘Asian values’ were supposedly a barrier to modernisation, so were those Western values that proliferated corruption. Elsewhere, the same speaker characterised the prevailing Singaporean values as ‘moneytheism’ (Milne and Mauzy, 1990: 24).

Nor was Rajaratnam the only Singapore politician to speak candidly about wider social values. Of particular interest are the remarks of another of the founding group of PAP leaders, Goh Keng Swee – interestingly, an economist who was well versed in Weberian thought (Kwok, 1999) – because he was later to become intimately associated with the Confucian values project. In 1970, however, speaking to a student group on the subject of ‘The Hippie Threat’ and deploying his inimitably robust brand of irony and wit, he had observed:

If we are honest with ourselves, I think we can detect in contemporary Singapore a strange but striking similarity of intellectual climate and social values with Victorian England, together with much of the hypocrisies and cruelties of that age. (Goh, K.S., 1972: 176)

The statements contrast markedly with the legitimacy which was later assigned to ‘Asian values’ – and especially to Confucianism – as a source of ‘cultural ballast’ (Goh, K.S., 1979: 1-6) and of protection against the corrosive influence of perceived Western values. To what do we attribute this considerable shift in orientation?
‘ASIAN VALUES’ IMPORTED

The growing acceptance of the ‘Asian values’ construct that occurred at the end of the 1970s in part originated in a sense of cultural malaise. As Kuo describes it:

By the late 1970s, when most of the basic needs of the population had been fulfilled, there came the time for soul-searching and reflection, and there emerged a new and increased concern over the non-material (social and cultural) dimensions of nation-building. Alarmed by increasing (or at least socially more visible) numbers of crime, delinquency, drug-abuse, abortion and divorce (and despite the fact that the rates of such social indicators were comparatively low in Singapore compared to other equally urbanized societies), there emerged a collective sense of moral crisis, calling for collective action. (Kuo, 1992: 4)

Given the already noted uncoupling of modernisation and Westernisation it can be understood why the crisis was identified as one of ‘Westernisation’. Furthermore, this problem was seen to be more acute in Singapore than in other Asian societies because of the use of English as a common language. However, in the light of the subsequent discussion of allegedly ‘Asian’ – and specifically Confucian – values it is important to establish that before 1979 ‘Confucianism was not even a topic for public discussion in Singapore’ (Wong and Wong, 1989: 517).

Another reason for the growth of concern with ‘Asian values’ in the late 1970s was overwhelmingly pragmatic. Given Singapore’s dependence on foreign capital, the reduction of Western investment in Southeast Asia because of recurrent economic crises was a source of deep concern. Japan then emerged as an important new source of foreign investment, but the sustained resentment of Japanese wartime occupation necessitated a major government effort at rehabilitation. This was done through the reconstruction of history including two waxworks ‘surrender chambers’ on Sentosa island instead of the previous one depicting only the Japanese surrender in order to attract Japanese tourists. But there was another aspect to the strategy:

Ezra Vogel’s book which overtly celebrates every aspect of Japanese culture, Japan as Number One (1979), was sanctioned by state elites in Singapore as the official bible for all civil service bureaucrats to read and adhere to religiously. (Leong, 1997: 528)

Thus Vogel’s book played a key role in the reinvention of Asian identity.

Decadent Western elements had acquired a symbolic focus during the 1970s in the image of the long-haired hippie, embodying the philosophy of ‘patched-up jeans and patched-up souls’ (Gopinathan, 1988: 134). From the late 1970s the desired cultural values were increasingly labelled ‘Asian values’ and were claimed to include such traits as ‘thrift’, ‘industry’, and ‘filial piety’. Whether there existed in a readily identifiable form a set of values that could be seen as distinctly ‘Asian’ was, as has been shown, a matter of sceptical comment even
among senior government Ministers (see also Chua, 1985: 35) and the polarised conception of a set of desirable Asian values confronting the decadent lure of those imported from the West had attracted critical comment (Clammer, 1993). Nevertheless, attempts to articulate such values began in the latter part of the 1970s and became a major project during the 1980s. An early statement of the issue, using a distinctly medical metaphor, was made by Lee Kuan Yew in his National Day Speech in 1978. Arguing that Singapore had ‘already been infected’ by the West he suggested that the ‘antidote’ was the ‘strong assertion of the Asian values common to all Singapore’s ethnic groups, stressing the virtues of individual subordination to the community so as to counteract the disruptive individualism of western liberalism” (quoted in Berger, 1997: 270).

Although only brief attention can be given here to the details, the key date in the mobilisation of concern with cultural values was 1979 (for details, see Hill and Lian, 1995: 85–90; 196–205). The project to establish a set of core values in the process of nation-building attained great prominence in that year, mainly as a result of the two government reports, the first, which was chaired by Goh Keng Swee (the Goh Report) addressed the role of bilingualism and multiculturalism in schools, and the second (the Ong Report) explored the need for moral education. Bilingualism in particular was viewed as a means of protecting the young against the decadent influences of Westernization, as a medical metaphor employed by one proponent shows:

Bilingualism will serve to inoculate our young people against the epidemic of unwholesome fads and fetishes and make them understand that they are they, and we are ourselves. (quoted in Clammer, 1981: 233)

The goal of ‘inoculation’ provided the starting point for the policy of bilingualism and the later search for Asian values; thereafter the process developed into a search for an ideology to legitimate social discipline and an exploration of substitutes for the Protestant work ethic. It was also around this period that the government initiated an extensive programme of national campaigns such as the National Courtesy Campaign, Senior Citizens’ Week Campaign, and the Speak Mandarin Campaign (Kuo, 1992: 5).

The Goh Report dealt only briefly with Moral Education, since this was the remit of the second Report, but it did note that ‘One of the dangers of secular education in a foreign tongue is the risk of losing the traditional values of one’s own people and the acquisition of the more spurious fashions of the west’ (Goh, 1979: 1–5). The Report also noted the ineffectiveness of much of the existing moral education and civics material and suggested the need to instil a common set of values in order to ensure that a population of recent migrant origin would be willing and able to defend their collective interest. The solution in the Report’s view was not to teach moral values in the context of abstract ideas but in terms of great men in Asian history, and furthermore to do this in the language of the students’ ‘mother-tongue’: this, it was argued, would overcome the danger of ‘deculturisation’.
Lee Kuan Yew’s reply to the Report concentrated on its moral education aspect and summarised the characteristics of the good citizen in what might almost be a reverse image of Kahn’s undesirable young American (see above):

What kind of man or woman does a child grow up to be after 10–12 years of schooling? Is he a worthy citizen, guided by decent moral precepts? . . . the litmus test of a good education is whether it nurtures good citizens who can live, work, contend and cooperate in a civilised way. Is he loyal and patriotic? Is he, when the need arises, a good soldier, ready to defend his country, and so protect his wife and children, and his fellow citizens? Is he filial, respectful to elders, law-abiding, humane, and responsible? Does he take care of his wife and children, and his parents? Is he a good neighbour and a trustworthy friend? Is he tolerant of Singaporeans of different races and religions? Is he clean, neat, punctual, and well-mannered? (in Goh, 1979: iv–v)

At this point the proposal was made by Lee Kuan Yew of an amalgam of the best characteristics of eastern and western values, so that Confucian ethics, Malay traditions, and the Hindu ethos might be combined with more sceptical Western methods of scientific inquiry. The Ong Report on Moral Education which followed shortly afterwards reiterated the idea of an amalgam:

Emphasis should be placed on the inculcation of the desired Eastern and Asian moral concepts, values and attitudes so as to help in the preservation and strengthening of our cultural heritage. (Ong, 1979: 10)

and adoption of the mother tongue was seen as the most ‘efficient’ way of transmitting Asian moral values. The proposals in the Ong Report led to the rapid development, under the guidance of a Singapore Jesuit, of a moral education syllabus and curriculum (Gopinathan, 1988: 138).

In view of the prominence given by Western commentators to the Confucian dimension of the ‘Asian values’ project in Singapore, it is important to observe that the inclusion of Confucian ethics in the moral education syllabus was something of a hesitant afterthought. As announced in January 1982, only five religious subjects were to be offered – Bible knowledge, Buddhist studies, Hindu studies, Islamic religious knowledge, and World religions:

Confucianism, as a secular ethical system, could have no place as a part of the religious teachings. It was at the suggestion of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, and after spending ‘many of his wakeful hours and several sleepless nights’, that two weeks later in early February 1982, Goh [Keng Swee] announced that Confucian Ethics was to be included as an additional subject for those Chinese who might not be religiously inclined, ‘to give young Singaporeans a cultural ballast against the less desirable aspects of western culture’. (Kuo, 1992: 6)

A few days later Lee Kuan Yew reinforced the programme when, in a Chinese New Year Reception speech, he emphasised that
Our task is to implant these [Confucian] values into our children when their minds are young and receptive, so that when they grow out of their teenage years, these attitudes harden and are forged for a life-time. (quoted in Kuo, 1992: 6)

Thus Confucianism – supposedly the keystone of East Asian values – only became a major preoccupation of the Singapore government after 1982. Once the government had announced that Confucian ethics would be included in the Moral Education syllabus in secondary schools, eight ‘Confucian scholars’ (as they were labelled) from the United States and Taiwan were invited to Singapore in 1982 for consultation (Gopinathan, 1988: 139–140). The necessity of importing such expertise is a further indication of the hitherto low level of interest in Confucianism within Singapore.

However, support for the Confucian curriculum thereafter attracted a disproportionate share of the resources devoted to the moral education programme, and the establishment of the Institute of East Asian Philosophy in 1983 to encourage the study of Confucian ideas, with Goh Keng Swee, by then retired from politics, as its first chairman, and Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong – who was responsible for the 1979 Report on Moral Education – as vice-chairman, was especially important in providing the movement with legitimacy (Kuo, 1992: 9). The Confucian project was enhanced by the now well established perception that other economically successful Asian countries – Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan – had a Confucian tradition of ethics. Confucian ethics, it was thought, were playing a similar role to that played by the Protestant ethic in the West: what was important about Confucianism was not just its emphasis on hard work but its stress on social obligations.

Having based the Moral Education project on the compulsory teaching of Religious Knowledge, introduced in 1984, within little more than two years the problematic nature of religion had been highlighted in the wider society. The emerging crisis of religion and the Singapore government’s response to it in the period 1986–89 are the subject of more detailed analysis elsewhere (Hill and Lian, 1995: 205–210; Hill, 1997; 1999) but in 1989 the decision was made to terminate the project. There is not space here to examine the political elite’s search for an alternative source of civic morality in the Shared Values project, but it was inaugurated in October 1988 when the First Deputy Prime Minister (and Prime Minister designate) Goh Chok Tong gave a speech on ‘Our national ethic’ to the PAP Youth Wing. In it he noted that the values of Singaporeans were being transformed as a result of their daily exposure to external influences:

Relying on the two major concepts of ‘individualism’ and ‘communitarianism’ used in George C. Lodge and Ezra F. Vogel’s book, Ideology and National Competitiveness: An Analysis of Nine Countries, Goh argued that during the last decade ‘there has been a clear shift in our values’ from communitarianism to individualism especially among the younger Singaporeans. (Quah, 1990: 1)

This value-transformation was regarded with concern by the government because it was seen to influence national competitiveness, prosperity, and even survival as a nation. It was thought that since Singaporeans shared the core
values of hard work, thrift, and sacrifice with Japanese, Koreans, and Taiwanese these should be somehow enshrined in a national ideology. This ideology would be inculcated in schools, homes, and workplaces as the Singaporean ‘way of life’ and was necessary for two reasons: the first was to immunise the population from undesirable alien influences; and the second was to bind them together as a nation. Thus Lodge and Vogel’s concepts of ideological strength and communitarianism were directly incorporated in the construction of a national ideology. As we have noted elsewhere, there is a certain symbolism in the fact that just as the transition to a new cohort of political leaders was occurring, the configuration of core national values was being modified from an overtly Confucian design to a refurbished global systems model (Hill and Lian, 1995: 210).

This paper has traced the construction of ‘Asian values’ to a version of reverse Orientalism which began with a search for surrogates to the Protestant ethic and subsequently developed into a canonisation of Confucianism as the new motor of Asian capitalist development. Seeking an ideological component to the nation-building project that would secure collective social discipline and offer cultural ballast against perceived undesirable aspects of Western culture, the political leadership in Singapore directly imported elements of the Western construct. The project has much in common with the ‘invention of tradition’ which has historically accompanied nation-building (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). In Singapore, however, the underlying pragmatism of the ruling political party is still an unmistakable part of the enterprise.

NOTE

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