ASIAN COMMUNISM:
ENIGMA VARIATIONS

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Occasional Paper 05/93
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ASIAN COMMUNISM: ENIGMA VARIATIONS

In contrast to European communism, the most striking characteristic of Asian communism in 1992 is, of course, that it is still there. This fact leads immediately to the question of whether Asian communism is simply slower in its development than European communism, and will eventually undergo changes similar to those occurring in Europe, or whether Asian communism is a different species which may prove hardier or more adaptable. This question is rooted in the basic enigma of Asian communism, namely, the success of an alien ideology and organizational structure which seemed originally to be ill-adapted for non-Western, rural, pre-capitalist environments. What happens now that the Soviet Union, the model and source of support for Asian revolutions, has rejected communism and has disintegrated? The fall of European communism cannot but be a traumatic and redefining experience for other communist countries, but does it presage their own fate, or does it instead become a "teacher by negative example?" And to the extent that Asia delays or does not follow the European model, is its difference due to a kind of growth defect, the presence of an inhibitor of normal political development, or does it in fact have another path or set of paths?

The questions just raised do not yet have answers; they are core problems not only for external observers seeking to understand Asian communism, but for the participants themselves, from Deng Xiaoping and Kim Il Sung to exiled dissidents. The task here is to specify the differences between Asian communism and European communism, and among Asian communist countries, so that the dimensions of these problems may be better grasped.
The first section discusses the differences between Asian communism and European communism. While acknowledging the somewhat artificial character of "Asian communism" as a category, the region as a whole does have important differences from European communism and post-communism in the areas of socio-economy, international relations, and political culture. The second section discusses the differences among the Asian communist countries. It attempts to sketch the essential characteristics of each ruling Asian communist party-state within a general typology of communist regimes. The third section analyses the basic post-revolutionary political challenges and problems of regime transition. Finally, the conclusion returns to the general question of the fate of communism in Asia.

The underlying assumption here is that the future of Asian communism will be co-determined by its general situation, by the specific capacities and features of each regime, and by the generic political dynamics of communist party-states. The argument is, first, that the differences between European and Asian communism with regards to level and structure of economic development, vulnerability to the end of the Cold War, and political culture account for the disparity between what has happened in Europe as a region and what has happened (or not happened, or not yet happened) in Asia. One important situational difference between European and Asian communism is the presence of the European post-communist example for Asia, an example that proves the possibility of major change and at the same time increasingly demonstrates its dangers.

Secondly, the diversity of Asian communist regimes requires an analysis of each country’s political situation. China, Vietnam, Mongolia, North Korea, Cambodia and Laos are even less uniform in their histories, regime capabilities and prospects than were the
European communist countries, and so they differ both in their vulnerability to post-
communist revolution and in their probable future paths. National diversity, however, is not
simply a product of national idiosyncrasy. I argue that the primary determinant of regime
capacity is the nature of the founding revolution in each country, and in this respect Asian
communist countries can be compared not only with one another, but they can be placed in a
general taxonomy of communist revolutions and be compared with individual European
communist countries. In the spectrum of communist regimes, it is clear that externally
imposed regimes, like those of Cambodia and Eastern Europe, are more vulnerable to
thorough post-communist revolutions than states founded on the broad popular mobilization
of rural revolution such as China and Vietnam.

The third thesis is that, despite the differences in regime capacity, there are
underlying dynamics at work in all Asian communist countries which produce perhaps
inexorable political pressures. These dynamics are found in communist countries in general,
but the focus of the discussion in this paper will be on their effects in Asia. The most
important common problem is the failure of any Marxist-Leninist regime to continue its
revolutionary dynamic by striding forward toward the goal of communism. Since such
historic leadership is the basic justification of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the mounting
sense of revolutionary failure leads to a postrevolutionary syndrome of disillusionment,
hypocrisy, corruption, and difficulties of leadership transition.

Besides the postrevolutionary syndrome, Asian communist regimes face a variety of
pressures from a more complex society, beginning with the tendency for an informal
economy to emergence at the fringes of the state economy and developing into the situation
of a mixed economy with a relatively inefficient state economy in the center surrounded by a
rapidly growing peripheral economy. While reform politicians in China and Vietnam might
acknowledge and permit the mixed economy to develop, the needs of the peripheral economy
are not well served by the state, and so it was not surprising that the "cityfolk" (shimin)
emerged as an ally of the students in the 1989 demonstrations at Tiananmen. Lastly, Asian
communist regimes face some common transitional contradictions, including the tendency for
strong regimes to remain complacent and weak regimes in crisis to make risky compromises,
and the tendency for both the government and the opposition to take rigid, all-or-nothing
positions. As a result, a goal which would probably be satisfactory to all major participants,
namely, a constitutional state with a hegemonic but not monopolistic communist party, may
be difficult to obtain.

In brief, the paper presents regional differences between European and Asian
communism, national differences among Asian communist countries, and underlying common
problems of Asian communist countries. Each of these dimensions is significant for the
future of Asian communism, but their complexity makes difficult the projection of future
scenarios. Prognostications are further complicated by the role of historical conjuncture and
the vulnerability of these regimes to political crisis. Nevertheless, it is clear that the
economic, international and cultural contexts of Asian communism present a different field of
possibilities from those of Europe, and that major changes have already occurred in the
ideology and economics of Asian communism. From the perspective of Marxism-Leninism
and of socialist command economics, Asia is already post-communist. But it has become
more Asian rather than more European as a result, and whatever the future this trend is likely to continue.

I. Contrasting European and Asian Communism

The diversity of Asian communism is far more impressive than its uniformity. It would be hard to imagine more disparate ideologies than those of the Indonesian Communist Party and the Khmer Rouge, or more different styles of leadership than those of Ho Chi Minh and Kim Il Sung.\(^1\) Within India, the establishment communists of Kerala and the rural revolutionary Naxalites of the northeast are even further apart politically than they are geographically. Even if we restrict our purview to communist regimes, the differences between Mongolia, North Korea, China, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia could only seem small to someone who did not know them.

What, then, is Asian communism? The only reasonable answer is startling in its simplicity: *Asian communism is not European communism!* The more Eurocentric ones notion of communism, the more homogeneous and clustered Asian communism appears. Since Eurocentrism has been heightened by the extraordinary changes there, Asian communism seems homogeneous in its lack of structural reform.

In a more positive vein, the discussion of Asian communism in general only makes sense if it is counterposed to European communism in general, and this juxtaposition does shed some light on the situation of each. This section will first discuss the different economic contexts of Asia and Europe, stressing the difference in general economic level and the diversity of current economic prospects. Then the international context will be discussed,
beginning with Asia's different relationship to the Cold War, followed by a consideration of the different alignment of external models, most obviously Japan and the "four tigers" (South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore). Lastly, differences in political culture will be discussed. The differences between the ideological role of Marxism-Leninism in Asia and Europe will be discussed under this heading as well as the more familiar differentiation between Confucian and Western politics. My discussion will rely more heavily on China and Vietnam than on Mongolia, North Korea, Laos and Cambodia. This is due to the availability of information and my own expertise, but it might be partially justified by the fact that China and Vietnam together comprise 97% of the population of Asian communism.

Economic Context

The two major economic differences between European and Asian communism are first, that the level of economic development in Asia is markedly lower, and second, the Asian economies, especially China, have been performing better than their European counterparts. Both of these differences would tend to stabilize Asian communism.

The average per capita Gross National Product for Asian communist countries in 1989 was US$573, while the average for European communist countries was ten times greater at US$5760. If we weight these averages by population the difference is even more impressive: Asian communism's per capita GNP becomes US$360 and Europe's becomes twenty-two times higher at US$7946.² These current disparities reflect the disparities in starting points rather than a much better relative long term performance by European communism.
There are manifold implications of the general difference in economic level. First, agriculture plays a more significant role in the Asian economies. The percentage of Gross Domestic Product derived from agriculture is 32% and 48% for China and Vietnam respectively, and is 11% and 14% for Bulgaria and Hungary, two relatively agricultural countries in Eastern Europe. But agriculture's share in GDP understates the societal disparity. In a country like China agriculture is much less efficient as a commercial producer and is much more engaged in directly sustaining the rural population. The rural socio-economy is thus much larger, more localistic, and more distinctive in mentality and interests from the urban population. It cannot be as active in national politics as urban residents, but for that very reason it tends toward a non-political conservatism stressing the maintainance of societal order.

The leading role of rural reform and decollectivization in China and Vietnam implies that the rural influence on current politics is not simply that of a traditional "peasant culture." Nevertheless, the political pressures for further reform are concentrated in the cities. During the demonstrations in Beijing in 1989 the word shimin (cityfolk, civilian, but also bourgeois in its old sense of urban resident) attained instant popularity as a self-description of the supporters of the student demonstrations. Moreover, descriptions of the national support for student demonstrations in 1989 show it to be extremely widespread, reaching down to the county towns, but it was still an overwhelmingly urban movement in which rural participants appeared as oddities. This shows a certain resonance between current events in China and the bourgeois revolutions that founded modern Europe, a resonance the highlights the gulf between contemporary European and Asian communism.
Secondly, the issues and crises faced by countries at lower levels of economic development are more basic than those confronting more advanced countries. In Vietnam only 35% of urban households have indoor plumbing, including only 46% in Hanoi. The need to increase agricultural production is well understood by those who have known and still fear famine, and the establishment of basic health and educational facilities is a clearer and more concrete task than improving their efficiency. In general, Asian communism has had to cope with *vital issues*, while European communism has been beyond these issues for a generation, and has had to use central mechanisms to cope with more sophisticated *quality of life issues*. The adoption and pursuit of vital issues as state goals are less problematic than the state's attempt at managing more problematic and complex undertakings, and positive results are more obvious.

[Figure 1 here]
Figure 1: Life Expectancy Increase
Communist Countries, 1960, 1975, 1989

China
N. Korea
Mongolia
Vietnam
Cambodia
Laos
Albania
Bulgaria
Czechoslovakia
E. Germany
Hungary
Poland
Soviet Union
Romania
Yugoslavia


Figure 1 illustrates the relative progress in vital issues among communist countries. Life expectancy is the ultimate "bottom-line" statistic for the delivery of basic human services, but increases in life expectancy above age 70 become increasingly difficult to obtain. They are also arguably less pressing than adding decades to the life of the average 40-year-old, or organizing effective vaccination programs against preventible childhood diseases. To compare China with the United States, the US reached China's 1960 life expectancy of 51 in 1911, and achieved China's 1989 life expectancy of 70 in 1961, accomplishing in fifty years what China accomplished in thirty. Achievements in medical technology have made a large difference, but technology alone does not explain progress. American blacks achieved a life expectancy of 52 in 1933, and as of 1990 have not yet achieved a life expectancy of 70. European communism's existing level of achievement on vital issues (taking 1960 as the starting point) has had the paradoxical effect of making significant further progress more difficult, while Asian communist countries are only now reaching this plateau. Vietnam's addition of 21 years to life expectancy since 1975 is probably the world's most dramatic example of a "peace dividend."

The other side of the contrast in life expectancy is the pressure of population growth, a serious problem in Mongolia and the Southeast Asian countries and controlled only by draconian policies in China. In Europe the problem is rather population decline and the resulting shift in the age balance of the population, and frustrations caused by quality of life issues, especially inadequate housing, are held responsible.
Life expectancy is only the most general expression of the responsiveness of Asian communism to a greater urgency of existing problems and a higher ceiling of possible accomplishment. Daily calorie supply in China in 1965-1989 went from 1931 calories per person to 2632, an increase of 36%. This accomplishment moved China from national nutrient deficiency to sufficiency, while Hungary’s 14% increase to 3601 calories during the same period was significant primarily in terms of agricultural exports. Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are still in the danger zone of agricultural production in which output and distribution directly affect the extent of chronic and acute malnutrition. Such tasks are natural items for the agenda of a Marxist-Leninist party-state, even if one has misgivings about the efficacy of their undertakings. It would be hard for even the most committed political demonstrator to argue that such concerns should not have a priority.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>HDI RANK</th>
<th>RANK DIFF GNP/c-HDI</th>
<th>GROUP AVERAGES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CZECH</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Average HDI rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUNGARY</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Average GNP/cap rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Average difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BULGARIA</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YUGOSLAVIA</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLAND</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALBANIA</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROMANIA</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>-8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ASIA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N KOREA</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Average HDI rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHINA</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Average GNP/cap rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MONGOLIA</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Average difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIET NAM</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAOS</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMBODIA</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The Human Development Index (HDI) is an inversion of a composite index of deprivation in three areas: life expectancy, education, and income. It was first used by the Human Development Report 1990. Rankings are from a list of 160 countries. A positive rank difference (column 2) means that the country’s relative performance on the HDI is better than its relative societal wealth as measured by GNP per capita.


We have discussed the rate of progress in providing for vital issues and of movement from below a threshold of sufficiency to above it. Table 1 addresses the question of general performance in basic services relative to societal wealth. The framework of comparison is not only European and Asian communist countries, but also both groups to the rest of the world. Clearly communist countries as a group have done significantly better than the rest of the world in providing basic human services with the societal resources at hand. For example, Albania’s neighbor on the Human Development Index scale is Kuwait, a country of significantly greater societal wealth. Romania is the only communist country whose relative
societal wealth exceeds its performance in human services. The human services level at hand in Europe is higher in every case than that of Asian communist countries. However, China and Vietnam have done spectacularly better than their resource availability would predict in providing basic services.

Thirdly, although the economic problems caused by restricting incentive and entrepreneurship can be severe in a less developed economy, the problems caused by the incapacity of a centralized system to handle complexity should be less severe. One reason is that the centralized system is less likely to be able to assert the same degree of control over a less commercialized and more localized economy, and would have fewer modern resources to do so. To take the most impressive example, although China had no ideological hesitations about central control, even at the height of leftistism in the early 1970s its economic mechanism was more flexible than that of the Soviet Union. Planning guidelines were not as taut, there fewer products subject to unified distribution, and there were thousands of small-scale enterprises operating outside the central plan. Another reason is that the tasks of basic construction discussed above appear to require a coordinated effort. Even with China’s horrendous failures in the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, its accomplishments from 1949 to 1979 are notable, especially in areas of public welfare, and compare favorably to non-communist countries with similar initial levels of resources and problems. Of course, success in basic construction ipso facto creates a more complicated economy in which the inefficiencies of central management become an increasing burden.

As the last point implies, the recent rates of growth of Asian communist countries, and especially China, has been greater than that of European communist countries. While
the primary political economic problem in Europe in the 1980s was stagnation, that of China was coping with rapid growth. None of the other Asian communist countries did as well as China over the decade, and the Indochinese countries were often close to the edge of insufficiency, but significant rates of growth were achieved generally, in contrast to European stagnation. However, the economies of Mongolia and North Korea have been heavily dependent on the Soviet Union for aid and trade, and since 1989 their economies have been in disarray as a result of Soviet cutbacks and the collapse of the Russian market. The economies of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were also severely affected in 1990-91.

In general, the developing countries of East Asia, both communist and non-communist, did better than the industrial countries as a whole during the 1980s. For 1980-89, the average annual percentage growth of GDP in East Asia was 6.2%, while it was 2.3% for industrial countries. The World Bank projects that East Asian GDP will grow at 4.2-5.3% in the 1990s, as compared to 1.8-2.5% for industrial countries. The situation is not so favorable for other developing areas.

As Nick Lardy pointed out in a contribution to the previous workshop in this series, considerable credit for China’s economic success in the 1980s in contrast to Soviet problems with perestroika is due to China’s pragmatic pursuit of reform. Lardy argues that because China did not have a grand plan, but proceeded piecemeal and responded to the success and failure of policies, it was able to put into effect more daring reforms. Moreover, the reformers were fortunate to have started with agricultural decollectivization because success in this area created their basic momentum. Without questioning the importance of these factors, I would suggest that this successful leadership direction was conditioned by the fact
that, given the level of the Chinese economy and earlier leftist policies, the restoration of incentives and permission for entrepreneurial activity could have a tremendous effect without raising the more complicated and riskier tasks associated with switching the state economy to a market basis. I am not sure that Gorbachev had that option in economic policy.

The economies of Asian communist countries are not without their problems. For China, the unevenness of modernization between localities is creating new tensions. To some extent the tensions are competitive, such as those between Guangzhou and Shanghai. On basic issues such rivals would stand together. But the difference of interests between coastal and hinterland provinces may be more serious, and there are also tensions between central control and provincial autonomy. Similarly, important differences in economic development exist within Vietnam between the North and the South, and greater international openness will probably enlarge and complicate the disparity. Nevertheless, such problems will remain a far cry from the regional separatism problems of the Confederation of Independent States, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The major immediate problem for Mongolia, North Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia is that of abrupt reorientation from economic dependence on the Soviet Union. Until 1991 the Soviet Union was the major trade partner and/or aid supplier, usually as the source for such vital and expensive items as petroleum and fertilizer. These countries have been left in the lurch and must come up with other sources, and they still owe the heirs of the Soviet Union large debts for past deliveries. This increases the economic urgency of opening to the West, and also to China, though China is not likely to be persuaded to assume large and demonstrably unrewarding burdens of aid.
International context

The international context of Asian communism differs in two major ways from that of European communism. First, Cold War polarization had a different effect in Asia. Although the Korean War and the American war in Indochina were two of the Cold War's major events, the tension between the United States and the Soviet Union was not the defining international concern in the Pacific that it was for Europe. Secondly, the immediate external referents for Asian communism are different. Taiwan, South Korea and Thailand present an economic challenge, but their politics are not (or not yet?) clear cases of polyarchy.

The national legitimacy of Eastern European governments was fundamentally compromised by Stalin and Zhdanov in the 1940s, and their subjugation was reiterated in the repression of Hungary in 1956 and of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The yoke rested more lightly on a traditionally pro-Russian country like Bulgaria than it did on Poland, but the external reliance on Soviet power made the Eastern European regimes stand with one foot on domestic achievements and one foot on the Cold War environment. While some of the regimes in Asia were as economically dependent on the Soviet Union as those of Eastern Europe (Mongolia, North Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia), they were not as politically dependent.  

The Cold War in Asia has been complicated by the presence of China, which from the early 1950s claimed a special role of leadership in Asia and from 1960 to 1989 was in hostile competition with the Soviet Union. The simultaneity of improvement of Soviet-United States relations and Soviet-Chinese relations confuses the responses to change, but if
we hypothesize a situation in which Soviet-US relations improved but Soviet-Chinese
relations remained hostile, the Soviet Union doubtless would have continued to support its
Asian allies and they could have continued their alignments of the 70s and 80s. As it is, the
other Asian communist countries are scrambling for better political relations with both China
and the West. The collapse of the Soviet Union certainly increases the significance of
relations with China for the Asian communist countries, and indeed for the Central Asian
parts of the Confederation of Independent States as well. Fortunately, better relations with
China and with the West are not mutually exclusive.

The effect of the end of the Cold War on China itself is far more ambiguous. The
combination of the end of the Cold War and international reaction to Tiananmen appear to
have raised China’s consciousness of the importance of Asia—hardly the effect that these
events have had on the rest of the world. There has been a sea change in its relations with
Southeast Asia, including normalization of relations with Singapore and Indonesia in 1990
and now normalization with Vietnam. China now appears less confident than it was of the
roles of the United States and of Japan in Asia, and it is likewise less confident of the
stability of its international relations. Although international openness and peaceful economic
competition remain the watchwords of China’s foreign policy, it is concerned about the
volatility of the future implicit in the end of the Cold War.

A second important difference in international context between Asian communism and
European communism is that they have different external standards for judging the efficacy
of their political economic systems. For example, Finland is likely to be the standard by
which Estonia judges its success or failure, while Thailand would be more important for
Vietnam. Disparities in economic performance between various communist countries and their closest non-communist referent countries are displayed in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communist</th>
<th>GNP Per capita, referent 1989</th>
<th>Non-communist referent</th>
<th>Disparity factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Southern European</td>
<td>3954</td>
<td>10215 Greece, Italy</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern European</td>
<td>6701</td>
<td>17623 FRD, Fr. UK</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>9211</td>
<td>20910 US</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>6000 Taiwan</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>985</td>
<td>4964 South Korea</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>1220 Thailand</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Southern European communist countries are Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania, northern are East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. The "Disparity Factor" is the referent GNP per capita divided by that of the communist country or group. A disparity factor of 1 would indicate equality; a disparity factor of 10 would mean that the GNP per capita of the referent was ten times higher.


As Table 2 makes clear, the Asian referents are even less forgiving than the European ones as far as comparative economic performance is concerned. The disparity factors are much greater in Asia, and they are not decreasing. In the case of the Koreas, it is estimated that a German-style reunification would cost South Korea US$ 140 billion in the first three years alone (with a 1989 GNP of $210 billion), and the total reconstruction bill over the
decade would be $250-300 billion. It boggles the imagination to think of what Chiang Kai-shek’s dream of reconquering the mainland would cost.

However, the desire of European communism to imitate the West stemmed from more than good example. Large hard-currency debts were owed by many countries, and the only hope for either clemency or repayment was more openness to the West. Such is not the case in Asia except for North Korea, which has shown a distinctly non-capitalist attitude concerning repayment. Vietnam owes its largest debts to the Soviet heirs, though it would dearly like to owe more to the West. China’s debts are still well within its fiscal capacities. So reform aspirations in Asia are still more induced by evident opportunities rather than pushed by existing indebtedness.

More importantly, the Asian referents do not present the same myth of market economy governed by multi-party democracy as do the European referents. The economic lessons of Taiwan, South Korea and Thailand concern attracting international capital and participating in international markets, and Asian communist countries are learning the lesson. Even North Korea is considering the establishment of Special Economic Zones and inviting South Korean investment. The political lessons of non-communist success in Asia concern the stability of governments rather than the roil of polyarchy. Conversely, the Asian reaction to Beijing’s crackdown at Tiananmen was notable for its mildness, except for Hong Kong.

Asian communism’s most recent and perhaps most important referent is the fate of European communism itself. The post-communist revolution in Europe inspires some by demonstrating the possibility of drastic change, but the picture of economic collapse and
national disintegration is especially frightening to less developed countries. If the European post-communist world heals its ethnic divisions and takes off economically it will stand as conclusive proof of the wisdom of transition. Until then, however, even radical reformers and dissidents in China and Vietnam are concerned about plunging their countries into such political and economic turmoil.

Political culture

The question of political cultural characteristics of Asian communism is an important but vexed one. Clearly there are behavioral and valuational differences between Asia and the European world, and also differences between Asian communism and European communism. It is more difficult to specify these differences and their operational relationship to a characteristic macro pattern (Confucianism, for instance), and more difficult still to demonstrate that these differences and the macro pattern itself are not the result of other environmental factors. But most arguments based on political culture do not take this difficult and narrow logical path; rather, their argument is based on the general plausibility of a broad sketch. My purpose here is to trim the over-explanatory generalizations and stereotyping and still highlight some of the historical and ideological differences between Asian communism and European communism.

The anti-capitalist, communalist, non-Faustian, non-adversarial, familial proclivities of Asia are by no means peculiar there. Indeed, the cultural peculiarity lies rather with the modern, individualist West. The restless self-centeredness of Faust, faithless to any external bonds, from family to God, redeemed by a total dedication to self-fulfilling activity, is a
cultural archetype invented by the modern West, but even at home it has always been in
tension with romantic communalism, social criticism and the actual bondedness of ordinary
life. From the reactions of Hesiod and Solon to the polarization of Athenian society by the
invention of money in the seventh century BC to the pro-whale exploits of Greenpeace,
values contrary to those of technology, wealth, power and material progress have remained a
part of the West.15 The development of Western society from community (Gemeinschaft) to
impersonal, market-based society (Gesellschaft) was first described by Ferdinand Tönnies,
and he saw the dis-integrating divisiveness of modern society as its tragic flaw.16 The
distinguished economist Werner Sombart coined the term "late capitalism" (Spätkapitalismus)
before the First World War based on a similar conviction that the political economy based on
private ownership had run its course. Although the dominant modern Western cultural model
is a multifaceted rugged individualism at the micro level and market capitalism at the macro
level, the salience of this model varies from country to country in the West and it is not
unchallenged. It is hardly surprising that in non-Western countries, whose first experiences
with possessive individualism were with its heel and grasping hands rather than with its
rewards, the critical, communalist aspect of Western culture, whether it be religion or
Marxism, would be more attractive.

Nevertheless, I would hardly argue that non-Western countries have simply
emphasized recessive traits of Western culture and that their own cultural and historical
backgrounds are irrelevant. For China, North Korea, Vietnam, and to some extent
Mongolia, the traditional political culture was Confucian, a cultural background also shared
with Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and the overseas Chinese. Of course, the establishment of
communist regimes meant a more radical and enforced break with traditional ideology than the erosion at the hands of pluralistic and materialistic forces occurring in non-communist Asia.

The significance of the rejection of Confucian ideology differed among Asian communist countries. China was the most radical rejector, because China's vulnerability to the power of the West was attributed to the failings of its traditional culture. In the first decades of this century it was common in China to contrast the strength and enlightenment of the West and to the passivity of the East, and to demand the rebirth of a young China informed by science and democracy and arising from the ashes of Confucianism.¹⁷ Chiang Kai-shek's attempt to promote neo-Confucianism through the New Life Movement in the 1930s only served to highlight the gulf between traditional Confucianism and progressive forces in China. New interpretations of Confucianism, from Kang Youwei to Liang Shuming, and continuing to contemporaries such as Tu Wei-ming, have been a significant influence on Chinese intellectual life, but since the New Culture Movement early in the century the center stage of Chinese consciousness has been occupied by Western ideas and models. Chinese communism was the culmination of progressive anti-traditionalism, though at the same time it re-established a closed Chinese polity.¹⁸ Confucianism was also criticized in Korea for the same reasons, and the failure of the Yi dynasty was blamed on its ideological bankruptcy.¹⁹ By contrast, in Vietnam the traditional order had been overwhelmed by the French, and the heroism of local mandarins in resisting the foreign invaders was inspirational to progressives fighting for national liberation. Although it would be difficult to term Vietnamese communism more Confucian than Chinese communism (since
it, too, is based on the rejection of feudalism as well as capitalism), it has been less anti-
traditional.20

But even as Asian communism pushed off from a discredited tradition, it continued to
exist in a world of common assumptions, values, institutions and political images set by
tradition. The act of rejection could not change its parentage. I have argued elsewhere that
in China there were five major traditional residuals in the political orientation of
progressives, including assumptions concerning the function of the state, its unity, the role of
intellectuals, and the idea that the state is self-controlled through virtue rather than externally
controlled through contract. The most fundamental continuity, however, is that the starting
point of political norms remained the communal good rather than individual autonomy.21
These residuals are basic enough not to be the private preserve of Confucians, but they do
provide a common heritage of political values in East Asia. The assumptions shared with
non-communist Asian countries will continue to shape Asian communist countries in
directions different from Europe, although this will be masked because one of those common
Asian values is a deference to the cultural priority of the West.

Even the shared intellectual framework of Marxism-Leninism differs significantly
between Asia and Europe. In all Asian communist countries, Leninist anti-imperialism was
the core value justifying the unity of national liberation and defence with world revolution.
This is in direct contradiction to the Eastern European experience of the stifling of national
identity by the Soviet Union and Marxism-Leninism. In China, Mao Zedong’s development
of a successful rural revolutionary strategy was more than the “creative application of
Marxism-Leninism to Chinese conditions” that it claimed to be, and the rural revolutionary
strategy also played a vital part in the Vietnamese revolution. In North Korea, Kim Il Sung’s self-glorification and ideology of juche is an extreme example of the neo-traditionalist tendencies of Marxism-Leninism pointed out by Ken Jowitt in Brezhnev’s Soviet Union.32

One major difference between European and Asian communism is that even China lacks a self-confidence in its own ideological leadership. The revolutions in Asia drew part of their organizational strength and a good deal of their ideological confidence from their compliant membership in a world revolutionary movement. Despite the mistakes of Soviet policy in China, for instance, even Mao Zedong could not openly criticize Stalin the way Lenin had criticized Kautsky and the Second International. Breaking with the Soviet model in the late 1950s was a traumatic event for China, and it was based on the accusation that Khrushchev had deviated from the correct revolutionary path rather than the proclamation of a new Chinese model. The current claims of national paths to socialism in Asia are pragmatic adjustments to existing societal trajectories (or desired trajectories) rather than new ideological paradigms. As remote as Marxism-Leninism is and has always been from the political realities of Asia, there is no experience or process of critical discussion. While Gorbachev and Soviet politics could look Lenin (or at least Stalin) straight in the face, there is a tendency in Asia to mill about the pedestal.

One implication of the derivative nature of Asian communist ideology is that the demise of European communism, and especially of the Soviet Union, presents a fatal shock for Marxism-Leninism as a credible intellectual framework in Asia. Although China and Vietnam are not likely to join Mongolia and Cambodia in simply jettisoning the ideology, for practical purposes the orthodoxy has been reduced to allegiance to the leadership of the
communist party and to refraining from sensitive questions about socialism. The conservative
carelessness in Asia defend a political and intellectual inertia against scandalous and
threatening reform, they do not offer an alternative paradigm. Even the conservatives have
lost their Holy Grail of communism and seek only unity and stability. The reformers are
also quiet about ultimate goals, and stress instead the benefits of pragmatic adjustments.
They avoid slapping orthodoxy in the face, claiming that the most socialist policy is the one
that works best, and pointing out that a mixed economy is necessary at the current "primary
stage of socialism," which might last for a hundred years. In short, the public ideology of
reform in China and Vietnam is "socialism, but not now," while practical policy guidance is
provided by non-communist models. In theory, then, Asia is already implicitly post-
communist, even in countries where party hegemony remains firm and the rituals of
orthodoxy are unchallenged. Perhaps because the original theory was not Asian, the
intellectual contradiction between theory and practice is accepted.

In Asia as in Europe it can be seen that, as the credibility and power of Marxist-
Leninist orthodoxy decline, the latent power of earlier and deeper cultural residues become
more prominent, as does the attractiveness of apparently successful external models. But
Confucianism is a state-centered ideology stressing a personal commitment to family and
communal values, and the proximate external success stories are pictures of ordered
achievement under wise and stable leadership rather than of individualistic hives of Horatio
Algers. Moreover, the infinitely subdividing pressures of ethno-nationalism present only
peripheral problems, and there are no ideological centers other than the state that could
challenge its role as the center of communal identity. Since there is less potential cultural
dissonance between the communist present and traditional values, and less disruptive potential in the Asian non-communist models (the eastern West?), it seems likely that the social fabric and political culture of Asian communism and post-communism will not become as deeply disoriented as that of European post-communism. Asian communism is already becoming more Asian. In his New Year’s Address of 1991 Kim Il Sung emphasized juche but did not mention Marxism-Leninism, and China is promoting socialism with Chinese characteristics.

The combined effect of the differences between Asian communism and European communism in economic context, international context and in political culture is to make unlikely a "domino effect" of European post-communism sweeping Asia. Moreover, the much greater likelihood of structural reform in Asian communist countries over the next decade will be responding to different needs, will be attracted to different external models, and will be oriented by different cultural values. As it becomes less communist, Asian communism is likely to become more Asian. The European goal of pluralist democracy may not be as attractive as Asian models of stable prosperity. If we accept Adam Przeworski’s definition of democracy as "a system in which parties lose elections," then not only does Asian communism at present not meet the standard, but foreseeable reform communism or post-communism might well fall short. If the acme of Przeworski’s standard is the Polish parliamentary election of October 1991, and the acme of economic reform is the Polish economy, then the concern of Asian communist leaders not to follow the European path is understandable.