

Wacana Pembangunan/*Discourses on Development*

Asian Renaissance and Enlightenment – Problems and Prospects

HENG SIAM-HENG

INTRODUCTION

The rise of China and India as new economic power-houses is affecting the balance of economic power globally. However, the rise of Asia is likely to exert even greater influence in the world *and even human civilization profoundly* if it is accompanied by a cultural and intellectual rejuvenation.

Economic resurgence in itself does not guarantee a corresponding intellectual ferment and cultural effervescence. An example is Japan, which has amazed the world with its sterling economic performance for decades, but without equally remarkable achievements in the cultural and intellectual realm. Bearing this in mind, the rise of Asia is an *opportunity* for an Asian Renaissance and Enlightenment, which may or may not happen. A lot of it would depend on what Asians themselves want to create out of the opportunity.

LEARNING FROM HISTORY

Seen from a historical perspective, the most recent experience of intellectual rejuvenation and reinvigoration associated with social and economic transformation is that of European Renaissance and Enlightenment. In the process, the European Renaissance and Enlightenment produced giants in a range of fields – philosophy, science and mathematics, social sciences, fine arts, music, architecture, and literature. Intellectuals (The term “intellectuals” here is used as meant by Alatas (1977), to refer to persons engaged in thinking about ideas and non-material problems using the faculty of reason) in Europe acted as a positive historical force during a very critical period of their history, functioning as both social critics and sources of forward-looking ideas. Their contributions have significantly shaped the character of modern European civilization.

Harking back to earlier times, we may cite other cases such as the Ancient Greece, Ancient China during the Spring-Autumn and Warring periods, the Islamic golden age, the Mughal period of India, and the Tang-Song period of China.

It is pretty safe to say that we can learn from history. Great cultural and intellectual achievements tended to occur during periods of profound social, economic and political changes. These transformations provided the historical stage for profound thinkers to make their contributions by throwing up many serious issues for them to solve. In their efforts to understand and solve these issues, the great thinkers were able to inherit their intellectual heritage, learn from other sources, cross-fertilize them and creatively synthesize them to produce schools of original thoughts. For example, Florence, known as the birth place of Renaissance, happened to be at an important meeting point of diverse cultures and intellectual traditions – the Greco-Roman, the Islamic, the Judeo-Christian and the Indian.

MODERN MINDSETS FOR MODERN ASIA

While the physical landscape in many Asian cities show evidences of economic modernization, one very often comes across a dysfunctional culture in the people running the show. Business contracts or government infrastructure projects are awarded to friends and relatives rather than to the most competent. Newspapers are full of examples of practices that reflect mindsets that are out of step with the demands of a modern economy. Even in societies where there are modern economic institutions in the formal sense, they fail to work properly due to the pre-modern mindset. In other words, a modern economy needs a modern mindset to run it, and a modern mindset is a product of modern culture and values.

ASIAN RENAISSANCE AND ENLIGHTENMENT

The economic re-emergence of Asia has occurred for several decades, with Japan taking the lead not long after the end of Second World War. By early 1990s, business magazines and serious academic journals were talking about the phenomenon as something significant to watch. Some even described it as “Asian Miracle”. While most were focused on the economic, social and political aspects, some were looking at the cultural and civilizational aspects. Reflecting this position is the book *The Asian Renaissance* by Anwar Ibrahim (1996: 17-18). “The economic rise of Asia, though critical and fundamental, is only a dimension of a much deeper, more profound and far-reaching reawakening of the continent which may be called the Asian Renaissance. By Asian Renaissance we mean the revival of the arts and sciences under the influence of classical models based on strong moral and religious foundations; a cultural resurgence dominated by a flowering of art and literature, architecture and music and advances in science and technology.”

If we are to use this conceptualization of Asian Renaissance, it may be argued that some countries of Asia have gone through a good part of Renaissance and even of Enlightenment. Partly because of imperialist intrusion by western powers and partly because of internal dark forces, they had not completed the full phase of their Renaissance. As this is a short piece, I shall limit myself to the case of China to illustrate this point.

The late Tang and Song period (960-1279) of China may be called the early modern phase. This period saw the emergence of a culture that was to remain characteristic of China until early twentieth century (Fairbank et al 1989). The intellectual achievements in the eleventh and twelfth centuries during the Song dynasty could be described as the Chinese Renaissance (Gernet 1982). "What is strikingly manifest is the advent of practical rationalism based on experiment, the putting of inventions, ideas, and theories to the test. We also find curiosity at work in every realm of knowledge – arts, technology, natural sciences, mathematics, society, institutions, politics. There was a desire to take stock of all previous acquisitions and to construct a synthesis of all human knowledge. A naturalist philosophy which was to dominate Chinese thinking in the following ages developed in the eleventh century and attained its definitive expressions in the twelfth. This complete renewal of intellectual was partly the result of social and economic changes, of the increase in the number of well-to-do families and of the growth of towns, but another reason for it was also the more and more extensive use of a rapid and cheap means of reproducing written texts" (Gernet 1982: 330-1).

Indeed, the early period of Qing dynasty produced several brilliant thinkers – Huang Zongxi, Wang Fuzhi, Gu Yanwu, Zhang Xuecheng and Dai Zheng - who were very much like the European Enlightenment thinkers (Gernet 1982). To these names, we may add Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In a way, the history of China since its big scale encounter with the western powers may be seen as a continuous and conscious national project to modernize its economy and society. Experiences have shown them that modernization is an extremely complex phenomenon, not a unilinear but a multilinear process. While they welcome the adoption of obviously more advanced technologies from the West, they have difficulties embracing the Western ideas and value system. In short, they want modernization with a Chinese character. The Chinese have a deep concern of their civilizational heritage, a fresh system of law, the search for a new system of ethics for the modern world and, not least, the dangers of a spiritual vacuum among the young (Wang 2003). And in this endeavour, the issue of morality, culture, ethics and values has featured prominently. More or less the same thing may be said of India and a few other countries in Asia.

TWO CARDINAL CHALLENGES

Asian intellectuals face two major tasks at this juncture of their history. The first challenge concerns how and what to draw from their own cultural and intellectual legacy in the process of dealing with new problems. Old ideas have a tendency to take on new meanings and interpretations when they are studied in the context of new social problems. Old myths can put on modern attires and assume modern colours. If such a new interpretation provides an effective way to tackle problems, the new solution is likely to find easier acceptance because it is framed in the language familiar to the people.

Another point is that even a new philosophy is dependent on the intellectual achievements of the preceding centuries and millennia. In his study of the European Enlightenment, Cassirer (1951:vi-vii) observe, “enlightenment philosophy simply fell heir to the heritage of those [preceding] centuries. It ordered, sifted, developed and clarified this heritage rather than contributed and gave currency to new and original ideas. Yet in spite of its dependence with respect to content, the Enlightenment produced a completely original form of philosophical thought. Even when it reworks prevailing ideas, when it merely continues to build on foundation laid by the seventeenth century – as is the case with its cosmology - everything takes on new meaning and appears in new perspective. For nothing less than the universal process of philosophizing is now seen in a new light.”

The second challenge facing Asian intellectuals is how and what to learn from others who have gone through modernization. To the extent that there are similarities in the issues involved in the transition from pre-modern societies to modern societies, we should learn from others’ experiences, both positive and negative. “Similar experiences engender in men’s minds similar views” (Radhakrishnan 1923: 24). Since the West has a longer history of modernization, Asia can certainly learn from them.

The Asian attitude of learning has to be open-minded and rational rather than ruled by emotion and sentiments. Asians are probably very proud to learn from sources like Hobson (2004) that European Renaissance and Enlightenment drank from the wells of Eastern achievements. However, they must also be happy and humble to learn from the West in the modernization of Asia. Just as Asians should not feel a sense of superiority in being a source of Western modernization, they should not feel a sense of inferiority in borrowing from the West. Learning from the findings of others can only increase the range of possible solutions.

As in all learning endeavours, one has to be selective. One obvious example that Asia cannot copy from the West is the route of colonization and slave trade taken by the West. Moreover, ideas and institutions originating in the West are not monolithic and there are serious debates among Western intellectuals about their efficacy.

Another point is that the current Asian modernization is happening within the historical context of globalization which is surely different from that of the West. It has often been said that Asian modernization cannot simply copy Western experiences. Modernization is not the same as Westernization (Huntington 1996).

Besides being meticulous and rational, one must adapt useful and proven ideas and practices to suite local conditions and drawing upon cultural resources to absorb them. It is here that having our feet firmly planted in our own cultural traditions is so vital. By interpreting the teachings of our sages broadly, we might find it easier to identify points of contact between the new ideas and our long cherished values. Perhaps we should not be surprised to find that ideas of democracy, gender equity and rule of law do have deep roots in Asia's underlying cultural heritage.

Asian countries need to chart modern ways of life that can strike a deep resonance with their own cherished values. It is not an easy task. Many of Asian societies are confronted with corruption, environmental degradation, ethnic or communal tension, crimes, economic-social disparities and drug abuse.

There need to be adequate material wealth combined with spiritual health. At the same time, Asia must avoid the high level of material consumption currently obtaining in the West. In fact, it would be a wrong policy for either China or India to try to become a second USA or to become a hegemonic superpower. This is something that none of the Western countries has succeeded in doing so at a societal level. Perhaps it is an honour, if not an onus, for Asia to show the world that this is indeed possible. To do so would require a great cultural and intellectual rejuvenation. It is indeed a great historical challenge for Asian intellectuals to prove that they are up to the task.

Skeptics may point out that most Asian public intellectuals are unlikely to rise to the occasion. There are formidable obstacles to the development of world-class and original ideas among Asian intellectuals. There is lack of freedom and internalized self-censorship that comes from a culture of fear. Second there is no critical mass of thinkers to stimulate each other. Third, there is no broad unifying theme like Enlightenment rationality to guide Asian intellectuals. Fourth, there is unlikely to be a powerful social group waiting to adopt and champion new philosophies developed by their people. Ironically, one cannot even speak of an Asian dialogue because they know so little of each other's intellectual and cultural traditions. As a general point, humanity is one - Asia must learn from itself as much as it must learn from other parts of the world (Abdul Rahman 2007).

While freedom to articulate fresh ideas may be curbed in some Asian countries, this is not true for all Asian countries. Moreover, given the freedom afforded by the cyberspace, the problem is not as grave as before. The core issue is whether Asian intellectuals and other social actors wish to take on the

task of their historical task of bringing about an Asian Renaissance and Enlightenment. At this very important stage of historical development sweeping across the globe, they have an intellectually demanding, morally lofty and socially relevant work cut out for them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In Malaysia and Singapore (and to a less extent elsewhere in Southeast Asia), one can find all the major currents of world religions, cultures and traditions coexisting as the mainstreams of social life. They represent invaluable resources. Ideally, every society should encourage its bright minds to take full advantage of its cultural resources and based on them to create something new and richer. Its ethos can help to moderate the currently prevalent obsession with the pursuit of material wealth. We should be inspired by the legacies left behind for us by the great civilizations. In the same way we should bequeath to the future generations something just as enduring.

In other words, though the Asian resurgence has its home base in Asia, its sources are international in scope and its meanings universal. It is thus an historical movement with a mission to rediscover, preserve, promote, invigorate, synthesise and bring to a newer height nothing less than the whole human cultural and intellectual heritage. Such an approach provides a new meaning, an attractive alternative and above all a more inspiring turn to the “rise of Asia” – for Asia and the whole world.

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Heng Siam-Heng, Ph.D
Senior Research Fellow
East Asian Institute
National University of Singapore
Singapore