

# Asia Past, Present, Future: A Civilizational Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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*In the latter part of the 20th century, much of Asia imported, both consciously and unconsciously, the western paradigm of economic, social, and political development, lured by the apparent success of the post-industrial, technologically advanced West. Asia superimposed this paradigm upon its own. This transition represented a dramatic shift. Whereas Asia had historically been driven by centripetal forces, the western model operates upon centrifugal dynamics. This article examines the case of Asia in terms of these paradigmatic shifts, with special emphasis on evolutionary principles and time-frames.*

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### *Paradigms and Civilizations*

Human civilizations can be studied as transformations of culture, beliefs, traditions, and political systems. In order to understand the evolution of a people or culture over time, it is first necessary to identify the dominant paradigm which drives that society. In some cases the same paradigm has remained in tact within a culture for centuries. In other civilizations, dynamic change has resulted in the adoption of new paradigms over time. It is in this last group that we find Asian civilization today. Between paradigms.

Asia, in it's drive to modernity over the last century, has superimposed a set of new driving forces upon a millennia-old system, willingly and unwillingly. These new contradictory driving forces are rooted in the Judeo-Christian traditions and within extensions of this tradition. These extensions have been universalized and secularized into an irresistible package of liberal democracy and egalitarianism, a package which is comprised of three main components. These three components are clearly laid out by Professor S. P. Udayakumar as " the triumvirate of Nation-statism-democracy, scientism, and developmentism which have very broad implications". Udaykumar's discourse on the ..."axiomatic Western three-in-one" speaks to religion generally as an underlying force. In the case of the west, this underlying force is the Judeo-Christian tradition. The primary precepts of the Judeo-Christian tradition<sup>2</sup> are these:

*God and man are wholly separate.*

*Man is unique and at the top of creation*

*Man has dominion over nature*

*The fall from Eden has to be regained by good works*

*All that are not of this tradition must be brought into the flock (conversion)*

*The Anti-Christ must be defeated (prepare for righteous battles)*

The important eras, stages, and episodes of western civilization with respect to itself and the "other" can be satisfactorily explained as an outcome of the implementation of these tenets.<sup>3</sup> Understanding this backdrop is crucial in order to understand the state of contemporary Asian society. Each of these tenets is centrifugal in nature. This centrifugality is apparent in the denuding of the earth's resources, in the creation of bigger and bigger "tragedies of the commons" now assuming global proportions, in the alienation and anomie of individuals, in the ongoing

proliferation of the number of disenfranchised groups seeking equity, worth, identity and rights.<sup>4</sup> This powerful force of centrifugality has gradually taken western civilization to near exhaustion, whereupon certain patterns have begun to emerge. These are patterns of discontinuities, which could be qualified as “punctuations”, according to the model set forth by Stephen Jay Gould.<sup>5</sup>

### *Deceptions*

The superimposition of forces of centrifugality has fundamentally altered, in some ways surreptitiously, contemporary Asian civilization in two ways. Foremost, the adoption and integration of the concepts of “individualism”, “rights”, “autonomy”, and “atomization” in their western denotation have catalyzed a storm pitting the individual against the collective good. This storm is grounded in the relegation of duties, obligations, and responsibilities accompanied by a removal and enforcement of the same to the ‘commons’. These institutionalized system of rules, laws, and codes had ensured centripetality in Asian societies for centuries. The rapid move to the western paradigm resulted in the undermining, corrupting, and the almost overnight replacement of these social, cultural, political and economic structures. Though, these structures were formerly hierarchical, traditional, patriarchal, they did contain some unique pluralistic and democratic features. In Asian history, these structures had coerced the cohesion and integrity of the whole and the collective, by placing primary emphasis upon duties, roles, obligations and responsibilities.

There has been a second major deception implicit in this attempted transformation by and of Asian societies. This deception, or error, was belief that the transformation towards a more western system would be relatively painless, swift, and manageable. Asia, thus, entered into the proverbial Faustian bargain.

The bargain, of course, required that in exchange for democracy, developmentalism, and scientism, which together held the promise of individual rights, sustenance, and survival, Asia had to first give up its inherent paradigm of centripetality. To the majority of these populations, entrenched in tradition, hierarchy, and patriarchy; this proposition seemed a good bargain. These populations were lured into agreeing to the proposition by the radical literate and liberated intellectuals of these societies. Unfortunately, these radical intellectuals were had and allowed

themselves to be misled by the promises of idealism implicit in this bargain. In all fairness, who wouldn't?

### *Civilizations in Transitions*

What is happening today in Asia is a transition between these paradigms, where the Asian paradigm has been submerged by the western model. The Asian paradigm is diametrically opposed to the Judeo-Christian model in every respect, the implications of this transition are enormous. The basic precepts of the Asian paradigm are these:

*Man and God are one and the same*

*Man is of nature and part of it*

*Righteous behavior and responsibility serves the larger interest of the community first and the individual second*

*Mans search for meaning and god is a process internal to oneself*

*Divinity is omniscient*

The irony here is, tragically, two-fold. First, many societies anchored on the Judeo-Christian traditions have become increasingly aware of the impending exhaustion of their paradigm as the logical outcome of the inherent centrifugality. However, these societies continue to energetically promote the same panaceas, only now with some measure of sobriety. This sobriety can be seen as attempts to moderate the heretofore evolutionarily unstable strategies in newer but ultimately anthropocentric prescriptions and imperatives.

In many academic, holistic, and long-term forward thinking communities in the west, "sustainability", concern for "future generations", "global ethics", "cosmic evolution", "gaia", and "systems" approach have become cardinal concerns. All are pale imitations of profound intuitions and understandings which have been addressed for millennia in Asian philosophies and cultures. This intuition is something that cultures such as the Tasadai of the Philippines, certainly, understood from day one.

Second, most Asian societies that have embarked on the path towards things western have found that the road is arduous, long, painful. Furthermore, it has become clear that this transformation will take centuries for these societies to become equals of the so called 'advanced economies' of today, in contrast to the presumption that only mere years or decades were needed to attain that objective.

Today there are more illiterate, undernourished, impoverished people in Asia than at any time in Asian history. Similarly, there exists more social discord, ethnic conflict, and racial and caste hatred today than the Asian culture at large has ever known before. Groups, which may have been historically disenfranchised due to their tradition, hierarchy, or patriarchy, have become even more marginalized. By enshrining centrifugality and discarding old "evil" structures of centripetality, vacuums have been created and are now filled by caricatures of democracy, scientism, and developmentism. All of these democratic movements are practiced in the main. However, they are built on rampant ignorance and illiteracy that now elects godmen, kings, dictators! Notwithstanding these 'formalities, very little else has been changed. For Asian civilization, the Faustian bargain has been a bad one. It is time to look at the very real possibility that Asian cultures have been had. The signs are everywhere and can be readily identified on many levels, yet many remain unwilling to face the truth. This manifests itself in the vociferous demonizing of the west for the presumed demonization of the non-west.

The current situation of Asian societies can be likened to a high wire act, on which they have gone a quarter of the way across, are losing balance, yet have no possibility of returning to the starting point. The picture painted here is a somber one. It is the only means, however, of coming to terms with this crisis which exists in Asia.

### *Leadership into the Future*

The strategy for moving Asia forward, therefore, is to manage the problem within the evolutionary context. If Asia were to take a managerial view of things (which incidentally is a western invention premised firmly in positive convictions about human agency, control over one's destiny, and the possibility of realizing desired futures) at a minimum, the requirements are:

- 1. Extend the time frames under consideration to centuries instead of the delusional approaches often taken in terms of decades.*

Given the nature of the representative democracies or the business sector, the planning horizons adopted for definition of national objectives or commercial strategies rarely ever exceed five years. This is true even with the understanding that the consequences of almost any policy

or decision, in either realm, will not be known in the same time frames chosen. Decisions for the building of a highway, dam, chemical factory, or the policy of one man- one vote, are attractive 'industrializing' and 'egalitarian' propositions. However, the consequences of these propositions spread not across one, but many generations and are often invariably negative. These environmental fluctuations and the political corruption in Asia have, not surprisingly, been considerable. What is needed is an the expansion of time horizons in terms of envisioning local, regional, and national destinies.

2. *The units of consideration should be top down from the largest and the most general to the smallest and the particular. Example: start with the earth as the unit of measure, and view smaller aggregations in order down to the individual. In other words, optimize the larger first and the smaller next.*

It is now becoming increasingly clear that mankind's understanding about his 'position' or 'location' has to be changed. The boundaries that man circumscribed himself within, be they economic, social, or political, have become obsolete. It has become irrevocably clear that the denuding of rain forests in the Amazon, the burning of forests in Indonesia, the eruption of Mt. St. Helen's in the United States, affect not one civilization but all. Legislation issued by the U.S. Congress to fight terrorism- touches religious, social, and cultural nerves around the globe. The Aids virus is not the localized, African, phenomenon that it once was. This is now a pandemic. Individuals such as the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, and even Michael Jordan, are no longer nationally or regionally bound icons.

The point which can be made from these observations is that when examining either one Asian country or Asia entire, in an outward sense, it is irresponsible to limit the perspective to thinking in terms of a "part" of the whole. In days past, this may have been a reasonable approach. Today, however, demands that there must be a wariness of man's inherent nature to look at the whole as a reflection of his own image. What one man, or even a collective, sees, feels, and desires, from a singular vantage may not be that which is objectively true. This being the case, a plea must be issued that considerations be made in terms of local and regional issues within the framework of larger, more relevant boundaries. Every man is a part of the whole. The whole circumscribes and defines the part, not the reverse. Asia, thinking about its future, must begin by thinking about what it is a part of. Likewise, any Asian country must

think about itself first as a part of Asia and then, of itself as an entity within it.

3. *Focus on the paradigms that will guide Asia into the future, even as we are respectful of what evolution teaches us, however distasteful those lessons might be.*

In the rush to modernize, most countries in Asia welcomed the western paradigm eagerly. Now they struggle with the reconciliation between who they really are, and the implications of the western paradigm upon their lives. The Chinese advising the US to mind of it's own business regarding human rights is a classic example. The reversion of Pakistan to a theocratic dictatorship is another. The current situations of Singapore and Saudi Arabia, still more. In other words, these countries have learned that the importation of paradigms in total is unworkable. What is needed instead is a paradigm that take Asia's own deep codes and structures into account. Visions that honor and retain the deep civilizational codes, as well as incorporating new ones with caution, are the ones that will meet with success. If not, Asia will most certainly perpetuate the conditions that prevail today- suffering from the onslaught of ramifications of employing the inappropriate western paradigm. Many point at the new paradigm as yet another western "agent of colonization". In all of these protestations, what is often ignored is the simple fact that Asia has willingly and enthusiastically embraced the western paradigm. The old dog of blaming everything on colonialism, capitalism, imperialism will not hunt anymore. That dog is dead.

4. *Consider things in a framework of hierarchic, interacting multi- system complexity and focus on boundary areas, the areas where systems interact rather than internal to any system.*

It is commonly known that when two tectonic plates rub against each other, earthquakes and mountains are caused. It is easy to conclude that the focus of any examination of this should be upon the areas of interaction of the tectonic plates and not simply the plates in isolation. One example of this is Kashmir, the area of intersection of India and Pakistan. East Timor, though internal to Indonesia, is another.

To understand and solve problems therefore, focus is needed on such intersections as a primary effort, rather than as a secondary concern. It is the areas of intersection that often have the most to reveal.

As another example, the various government bureaucracies must begin to manage the areas where the results of their autonomous partitioned decision-making show. A dam constructed by a department of public works must be coordinated with the department of agriculture, social welfare, forestry, flood relief, and so on, and not as an isolated edict arising out of a five year plan.

*5. Concentrate on the processes that will carry us to our objectives rather than the events that we desire.*

Many are familiar with Deming's great contribution to the quality improvement miracle of Japan. The underlying premise is simple. It can be explained through analogy. In a harvest of apples, rotten apples can be sorted out from healthy apples in the process of harvesting. Depending on the size of the crop, and the portion of the crop lost to rotten apples, one can then investigate the magnitude of cause after the fact. This is what I call "management of the event." Deming would argue that if one can identify all of the reasons that some of the apples have become rotted, and also what causes other apples to remain healthy, one would find that good apples happen because all the various inputs to getting good apples must be within an acceptable range.<sup>6</sup> These various inputs within a range and sequence can be defined as the process for producing apples. The imperative then, is to preemptively manage the process of producing healthy apples, rather than managing the event of harvesting bad apples.

This same rationale can be applied to a myriad of other phenomenon. One could just as easily approach crime, the population explosion, or disease in the same manner.

*6. Insist on discipline in the problem solving process. Identify the true, deep, underlying causes rather than the ones too near the effect.*

This dictum is a continuation of the ideas described above. Most problem solving usually takes the form of attacking the symptoms rather than the cause. For example, take potholes of a given street. Generally, if the pothole is the problem, the quick solution is usually to fill it. However, one must first determine whether this is truly a solution or simply a treatment of the symptom, which will most likely reoccur? Effective problem solving procedures first identify the true cause. In this scenario, it could be defects in the asphalt mix, inappropriate design for



the traffic that utilizes that road, or poor drainage. One tactic is to ask the question “why” five times. Usually by the fifth “why”, the cause is identified and a solution is readily apparent.

*7. Keep in mind evolutionary lessons as they pertain to human capacity and limitations when it comes to size of organization, clarification of roles and responsibilities alongside of rights and privileges.*

Asia has, as have other regions of the world, succumbed to the charms of developmentalism, scientism, nation-statism. In country after country, bureaucracies have attempted problem solving on a national scale. The result has been the creation of unmanageable behemoths, whether they be in the industries of steel, public works, banks, or airlines, while simultaneously proclaiming rights, votes, and privileges for all. However, two glaring omissions remained clear. First, reasonable interpretations of what constitutes the appropriate size for a given organization is absent. The second is the absence of duties, responsibilities, or obligations, or more generally, the absence of accountability on the part of its citizens.

At a minimum, Asian civilization must walk away from the “one minute manager” concept that has captivated and enthralled so many. This enthrallment has resulted in the use of perspectives based on short time frames used by everyone in their respective pursuits, despite the best of intentions in every case. This is exacerbated by the gross neglect of “complexity” and evolution “in decision-making and consideration.

### ***Conclusion***

The interactions of multiple solutions, multiple inputs, and multiple entries into the solution space often results in some self-organized outcome. This implies that diversity, difference and uniqueness must be maintained as inputs because they are the grist of the evolutionary mill. It must also be acknowledged that the evolutionary mill is a slow moving mill. If it took the West two thousand years to get to where it is, than Asian civilizations must understand and accept that the process it has now undertaken will take just as long if not longer, simply because of the circumstances and conditions that prevail. It would require the idealists and the radicals amongst us to moderate rhetoric into a slower and less strident mode. Otherwise, they must be prepared to accept responsibility for turbulence and turmoil unleashed by revolutions driven by

impatience, arrogance and servitude to any single belief system or alternative and, more importantly, disregard for the evolutionary juggernaut. History is replete with single utopian ideologies and designs as alternatives that have failed. The only overriding requirement of these alternatives should be that they are rooted in our own paradigm.

Contemporary Asian civilization must muster the courage, the appetite, and the strength of will to take a more radical approach. It requires Asia to stop the train of transformation and for its passengers to get off and in a sense, redirect themselves. Asian peoples must redirect themselves not only in terms of their own paradigm, but also in the evolutionary context. The benefits of implementing these alternative strategies are clear. Asia would do well to set up enclaves that experiment with a hundred visions that provide fresh inputs to the evolutionary process in terms of the socializing of the individual and varieties of social, economic, political organization. It will likely be the interplay of these varieties within its own all encompassing paradigm that will yield the results we need. There can be no more lost, and simultaneously everything to gain.

All human civilizations evolve. The evolution of these civilizations occurs within a variety of dominant paradigms which compete with one another for dominance. In the case of Asian civilizations, what history is witnessing is a paradigmatic shift to the western paradigm, even as the current dominant western paradigm with its one dimensionality is nearing its end. The re-emergence of Asian paradigms is timely and relevant. Over the course of the next two centuries, Asia should and will most certainly return home, to its own paradigm, which emerges from within. Dr. Sohail Inayatullah once described such a paradigm as one which cultivates "communities that are ecologically conscious, spiritually aware, socially progressive, and embedded in the culture of the area."<sup>7</sup>

### Notes

1. I would like to thank Paige Heydon for her editorial assistance.
2. Udayukumar, S.P. 1999. "Futures Studies and Futures Facilitators", in *Rescuing All Our Futures* (Ed) Ziauddin Sardar, Adamantine Press: UK.
3. Suggested reading *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention*, David F. Nobel. Penguin, New York, 1999.
4. See "The Tragedy of Commons" by Garrett Hardin in *Science*, #162

(1968) 1243-1248.

5. Explored in Elredge and Gould, *Reinventing Darwin: The Great Debate at the High Table of Evolution*, Wiley Publishers, New York: 1995
6. For details see Dr. W. Edwards Deming, *The New Economics*, MIT Press, Boston: 1996.
7. Personal Comments, E-mail. March 8, 2000. See, Johan Galtung and Sohail Inayatullah, eds. *Macrobistory and Macrobhistorians*. Praeger, Westport: 1997. And Sohail Inayatullah, *Situating Sarkar*. Gurukul Publications, Maleny, Australia, 1999.

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