Asian Cultures in a State of Flux

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Recent views of Asian culture(s) appear to be headed toward polar directions. On the one hand is the assertion, mostly by authoritarian governments in Southeast Asia and in obvious reaction against the West, that Asian culture is more communitarian than individualistic, oriented more toward social harmony and order than individual freedoms that lead to confrontational, fractional, atomistic societies as in Western countries. On the other hand, there is the view that Asian societies are basically multi-cultural as manifested in the manifold languages, belief systems and life patterns that encompass the region and individual countries. Recognizing the integrity of indigenous cultures, the second view accepts that most indigenous communities are themselves marginalized from the mainstream of Asian politics and economic life.

While the first view tends to present Asia as an immobile stereotype, harking back to a Confucian or Buddhist tradition or rooted in a religion like Islam, the second contests this perception, preferring to look upon Asia as a multi-chrome of cultures, faiths and societal patterns, each open to interpretation and re-interpretation. The openness of the latter view to other, perhaps differing, interpretations sets it apart from the tendency of the communitarian perspective to set Asian culture and values in a mold, which in practice often means in conformity with official prescriptions.

The more acceptable view from a social science perspective is the second, but even the first acknowledges, in fact, asserts, the integrity and specificity of Asian cultures. They differ only in their definition of what Asian culture is. And this is the true arena of social science discourse. By unduly emphasizing the importance of indigenous cultures, one could, as Pertierra suggests in his paper, fall into the trap of "over-essentializing" Asianhood, to the detriment of a more universal basis for understanding Asia as a whole. But an analysis of indigenous cultures is the necessary first step. In the Philippines, for instance, the inability of indigenous communities to participate in governance can be traced in part to the privileged status of English in official and private communications, even in education, as Paz points out. On the other hand, indigenous socio-political institutions do co-exist with formal mechanisms of power and, as Cariño explains, encourage popular participation in decision-making.

There is still much room for investigation into local cultures, not only for the sake of understanding them for what they are or how they are variously interpreted (and from whose points of view), but also for the purpose of arriving at a basis of commonality across cultures. Answers to basic questions on the meaning of freedom or of community and the role of the individual vis-à-vis the whole might not turn out to be all that different as some of us are inclined to think. With a deeper understanding of this commonality, notions of nationhood or national identity can be more clearly framed. And even if such views should differ greatly, the basis of difference will at least emerge, thus leading to a better understanding across communities in a nation and across nations in Asia.

There is, too, another point that calls for attention in the understanding of Asian cultures. This has to do with the internal and external forces that have direct impact on culture, whether for good or ill. Maceda maintains, for example, that the globalization of broadcast media has actually broadened the reach of Filipino pop culture in two ways: local stations have had to indigenize borrowed shows in order to attract the largest number (such television shows are now dubbed in Filipino); and the technology that comes with globalization has enabled media outfits to touch base with a much wider audience. At the same time, revival movements within cultures also cause changes in outlook and action of adherents. Azra discusses the revival of Islam not just as a faith (measured in terms of the number of pilgrimages to Mecca), but also as a political force (such as the influence of Islamic associations on policy-making), and a social movement (as lived by Muslims in accordance with fundamental religious precepts). No doubt these external and internal movements reinforce the view of culture in a state of flux, not fixed, ever changing in response to perceived needs. ◉