

“Asian Values” and Democracy in Asia

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The debates on “Asian Values” have been conducted on the basis of Asia’s economic success. It has been formulated to cope with the relentless tide of global scale market liberalization and to prevent it from undermining the political arrangements in East Asia in a more liberal and more democratic direction. It started with some domestic political goals in mind. But it also contains a real apprehension as to the basis of economic success including those “Asian Values” might be undermined by the tide of liberalization and democratization. The debates on the “Asian Values” have been conducted in contrast to the “Western Values” with some understandable political purposes in mind. This has, however, distorted the debates too much, contrasting the pairs of non-existent extremes, i.e., communalism versus individualism, order first versus freedom first, system conducive to economic development versus system creating chaos, authoritarianism versus democracy. As a matter of fact, various opinion polls in East Asia and the United States indicate that there are no such sharp differences between the two. The immaturity of democracy in Asia and the legacy of authoritarianism from the past have led the “Asian Values” debates in the somewhat unfortunate direction, i.e., justifying, if not glorifying, authoritarian politics in East Asia.